

Introduction

It has been the special genius of our century to investigate things in relation to their context, to come to see the context as formative on the thing, and, finally, to see the context as a thing itself. In this classic essay, first published as a series of three articles in *Artforum* in 1976, Brian O'Doherty discusses this turn toward context in twentieth century art. He investigates, perhaps for the first time, what the highly controlled context of the modernist gallery does to the art object, what it does to the viewing subject, and, in a crucial moment for modernism, how the context devours the object, becoming it.

In the first three sections, O'Doherty describes the modern gallery space as "constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church." The basic principle behind these laws, he notes, is that "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light....The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.'" The purpose of such a setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings – the artworks, like religious verities, are to appear "untouched by time and its vicissitudes." The condition of appearing out of time, or beyond time, implies a claim that the work already belongs to posterity – that is, it is an assurance of good investment. But it does strange things to the presentness of life, which, after all, unfolds itself in time. "Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of 'period' (late modern) there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there."

In searching for the significance of this mode of exhibition one must look to other classes of chambers that have been constructed on similar principles. The roots of this chamber of eternal display are to be found not in the history of art so much as the history of religion, where they are in fact even more ancient than the medieval church. Egyptian tomb chambers, for example, provide an astonishingly close parallel. They too were designed to eliminate awareness of the outside world. They too were chambers where an illusion of eternal presence was to be protected from the flow of time. They too held paintings and sculptures that were regarded as magically contiguous with eternity and thus able to provide access to it or contact with it. Before the Egyptian tomb, functionally comparable spaces were the Paleolithic painted caves of the Magdalenian and Aurignacian ages in France and Spain. There, too, paintings and sculptures were found in a setting deliberately set off from the outside world and difficult of access – most of the famous cave galleries are nowhere near the entrances, and some of them require exacting climbing and spelunking to get to them.

Such ritual spaces are symbolic reestablishments of the ancient umbilicus which, in myths worldwide, once connected heaven and earth. The connection is renewed symbolically for the purposes of the tribe or, more specifically, of that caste or party in the tribe whose special interests are ritually represented. Since this is a space where access to higher metaphysical realms is made to seem available, it must be sheltered from the appearance of change and time. This specially segregated space is a kind of non-space, ultra-space, or ideal space where the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled. In Paleolithic times the ultra-space filled with painting and sculpture seems to have served the ends of magical restitution to the biomass; afterlife beliefs and rituals may have been involved also. By Egyptian times these purposes had coalesced around the person of the Pharaoh: assurance of his afterlife through eternity was assurance of the sustenance of the state for which he stood. Behind these two purposes may be glimpsed the political interests of a class or ruling group attempting to consolidate its grip on power by seeking ratification from eternity. At one

level the process is a kind of sympathetic magic, an attempt to obtain something by ritually presenting something else that is in some way like the thing that is desired. If something like what one wants is present, the underlying reasoning implies, then what one wants may not be far behind. The construction of a supposedly unchanging space, then, or a space where the effects of change are deliberately disguised and hidden, is sympathetic magic to promote unchangingness in the real or non-ritual world; it is an attempt to cast an appearance of eternity over the status quo in terms of social values and also, in our modern instance, artistic values.

The eternity suggested in our exhibition spaces is ostensibly that of artistic posterity, of undying beauty, of the masterpiece. But in fact it is a specific sensibility, with specific limitations and conditionings, that is so glorified. By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility. As a ritual place of meeting for members of that caste or group, it censors out the world of social variation, promoting a sense of the sole reality of its own point of view and, consequently, its endurance or eternal rightness. Seen thus, the endurance of a certain power structure is the end for which the sympathetic magic of the white cube is devised.

In the second of three sections of his essay, O'Doherty deals with the assumptions about human selfhood that are involved in the institutionalization of the white cube. "Presence before a work of art," he writes, "means that we absent ourselves in favor of the Eye and the Spectator." By the *Eye* he means the disembodied faculty that relates exclusively to formal visual means. The *Spectator* is the attenuated and bleached-out life of the self from which the Eye goes forth and which, in the meantime, does nothing else. The Eye and the Spectator are all that is left of someone who has "died," as O'Doherty puts it, by entering into the white cube. In return for the glimpse of ersatz eternity that the white cube affords us – and as a token of our solidarity with the special interests of a group – we give up our humanness and become the cardboard

Spectator with the disembodied Eye. For the sake of the intensity of the separate and autonomous activity of the Eye we accept a reduced level of life and self. In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love. Indeed, since the white cube promotes the myth that we are there essentially as spiritual beings – the Eye is the *Eye of the Soul* – we are to be understood as tireless and above the vicissitudes of chance and change. This slender and reduced form of life is the type of behavior traditionally required in religious sanctuaries, where what is important is the repression of individual interests in favor of the interests of the group. The essentially religious nature of the white cube is most forcefully expressed by what it does to the humanness of anyone who enters it and cooperates with its premises. On the Athenian Acropolis in Plato's day one did not eat, drink, speak, laugh, and so on.

O'Doherty brilliantly traces the development of the white cube out of the tradition of Western easel painting. He then redirects attention to the same developments from another point of view, that of the anti-formalist tradition represented here by Duchamp's installations *1,200 Coal Bags* (1938) and *Mile of String* (1942), which stepped once and for all outside the frame of the painting and made the gallery space itself the primary material to be altered by art. When O'Doherty recommends these works by Duchamp to the attention of artists of the seventies he implies that not a great deal has been achieved in the last forty or fifty years in breaking down the barriers of disinterest or disdain that separate the two traditions. Such lack of communication is impressive, since artists themselves have attempted to carry on this dialogue for a generation. Yves Klein, for example, exhibited an empty gallery called "The Void" (*Le vide*) (1958); shortly thereafter Arman responded with an exhibition called "The Full" (*Le plein*) (1960) in which he dialecticized Klein's positing of a transcendental space that is in the world but not of it by filling the same gallery from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with garbage. Michael Asher, James Lee Byars, and others have used the empty exhibition space itself as their

primary material in various works – not to mention the tradition known as Light and Space. O’Doherty discovered the way to verbalize these developments for the first time. His essay is an example of criticism attempting to digest and analyze the recent past and the present – or shall I say the recent present. He argues that the communal mind of our culture went through a significant shift that expressed itself in the prominence of the white cube as a central material and expressive mode for art, as well as a fashionable style of displaying it. He identifies the transition in question as modernism bringing “to an endpoint its relentless habit of self-definition.” The defining of self means the purposeful neglect of all that is other than self. It is a process increasingly reductive that finally leaves the slate wiped clean.

The white cube was a transitional device that attempted to bleach out the past and at the same time control the future by appealing to supposedly transcendental modes of presence and power. But the problem with transcendental principles is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one. It is this other world, or access to it, that the white cube represents. It is like Plato’s vision of a higher metaphysical realm where form, shiningly attenuated and abstract like mathematics, is utterly disconnected from the life of human experience here below. (Pure form would exist, Plato felt, even if this world did not.) It is little recognized how much this aspect of Platonism has to do with modernist ways of thinking, and especially as a hidden controlling structure behind modernist esthetics. Revived in part as a compensatory reaction to the decline of religion, and promoted, however mistakenly, by our culture’s attention to the unchanging abstraction of mathematics, the idea of pure form dominated the esthetics (and ethics) from which the white cube emerged. The Pythagoreans of Plato’s day, including Plato himself, held that the beginning was a blank where there appeared inexplicably a spot which stretched into a line, which flowed into a plane, which folded into a solid, which cast a shadow, which is what we see. This set of elements – point, line, surface, solid, simulacrum – conceived as contentless except in their own-nature, is the primary equipment of much

modern art. The white cube represents the blank ultimate face of light from which, in the Platonic myth, these elements unspeakably evolve. In such types of thought, primary shapes and geometric abstractions are regarded as alive – in fact, as more intensely alive than anything with a specific content. The white cube's ultimate meaning is this life-erasing transcendental ambition disguised and converted to specific social purposes. O'Doherty's essays in this book are defenses of the real life of the world against the sterilized operating room of the white cube – defenses of time and change against the myth of the eternality and transcendence of pure form. In fact, they embody this defense as much as they express it. They are a kind of spooky reminder of time, illustrating how quickly the newest realizations of today become the classical insights of yesterday. Though it is common to say that modernism, with its exacerbated rate of change or development, is over, that rate of change not only remains but is increasing. Articles written today will, by 1990, either have been forgotten or like these, will have become classic.

Thomas McEvilley
New York City 1986