

Can Buildings Curate Shumon Basar

The physical, institutional and ideological status of the gallery setting before and after the whitewash.

At the close of Empire Strikes Back, the second instalment of George Lucas’s space-saga, the lovable rogue Han Solo (Harrison Ford) is put into ‘carbon-freeze’, a punishment memorably rendered in an obdurate bronze slab. But Han Solo’s suffering is not eternal. At the beginning of the third episode, Return of the Jedi, he is defrosted back into vitality. Carbon-freezing hasn’t killed him; it is a perfect process of suspending something living so that, on the outside, it resembles death. Inside, Han’s heart never stopped beating.

If I walk through New York’s Chelsea galleries, or the rooms at Tate Modern in London, or visit virtually any new art space (the reopened MoMA, NY, included), I’m faced with the same slick surroundings: miles of white walls, acres of polished concrete floors and sparsely deployed angular furniture. Brian O’Doherty’s prescient description of ‘the white cube’ back in the early 1970s remains as true as ever: ‘...an image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that more than any single picture may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art’.¹ The ‘look’ is copied and repeated ad nauseam, giving the impression that modern gallery settings have gone the way of Han Solo: carbon-frozen, circa 1970. Except that today the once inimitable traits of the modern gallery space can be found everywhere, from Helmut Lang boutiques to dentists’ waiting rooms to IKEA kitchens. An avant-garde for all. Well, how did it get here?

Imps and provocateurs Early 20th-century pioneers played hard at the potential (dis-)ordering of relations between works and their physical settings. The utopian impulses encoded in Suprematist or Constructivist paintings were extrapolated into spatial scenarios. El Lissitzky’s Abstract Room of 1927, constructed at the Hanover Landesmuseum, is perhaps the first modern exhibition Gesamtkunstwerk, fusing wall, frame, object and subject. Later on, Marcel Duchamp interfered with art on display by employing the ceiling and a ‘thickened’ space of string.² Friedrich Kiesler, also close to the Surrealists, polemically pronounced his ‘correalist’ synthesis of painting, sculpture and architecture.³ Yves Klein’s voiding of the Iris Clert gallery also turned it into its own frame and subject, whilst the proto-Junkplace of Arman’s Le Vide forced the viewer to stand outside the very same gallery two years later, objectifying it through occlusion. Today, artist Goshka Macuga recalls this era of impish provocation where rooms become ideological polemical and immersive settings.

See Marcel Duchamp (1), El Lissitzky (2), Friedrich Kiesler (3), Goshka Macuga (10)

Functioning of the studio During the 1960s, impoverished avant-garde artists in New York had no choice but to live and work in derelict industrial buildings lit by bare neon tubes. They often painted these spaces white to suppress the accumulated dirt. Galleries quickly followed suit. As Daniel Buren wrote in his seminal essay of 1971, ‘There is an equivalence between the products of these lofts and their placement on the walls and floors of modern museums’.⁴ Although art practice now often does

away with the studio, modern galleries continue (some forty years later) to ape the romance of 1960s loft-living, under the premise that it is the most ‘inevitable neutral frame’ for art. Following such logic of causality, shouldn’t today’s galleries also resemble laboratories, film-editing suites or abattoirs? *See Dee Ferris, Yuh-Shioh Wong and Eamon O’Kane (4)*

A wall is a wall is not a wall By the early 1970s, the modern gallery was firmly part of the contemporary art world-system. Its physical anatomy became resolute and familiar. When Michael Asher sandblasted or removed walls from host galleries, he did so to reveal the embedded correlation between architectural anatomy, institutional presence and ideology. Within the hallowed setting of art space, everything is super-charged and symbolically sensitive. Plug sockets, air vents, doorways, fire escapes and floors take on an ambiguous aesthetic status: the institution of art vocalising through architectural details. *See Michael Asher (21), Diller+Scofidio (20), Neal Rock (5)*

Curatorial instruments Harald Szeemann, who died earlier this year, is considered to be the instigator of independent curating. Since the 1990s, according to art historian Claire Bishop, it is ‘the curator [who] holds power ... not the critic’.⁵ Curators command high-profile positions within the network of the art world. Curating mixes the prosaic necessities of function and organisation with a philosophical or ideological agenda. Selection, presentation, evaluation and historicisation all play a part. And with the rise of site-specific work, curators commission works for certain settings. In this way, the gallery or museum becomes a curatorial instrument to be played in different ways. *See SANAA (12), AS-IF (11), Goshka Macuga (10)*

Don’t just decorate. Curate. That’s the catchphrase used on a current poster for London’s ‘Affordable Art Fair’. Morrissey, Nick Cave and Sonic Youth have all ‘curated’ music festivals. It’s in the air.

Whilst professional curators have by default to deal with the ‘fact’⁶ of buildings and spaces, certain recent architectural approaches cite curatorial uses as their main logic. They often focus on intimate, strategic relations between permanent collections, temporary shows and the matrix of rooms available. Various modes of time – from real, to institutional, to historical – are manipulated in parallel with walls, floors and ceilings.

See OMA/AMO (16), Barbara Vanderlinden (9)

Bizarre love/hate triangle Carlos Balsualdo, co-curator of Documenta 11, said that the ‘curator provides an interface’. The same could be said about the gallery setting.⁷ It is an interface between artist, curator and architecture. The visitor, upon arrival, is witness to the fruition or failure of this three-way interaction. Sometimes egos compete. Occasionally envy is provoked. And, every so often, love prevails as collaborative new relationships are born. *See Nikolaus Hirsch/Michel Müller (17), Drabble + Sachs and Isa Sturm (6), Døstvedt&Rahm (22)*

Driven to spectacular distraction One of the eternal truisms of any gallery space is this: loud architecture

deafens the viewer and distracts from the work on show; clamour, cacophony and the chaos of modern life are to be firmly kept out of the gallery. Perhaps Lina Bo Bardi’s anti-gravity painting-hang at MASP was so short-lived because it competed too much; it spectacularised what should have been contemplative reflection. The Guggenheim franchise is of course no stranger to spectacle, hiring the world’s foremost architectural stars to add to its global network of ‘must-see’ icons. Perhaps ultimately Frank Lloyd Wright is to blame. His original white New York spiral – disparagingly compared to a glorified car park ramp – set the datum for ‘difficult’, spectacular art spaces. And also elicited some of the most memorable installation art. Ever. *See Lina Bo Bardi (15), Zaha Hadid Architects (13), Davide Bertocchi (14)*

Protest and persist The 1990s Guggenheim ‘Bilbao effect’ hysterically required new museums to be photogenic playgrounds: but only on the outside. A careful look inside the galleries reveals the same McWhite Cubes. The persistence of the modern gallery setting appears assured. No other scenario works so effectively as a shop or possesses the kind of blue-chip rarefaction that high-art lusts after. As curator Jens Hoffman says, ‘Artists have been reared on the idea of neutrality – it has become a permanent condition, and they are conditioned by it’.⁸ However, the myth of neutrality has also come to an end. Tactics from certain artists, curators and architects increasingly favour dirtier, messier and less perfect conceptual contexts. They simultaneously accede to the desire for neutrality and thwart it by revealing the fallacies of that need. *See Igor Zabel and Josef Dabernig (11), R&Sie (10)*

Escape and self-exile It would be naïve not to mention the recent proliferation of art ‘in the expanded field’, as Rosalind Krauss put it.⁹ For many artists, Robert Smithson was right when he wrote ‘Museums like asylums and jails have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called “galleries”’.¹⁰ However, there is a form of practice that hovers between affirmation and denial of architectural settings. In these works, artists curate spaces, structures and signs of buildings. They baptise new ‘gallery’ spaces where there are none. *See Cai Guo-Qiang (22)*

Anti-amnesia If amnesia has a colour, then that colour is white. White has almost succeeded in smothering that once utopian space of cultural experimentation and meditation: the gallery. Our memories have been whitewashed. To paraphrase Mary Staniszewski (from her book on ‘the laboratory years at MoMA’), studying the various aspects – physical, symbolic, political and nostalgic – of the gallery setting is a strategy for framing one part of the art system such that its ideological limits become more visible. Can Buildings Curate attempts to stimulate debate on the future by framing the past and present. It brings together unlikely unions, not to pronounce ‘Zeitgeist!’ but rather to depict today’s plurality of positions, vociferously at play. Without play, there is no experiment. Without experiment, there is no progress. Without progress, we’re in carbon-freeze alongside Han Solo. Without a sequel to save us in sight.

Statement pertaining to the Architectural Aspects of the Gallery¹

Joshua Bolchover

Exhibition curators and designers, Newbetter, pay homage to visionary architect and scene-setter Friedrich Kiesler

We aimed at creating a series of innovative exhibition devices that colonise the host gallery, activating the neutral space of exhibition in such a way that it participates in the curation of the work itself. The intent is not to subjugate the artwork or curatorial idea. Rather, we assert that exhibition design – an overlooked, insipid discipline since the ascent of installation art – can initiate the latent creative potential that exists between content, viewer and architectural setting. The exhibition criteria of Can Buildings Curate are as follows:

- All installations are mobile and demountable: a kit of flat-packed components designed for ease of transportation. The exhibition is conceptualised as a virtual white cube. On arrival at the host institution the cube subdivides into a series of devices, each colonising the gallery in specific ways.
- Materially the components have been selected for ease of construction, economy and potential for transformation. Each apparatus can be adapted according to the architectural constraints of the gallery space or the viewing conditions demanded by the artwork. Materials have been appropriated from other manufacturing fields; they include an industrial warehouse shelving system, the kind of acoustic foam used in tractor engines, plastic hygienic wall panels and standardised electrical conduit.

- The interaction between the exhibition devices and the architecture of the host institution creates a cluster of augmented gallery spaces. An acoustically insulated hanging cube becomes an immersive one-person sound room; the combination of two roller-blind creates a darkened video gallery. An extruded cage provides infrastructure for photographic, digital and three-dimensional material, forcing close proximity between

works yet maintaining visual continuity across the gallery. The free spatial distribution of objects generates a dynamic field of interaction for the viewer.

1. The exhibition design is a response to the specific characteristics of the host building.

- The exhibition adapts to the characteristics of its host. The AA gallery at first appears as a modern white gallery space, yet on closer inspection reveals the eccentricities of a Georgian house, with its dado rails, skirting details and cornices. A secondary doorway, blocked up with plasterboard for as long as anyone can remember, is re-opened. A new room within a room is created in the gallery. The room is accessible only from the outside corridor, but is broken through a low-level slot that creates permeability between the interior of the gallery and its exterior.

- Details of the room are exposed to form new sites for artworks. For example, the ‘shadow-gap’ – that trusty architectural detail employed to make modern walls seemingly float – becomes the site for a commissioned artwork. The floor/wall juncture is used to complete an in-situ painting that was begun in the artist’s studio. The exhibition itself is a discursive tool, pitched between architecture and exhibition device, between host curators and the exhibition curators. In each location the exhibition will be unique both in its physical configuration and in its capacity to stimulate a debate on the constitution of the contemporary gallery space. The exhibition promotes a renewed exploration of the potential for exhibition design to act as a creative participant in the contentious relationship between art, the curator and the architecture of the gallery. To re-state Herbert Bayer’s words:

‘Exhibition design should evolve as a new discipline, as an apex of all media and powers of communication and collective efforts and effects. The total application of all plastic and psychological means (more than anything else) makes exhibition design an intensified and new language.’²

^[1] The title and the structure of essay refer directly to ‘Press Release pertaining to the Architectural Aspects of the Gallery’, written by Friedrich Kiesler for the exhibition Art of this Century (1942) and reprinted in Friedrich Kiesler: Art of This Century, Hatje Cantz, 2002.

^[2] Herbert Bayer, ‘Aspects of Design of Exhibitions and Museums’ (1961), quoted in Staniszewski, Mary Anne, The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art, MIT Press, 2001.

^[1] Brian O’Doherty, Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999. The essay was originally published in Artforum in 1976.

^[2] See Lewis Kachur, Displaying the Marvelous: Surrealist Exhibition Installations, MIT, 2001, for a lucid account of Duchamp’s role in the formation of ‘ideological exhibitions’.

^[3] Kiesler’s Manifeste du Constatisme was originally published in L’architecture aujourd’hui in 1949. An English translation is available in Endless Space, Hatje Cantz, 2001.

^[4] Daniel Buren, ‘The Function of the Studio’ (1971), reprinted in October: The First Issue, MIT, 1986.

^[5] From a conversation with the author, 18 November 2004

^[6] Author interview with Teresa Gladowe, 18 November 2004.

^[7] Lecture at Royal College of Art, 23 November 2004.

^[8] From a conversation with the author, 24 January 2005.

^[9] ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, October (Spring 1979)

^[10] Robert Smithson, Cultural Confinement, in Documenta 5, Kassel, 1972.

^[11] Mary Staniszewski, The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art, MIT, 1998.

21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa by SANAA Kieran Long

Labyrinthine and strange or a diagram for future art institutions?

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan is a building that resists attempts to experience it through the senses. It demands and elicits an intellectual response. Its materials – the glass perimeter, the white rendered geometric pieces of the gallery spaces, the polished floor – recede into the background. Its iconography is suppressed. Its abstract nature is disorientating. I wandered around for nearly three hours before I was absolutely sure I had seen every space. (It was no surprise that most western visitors were to be found in James Turrell’s installation – a stone-lined room with a square opening in the ceiling – which here at least can be interpreted as the atrium of a Roman house, a place of social intimacy and repose.)

The plan of the building has been compared, by me among others, to an approximation of an urban arrangement.

With few points of orientation and an intimate scale, it has the feel of a medieval city. Assembled like a jigsaw within the circular envelope, the building is a collection of abstract geometric forms, with corridors of different widths and lengths.

Pictures of the study models confirm that Sejima and Nishizawa developed hundreds of configurations before deciding on this one. When you’re there, it’s difficult to appreciate the specific benefit of this arrangement as opposed to any other. The world of circular, oblong and square galleries is seemingly constructed by the serendipity of a gradual arrangement, and homogenised by a neutral material strategy.

Some of the artworks here create relationships with the building that make you laugh out loud. On entering the very beautiful, flower-hung gallery number Six (by Gerda and Joerg Lenzlinger), I noticed a door on the far side of the room leading to a long descending corridor. At the end of this tapering passage, through a small portal, is Brazilian artist Leandro Erlich’s swimming pool, a permanent gallery installation.

From the courtyard above, it looks as if fully clothed people are sitting at the bottom of the pool. On closer inspection this is revealed as an illusion, the effect of a layer of glass covered by just a couple of inches of water. This is architecture and installation as elaborate dissimulation. It’s funny and charming and excessive – more the attributes of a leisure environment than a traditional art-space.

Other pieces in the opening exhibition perhaps strike a more profound chord. Motoi Yamamoto’s extraordinary *Labyrinth* is an intricate maze made of nearly three tons of salt, which effectively blocks off one corner of the museum and seriously affects the already complex matter of finding one’s bearings.

It seems to me this is architecture curating art. *Labyrinth* is not site-specific (it was first executed in 2001), but it is absolutely of its place.

In this context it suggests ramifications for the gallery as a whole, for the city beyond, and for Japanese history and culture (in Japan salt is strongly associated with death and purification). Its intimate and obsessive complexity suggests architectural concerns in the artwork, but it is the building and the artwork together that summon the power of the work.

Sejima and Nishizawa’s building has an overt relationship with the curatorial policy of the institution. But the first thing to realise is that the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art is a very local project, despite the international stature of its architects. The museum’s own PR material notes that there are currently over 300 art galleries around the world either under construction or in the process of refurbishment. True, it has a gimmick – only collecting work from this century (with a little latitude) – but it is both architecture and a geometric haven onto which artists and curators can project extraordinary worlds.

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