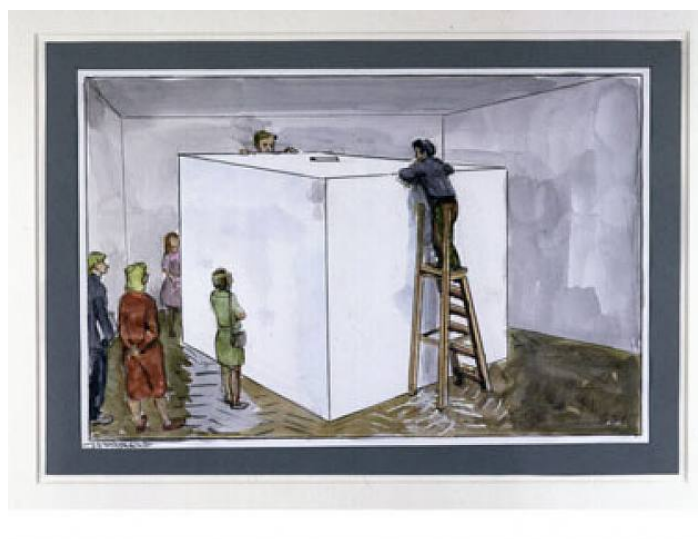


Simon Sheikh
**Positively White
 Cube Revisited**

Few essays have garnered as much immediate response as Brian O'Doherty's "Inside the White Cube," originally published as a series of three articles in *Artforum* in 1976, and subsequently collected in a book of the same name.¹ According to myth, the issues of *Artforum* containing O'Doherty's texts sold out very quickly, and as he himself has remarked, many artists he spoke to at the time told him that they themselves had been thinking about writing something similar. This is to say that the main concern of the essay – how to deal with the white cube convention for gallery design – was shared by many of his contemporaries. Naturally, O'Doherty was writing not only within the specific context of post-minimalism and conceptual art of the 1970s, but also from the point of view of artistic practice. Aside from being a prominent critic, O'Doherty was also an installation artist, having worked since 1972 under the name of Patrick Ireland (in protest against the British Army's involvement in Ulster). As both theorist and practitioner, insider and outsider, he was not in a bad position to examine the ideology of something as peculiar as the modern gallery space, the much loved and maligned "white cube."



Ilya Kabakov, *The White Cube*, 2005. Watercolor and pencil, 40.5 x 29.5 cm

In many ways, O'Doherty's point is as simple as it is radical: the gallery space is not a neutral container, but a historical construct. Furthermore, it is an aesthetic object in and of itself. The ideal form of the white cube that modernism developed for the gallery space is inseparable from the artworks exhibited inside it. Indeed, the white cube not only conditions, but also overpowers the artworks themselves in its shift from placing content *within* a context to making the context *itself* the content. However, this emergence of context is enabled primarily through its attempted disappearance. The white

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Inside the White Cube

The Ideology
of the Gallery Space

Expanded Edition

by Brian O'Doherty

Cover of *Inside the White Cube*, published by University of California Press, 1999.



Cerith Wyn Evans, *Look at that picture... How does it appear to you now? Does it seem to be Persisting?*, 2003.



Installation *White Cube*, London.

cube is conceived as a place free of context, where time and social space are thought to be excluded from the experience of artworks. It is only through the apparent neutrality of appearing outside of daily life and politics that the works within the white cube can appear to be self-contained – only by being freed from historical time can they attain their aura of timelessness.

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Elmgreen & Dragset, *Dug Down Gallery / Powerless Structures*, 1998. Installation view: Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland.

Enter the white cube, with its even walls and its unobtrusive artificial lighting – a sacred space that (despite its modern design) resembles an ancient tomb, undisturbed by time and containing infinite riches. O’Doherty uses this analogy of the tomb and the treasury to illuminate how the white cube was constructed in order to give the artworks a timeless quality (and thus, lasting value) in both an economic and a political sense. It was a space for the immortality of a certain class or caste’s cultural values, as well as a staging ground for objects of sound economic investment for possible buyers. O’Doherty thus reminds us that galleries are shops – spaces for producing surplus value, not use value – and as such, the modern gallery employs the formula of the white cube for an architectonics of transcendence in which the specificities of time and of place are replaced by the eternal. In other words, the white cube establishes a crucial dichotomy between that which is to be kept outside (the social and the political) and that which is inside (the staying value of art).

O’Doherty’s book offers a critique of this distinction, and his essays have often been seen

as a turning point in artistic-theoretical perception – from plane to space, and from work to context. His critique can be seen as part and parcel of a general artistic method – that of spatial critique, so prevalent in post-minimalism – and also as a method applied in O’Doherty’s own installation work. In this sense, O’Doherty’s writings are not art history (though they involve elements thereof), but are rather artist’s texts. There is an almost practical aspect to how they instruct an installation artist to deal with space. Indeed, O’Doherty had planned further chapters on the problem of corners and how they interrupt the perfect white walls, as well as a commentary on how to deal with ceilings. O’Doherty’s tone is not academic, but humorous and often quite sarcastic (he doesn’t shy away from the occasional dig or even dis). As he recasts and rewrites modern art history vis-à-vis various art practices’ relationship to the exhibition space, pragmatic answers alternate with theory and references to popular culture. With O’Doherty’s position being at once inside and outside, art’s histories and practices come to the fore as a strategy for writing. Just as in the cinematic example offered in the first essay’s opening passage, it is as if the essays formed a Hollywood movie in which we observe everything from the outside, while simultaneously identifying with the main characters within the narrative.

Not only in the context of art institutions and gallery spaces, but also in broader territorial and political senses, the dichotomy between inside and outside has become a cornerstone of what we would now call installation art. Thus, we should not only read “Inside the White Cube” as the vital document of the 1970s post-studio art scene that it undoubtedly is, but also as a nodal point that connects in two directions: backwards to the modern history of art, and forwards to contemporary spatial practices. It connects to history in that it can be re-interpreted in terms of its issues of space, as already mentioned, and to the contemporary and the recent histories of institutional critique, spatial production and politics. If the gallery space is saturated with ideology (as O’Doherty claims), and if it can be analyzed spatially and politically through artistic practices (such as the ones O’Doherty mentions in his fourth installment in the series “The Gallery as Gesture”), then this method can also be transferred onto other spaces and non-spaces (to reference the work of Michel Foucault and Marc Augé, among others).² This can lead to a comparative analysis of space: an analysis of territories, states, institutions, and their contingent mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, representation and de- presentation – an analysis that not only determines what is

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shown and what is not shown, but also what must be eradicated in order for one spatial formation to take precedence over another.

As O'Doherty concludes, the spatial arrangement overdetermines – consumes – the works (or, if you will, statements placed within them) to the degree that context becomes content. The task of critical art then becomes one of reflecting and restaging this space. Of course, this is exactly what happened in the 1970s, as well as in the so-called expanded field of art today. As such, O'Doherty's texts attest to the epistemological shift from the modern to the postmodern era of art and politics. In spite of these changes, however, the text not only marks a beginning, an end, or a part of a history, but is equally relevant today as part of a continuous debate – an ongoing struggle, if you will. After all, most galleries, museums, and alternative spaces still employ the white cube as the favored *modus operandi* for exhibition-making – as the dominant model for the showing of art. Gallery spaces and museums are still white cubes, and their ideology remains one of commodity fetishism and eternal value(s)...

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SpY, *Rubik's cube for the lazy person.*

1

See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

2

See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22-27; Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995).

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