

## The White Cube Theory and the power of the artwork inside and outside the museum.

Clara Blasco  
Lisa Della Chiesa  
Molly Martin  
Marc Haeffner

*"The white cube is usually seen as an emblem of the estrangement of the artist from a society to which the gallery also provides access. It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to the timeless, a set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location, a reflex to the bald curtain wall, a magic chamber, a concentration of the mind, maybe a mistake. It preserved the possibility of art but made it difficult."<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Into the topic of "White Cube Theory"

Possibly the "White Cube" is one of the most important factors in framing and understanding modernity or modern art. The exhibition space of modernity constructs new norms for the representation and exhibition of works of art. Something as seemingly simple as the question: How to display a painting? This is what contributes to the development and emancipation of this theory.

Brian O'Doherty in his book *"Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space"* explains perfectly all the contextual development of the exhibition space, we could say that this book is the founding father of the whole theory of representation and exhibition of modernity. That is why it has guided us throughout our research.

O'Doherty affirms that *"without that change art would have become obsolete"*. The theory of the white cube intends to gather all those tendencies that have changed since the end of the 19th century in the field of art, representation and exhibition. To understand this change of paradigm in the limits of representation, to situate the new problems of modern art, to re-establish the codes of the art market, and to analyze the new figures and conceptions that emerge throughout this "new" history of art.

We could already sense that there was a certain animosity towards museums and their old and outdated approaches. Remembering those words of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in the "Futurist Manifesto": *"Museums: cemeteries!... Truly identical in their sinister promiscuity of bodies that do not know each other. Public dormitories where one sleeps forever together with other hated or unknown beings."*<sup>3</sup>

It is then, from this theoretical proposal from where we detonate our research, trying to set some key points on which we want to focus specifically. Through certain hypotheses we open a framework of research and experimentation that will allow us to solve some questions related to representation and artistic production in the 21st century.

## 2. Our position

After having read the book of Brian O'Doherty, each of us wrote down our personal key points. We also investigated other sources that talked about the topic, like magazines, museums or professional lectures.

We read all our notes and tried to put in common our concerns. Some words came up repeatedly as appealing concepts: the idea of the museum as a "chamber" where the object is glorified, a ritual space, a non-space or an ideal space where space-time is annulled. (Brian O'Doherty, p. 9). All in all, the place where you can find eternity, sanctity, mystique... A secular status. (Brian O'Doherty, p. 14)

Taking this into account we debated what we thought about that glorification, and we discussed some famous cases where this phenomenon occurred. One of them was the "Comedian" artwork of Maurizio Cattelan, a banana stuck onto the wall of the Art Basel (a contemporary art fair in Miami). Its price was 120.000\$.

### 3. Our path to the hypothesis

The development of empirical questions began with consideration of a series of initial points and questions for ourselves. The accessibility of the White Cube, the inside versus the outside 'world' for conditions to experience art, the amount of power that a gallery can hold over artworks and how manipulation of power within the wall of the White Cube. Between discussions on the artwork of Maurizio Cattelan and the scriptural key words within the theory of O'Doherty's White Cube, we individually brought forward a series of posing empirical questions:

*How easily manipulated can people get by setting an object under the context of the White Cube?*

*To what degree does a viewer's reaction change(or)To what degree are viewers influenced when an artwork is based within a gallery space/museum versus outside of a gallery space/museum?*

*Is artwork more accessible to view if it is not in a white cube space?*

*Despite the fact that the White cube has been a mode of display that had long achieved dominance in museums and commercial galleries, does it really provide the most ideal conditions for art?*

We got to the conclusion that the best question should be the one that allowed us to make a proper experiment. Therefore, altogether wrote our hypothesis:

**"Things become art in a space", according to Brian O'Doherty. Does a gallery space/museum have the power to glorify artwork in comparison to an outside exhibition space?**

1. O'DOHERTY B. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. 1<sup>o</sup> edition ed., San Francisco, Expanded Edition, 1986. P. 80.
2. O'DOHERTY B. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. 1<sup>o</sup> edition ed., San Francisco, Expanded Edition, 1986. P. 30.
3. TOMMASO MARINETTI, F. *Futurist manifesto*. 1<sup>a</sup> edition ed., Italia, Le figaro, 1909.

## 4. The experiment

The experiment will be separated in two parts: the outside space and the inside space. We will observe people's reaction in both spaces and after it, analyse what happened. Therefore, there won't be any intervention by the experimenters.

### Subjects

The subjects won't be controlled, so we will let people pass through both spaces (a mix of people from different ages, genres, cultures...) until we count 30 in both spaces (maybe in the street is 10 minutes but in the museum is 1 hour).

### Materials

In this study, we will use a tally counter to quantitatively evaluate the amount of people who show interest to the specific object, a.k.a, the plant. The Tally Counter will be efficient when trying to calculate people during a fleeting moment. A hidden camera would be used for this research so we could analyze the age group, the eye movement that was spent looking at the object and to note the human reactions towards the object.

### Location

For this experiment we have chosen Blaha Lujza Ter tram stop, and will specifically locate the object on top of a ticket machine. This is a neutral place of location of the object as it is above eye level for those approaching the machine, but it is simultaneously noticeable for those around the area to see a plant placed here.

We will begin the experiment specifically at 14:00 as this is the hour we expect there to be a reasonable but not overbearing busyness in numbers of members of the public at the tram stop. We expect to spend approximately 30 minutes at the Blaha Lujza Ter tram stop until we reach a tally of 30 people. This equates to one person per minute which will be a contributing factor of consideration in our predictions of the experiment.

## 5. Procedure

This experiment takes place in two places at the same time. On the one hand the plant will be placed on top of a streetcar ticket vending machine (outside) and on the other hand it will be placed inside a museum. At the moment of activating this action, two of us will stand on the spot and record people's reactions. There will also be hidden cameras placed at strategic points to capture a more natural reaction of people. We are aware that we must have certain permissions to record with hidden cameras in public space. We have decided to restrict the number of people who interact with the action, as we understand that there must be an equivalence between the people who visit the action in the museum (inside) and in the public space. That is why, by using a counter, we will account for it and as soon as we reach 30 people we will close the experiment.

The people will be labelled in two groups: the ones who ignored the object and those who recognise it as a piece of art.

## 6. Possible results and conclusions

Instead of conducting the experiment, we created a survey with related questions and sent it to a variety of people (different ages, nationalities, culture...). We collected 75 responses that gave us an idea of what the real results would be:

We can predict that this experiment would involve engagement, similar to "Comedian" by Maurizio Cattelan 64% percent agreed that "Things become art in a space". There is a high possibility that people would interact with the specific object, in the context of the museum, giving it the label of "art", while in the streets the object will be unnoticed.

In the survey we conducted, 54.7% of the people preferred the context of a White Cube to see a piece. The interesting point is that depending on the piece, people will be more open to see it in an outdoors context. For example, 84% preferred to see a Yayoi Kusama piece out of the White Cube, and 97.3% thought the same for a John Gerrard display. This new information leads us to new questions: How related is the acceptance of a non White Cube context to the nature of the piece? Are people more open to accept seeing art outdoors depending on who the artist is?