Art Space Archaeology

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Adopting classical methods of archaeology, the project outlined herein aimed to recover and analyse cultural data and remaining artifacts to study past activity of artist-run spaces. Also known as project spaces or off-spaces, these kind of spaces "are organized mainly by artists and art related professionals – such as curators and art-historians – as non-profit, independent venues for many types of artist generated activity."[1] Despite that such initiatives have become aglobal and commonplace phenomenon in the contemporary art world, they experienced little sustained academic research interest.[2] Combining visual and historical modes of inquiry with the methodology of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, Art Space Archaeology desired toanalyse the conditions of knowledge production that evolved in these spaces and the discursive elements that endured their passing.

This research project intended to do so by uncovering idiosyncrasies in specific artifacts or architectural interventions the artists chose to use or to create with the goal to transform a space into an art space. Its aspiration was to index distinguishing artistic approaches to initiate and implement these transformations, but the findings proved similarities to be more striking than any differences. When artist-run spaces vanish, the archaeological traces that are consistently left behind are photographs of mostly white, empty spaces. This led to a series of questions on how to assess their archaeological significance and further, what kind of information about time and content can be derived from the cold walls of mostly white rooms, and ultimately if it is sufficient to understand artist-run spaces as blank canvasses for the artworks they host, or whether they must be appreciated as an extended mode of artistic expression beyond established artistic formats and media?

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Allegedly it was Thomas Bernhard who formulated the debatable declaration that what can be seen with our eyes doesn't need to be further described with words.[3] This rather provocative statement certainly has some truth to it, given that particularly intangible characteristics can only
be comprehensively perceived by
looking beyond the visually apparent, and require to be addressed through further description and research to enable a deeper level of
understanding. This line of thought can easily be applied to the archetypical design of exhibition spaces, given that there is hardly anything to see in an empty space with white walls, yet it is far from being empty of context or content.

Karl Schlögel's monograph "Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit", which translates
into "In SpaceWe Read Time", shows that history is always tied to a specific place or space.
History literally *takes place and history itself shapes the contours of its places*.[4] Following this hypothesis, even the white emptiness of museums, galleries or artist-run spaces carries an imprint of its time and purpose, and is consequently far from being a neutral container but rather a social and historical construct providing
various archeological insights.

The research of concluded artist-run space initiatives in Vienna between 2005 and 2015 has proven qualities of white cube exhibition space designs to be the dominant archetype. This

particular type of exhibition architecture has various roots, and the social and political context it emerged from is eminently diverse. In 1929 MoMa opened its doors in New York, presenting a white open space, cleared of any windows, repressing outside noises and lit exclusively by artificial light, creating the same sensual settings at any given time of day or year. Eight years later, the first artificially lit, all-white and windowless exhibition space in Europe opened in Munich in 1937. The Nazis' first architectural development, the Haus der Kunst, showed the "Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung" ("Great German art exhibition"). "If the white cube managed to be both the ideal display format for the MoMA's and the Third Reich's respective visions of modern art, despite their extremely different ideological and aesthetic positions, it is because the display conceit embodied qualities that were meaningful to both, including neutrality, order, rationalism, progress, extraction from a larger context, and, not least of all, universality and (Western) modernity."[5]

The white cube became *the* global default mode for showing art through the facilitation by modernism, a philosophical and aesthetic movement characterised by abstraction and the rejection of the ideology of realism. The white ideal space, being an aesthetic object in itself, is far from being neutral but is intensely linked to its historic context and the social construction that enabled it. It greatly impacts the perception of the art that is exhibited by paradoxically becoming a significant element of the artwork itself, exposing the failure in its attempt at neutrality and independence, putting precisely the act of removing cues to the temporal, social and political on display as content and context.

As installation artist and critic Brian O'Dorothy notes in his influential essay *Inside the White Cube*, it appears that time and change are attempted to be bleached out by the white cube to achieve a higher way of transcendence.[6] Transcendence is, per definition, an existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level — beyond our world. Following Kant's definition, transcendence isn't even realisable in human experience,[7] so how did white cubes become the favourable spaces to present art, for which the main purpose is exactly that - to be experienced?

Everything that is elementary to being human, our bodies, our flesh and bones, seems to conflict with the principals of timelessness and transcendence. "The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not — or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannekins for further study."[8] So it appears that the white cube is aiming to create and enforce the separation between body and mind, and the source for this aim could be anthropological.

The anthropologist Helmuth Plessner states that humans experience ultimatefreedom when they create a distance to themselves; that artificiality in acting, thinking and dreaming is what enables a person to be in accord with him- or herself.[9] This notion translates to the conceptuality of white cubes in a peculiar manner. White is a non-colour as it contains an equal balance of all the colours of the visible spectrum and thus is quite literally a colour without any colour. It represents, among many other symbolisms sterilisation and artificiality. Our bodies — being the disruptive factor within a clinical environment such as the white cube, and them keeping us from a higher state of transcendence — are artificially denied their existence, enforcing the duality of body and mind, and through that seemingly liberating the mind. Philosophically, we overcame this artificial division, yet architecturally it is perpetuated through time and again, creating white cubes in which to perceive and experience art. This appears particularly striking when applied to artist-run spaces — spaces created and formed by the creators of art themselves. To get deeper insight in the field of research addressed within this paper we shall take a step back and look at how and why the first noted example of an artist-run space came about. It was a tale of rivalry, protest and the intention to clear someone's name, that led to the first alternative exhibition space showing noted in history.[10]

Nathaniel Hone was an Irish painter born in 1718 and a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts. Together with six additional works, he submitted his painting *The Pictorial Conjuror, displaying the Whole Art of Deception* for inclusion at the 1775 annual exhibition of the Royal Academy. With this painting, Hone took aim at the Academy's president, Sir Joshua Reynolds. It depicts a bearded conjuror pointing his wand towards a fire ignited by an assortment of Old Master pieces, from which a framed painting arises. Reynolds delivered a discourse to the students of the Royal Academy on the distribution of the prizes, December 10, 1774, for which the subject was imitation. In his speech he claimed "that by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention is produced" and that further "even genius (…) is the child of imitation."[11] In his portraits Reynolds attempted to incorporate the air, manner, and gestures of the Old Masters on the grounds that such imitation elevated his own works. Hone'sConjuror alluded to Reynolds's practice through the inclusion of a number of Old Master pieces, which Reynolds had used as a source for his paintings. Hone further portayed a little girl kneeling at the conjuror's feet and folding her arms across his knee, supposedly resembling Angelika Kauffmann, another member of the Royal Academy, who allegedly had an affair with with the 18 year older Reynolds. However, it was neither the satirical depiction of Reynolds nor the representation of Kauffman leaning across the conjuror's knee, as much as the inclusion of a naked woman among the masterpieces, which was claimed to resemble Kauffmann, that ended up causing one of the biggest art scandals of the British eighteenth-century art world.[12] Due to Kaufmann's claimed resemblance to this naked figure, and despite the fact that said figure was only approximately 8 centimetres in size, a public display of disapproval between the relevant parties resonated and *The Conjuror* was expelled from the exhibition. Following the rejection by the Royal Academy, Hone decided to rent a space at 70 St. Martin's Lane, only about 500 meters from the exhibition space of the Royal Academy at that time. There, he created the first noted solo exhibition titled "The exhibition of pictures by Nathaniel Hone: mostly the works of his leisure, and many of them in his own possession" in the first noted artist-run space, which opened only 8 days after the official opening of the Royal's Academy yearly exhibition.

Hone's motives to present his works in a solo exhibition within an alternative exhibition space were likely to clear his damaged reputation and to protest the methods of the Royal Academy; yet, this is rather informed speculation than fact.[13] What definitely resulted from his actions were multiple other exhibitions of artists staged outside of the walls of autochthonous

museums and galleries. So the question is, what changed in artist-run space culture since the incident in 1775? Artist-run spaces still inherent some elements of protest and some of simulating features of classical museums. Even though artist-run spaces can hardly ever be found in direct proximity of museums anymore, which is likely based on financial reasons rather than a willing decision, other simulacrums, such as attempted copies of how to arrange artworks, can easily be identified — one of the most obvious is that these spaces are transformed to become white cubes.

Removing decoration, installing discreet sources of artificial light and colouring the walls white became quasi-neutralised identification factors for the intended purpose to display art. These are frequently the first transformational actions artists assume when adapting their spaces.The most likely core explanation for their interventions was to make their spaces identifiable as what they aim to be, and therefore also to make what is displayed within them identifiable as what it aims to be: tradeable artefacts on the global market of contemporary art. In her paper *The Global White Cube*, Elena Filipovic argues that it is in the interest of galleries and art fairs to resemble museal spaces, to support their strategic interest by an apparent legitimisation through presenting the works in museum-like spaces.[14] The same could be said about artist-run spaces, which might — even though they have different motives — aim to accomplish this same legitimisation.

The decision to create such a museum-simulacrum, however, comes with a series of consequences. One of them is that they create an almost sacral atmosphere. Even within artist-run-spaces, there is usually a level of quietude and timidness, an unspoken agreement that things are not to be touched, and that louder conversations or other display of human energy are supposed to be taken to the non-spaces around the white cubes – whether it's a bar in the entrance hall, or simply the boardwalk in front of the space. This is where our bodies are not intruders anymore, yet these are the places that vanish again after the collective energy fades away — the white cubes, on the other hand, remain until the spaces are shut down.

Another consequence is that the white art

spaces – which, because of their attempted neutrality, emphasise some of the formal qualities of the works at display there – also dominate the perception of time, space and atmosphere, and thus have a distinct influence on the perception of these artworks. They restrain the methods of presentation, individual attitudes in the experience of art, and create an aura that confers a halo of inevitability of whatever is shown inside them, either when witnessed in person or through the installation shot. The globally replicated white cube removes identifiers of locale and contextual specificity, levelling the playing field between accomplished institutions and artists as upcoming generations try to make their way into the global art market.

Architecturally, artist-run spaces often miss the kind of radical aesthetic distinctionthat only they have the freedom to implement, which can sometimes appear as seeking complicity with established structures of power and norm. This lack of distinction immanently expresses the primary condition under which these spaces are founded – for its members and associated social groups to find their way into the canon of globalized contemporary art, with its dominant seasonal and globally synchronised appetites for certain colour palettes, formats and processes.

On a local level, the intent of artist-run initiatives are laudable and their effects immeasurable. In the case of Vienna, they create low-threshold spaces for individual and collective agency from which state institutions, commercial dealers and festivals harvest talent and movements to integrate in their agendas of an economy largely dependent on cultural products. In her essay *The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism*, Claire Dorothy emphasises the importance of "a dominant strand of contemporary art practice – namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption"[15]. While museums as archival and conservational institutions need to establish an aura of timelessness and permanence, artist-run spaces can embrace their inherent mortality by being vigorously impermanent and focusing on highly temporal outbursts of artistic energy – rapidly expanding in every physical, thinkable or discursive dimension. This continuous process of

deconstructing and rethinking strategies, frameworks, audiences, and formats of contemporary art and its spaces, allows these initiatives to become platforms for the discourse on artistic agency in an age of a widespread crisis of institutions.

Given the lack of critical research in this field, the Vienna based agencyAgency launched art-space-archaeology.tumblr.com *as an open platform for the collection of photographic documentation of former artist-run spaces in various states of formation and transformation. The website aims to become a visual research resource for the traces of idiosyncratic and canonical aspects in spaces for artistic agency. Art Space Archaeology has received funding by the City of Vienna and the Federal Chancellery of Austria.*

REFERENCES

[1] *Marina Coelho, "Sao Paulo Kunsthalle" (Master's Thesis, Zurich University of the Arts, 2011) 26.*

[2] There are however a view examples of research focusing on alternative art spaces such as Gabriele Detterer and Maurizio Nannucci, eds, Artist-Run Spaces (Zurich: JPR, 2012) or Andrew Graciano, ed, Exhibiting outside the Academy, Salon and Biennial, 1775-1999 - Alternative Venues for Display (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015)

[3] This sentence gets attributed to Thomas Bernhard by the architecture critic Friedrich Achleitner, "Von der Unmöglichkeit Orte zu beschreiben", in Excentrische Ansätze, ed Kai Luehrs-Kaiser (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1998), 126-135.

[4] See Karl Schlögel, Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011)

[5] Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube", On Curating, Issue 22 (2014), 46.

[6] See Brian, O'Dorothy, Inside the White Cube (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1976), 15.

[7] See Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft (B: 1787), ed Raymund Schmidt, 19.

[8] Brian, O'Dorothy, Inside the White Cube (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1976), 15.

[9] See Helmuth Plessner, Grenzen der Gemeinschaft (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2002), 94. and 316. as quoted by Helmut Lethen, Verhaltenslehre der Kälte - Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 82-83.

[10] See Maximiliane Drechsler, "Die Ausstellung als Waffe - Die kleinen Freuden des Nathaniel Hone", Zwischen Kunst und Kommerz (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1996), 17-22.

[11] See "Seven Discourses on Art" by Joshua Reynolds, accessed July 30, 2015, http://www.auth orama.com/seven-discourses-on-art-8.html

[12] See Martin Butlin, "An eighteenth-century art-scandal: Nathaniel Hone's "The Conjuror"", Connoisseur, Volume. 174 (May 1970), 1-9.

[13] What adds to this informed speculation is the catalogue Hone provided to all visitors. This catalogue consisted of a two page introduction just concerning "The Conjurer" and the incident with the Royal Academy. Other than that it only listed all the other paintings in the show numerically. See Nathaniel Hone, The exhibition of pictures by Nathaniel Hone: mostly the works of his leisure, and many of them in his own possession, 1775, accessed July 30, 2015, https://archive.org/details/exhibitionofpict00hone

[14] Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube", On Curating, Issue 22 (2014), 46.

[15] Claire Dorothy, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and the New Institutionalism", engage - Art of Encounter, Issue

15, p 6.