



Other Spaces (The White Cube and Beyond) • DANIEL BIRNBAUM

## OTHER SPACES (The White Cube and Beyond)

This is the story about a small white cube, a simple container, constructed behind an old facade in Frankfurt am Main. The facade is the Portikus of the old City Library that was bombed in World War II. The story starts with an empty box...

It was like a rite of passage. A white zone we all had to pass before other things could start to evolve. Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset's exhibition in the Portikus reminded us of the fundamental restrictions of the classical gallery space, and hinted at possibilities we weren't yet aware of. It was our first show in the space and the series of exhibitions it initiated was to follow a logical route: steps of expansion leading up to the final blast. Elmgreen & Dragset's elastic white cube made the transition possible, maybe even necessary. "Spaced Out," their second show, marked an end that was also a kind of beginning. It was a moment of implosion, but also a moment that made the general rule of our activity clear: these exhibition projects were all - in different ways - about the active production of space. That has continued after we left the space behind the façade, and the characteristics of our new "container" - designed by Tobias Rehberger and Olafur Eliasson - has triggered novel kinds of spatial exploration. Our physical displacement made visible that dislocation - the production of other spaces - had been the rule of the game all along. Other spaces: The hyper-visible façades of the Brandenburger Gate, the large electronic billboard of a Frankfurt bank, an art academy turned into an inn for hundreds of international guests... But also virtual spaces explored through the power of imagination: the realm of dead souls communicating via radio frequencies (Carl-Michael von Hausswolff), a journey into absolute darkness - the color black - through an elaborate molecular structure shining as bright as the stars (Spencer Finch), or the return to a critical moment in recent art history - Gordon Matta-Clark's "Splitting" - through the medium of bread (Pierre Huyghe, Pamela M Lee, Rirkrit Tiravanija).

Let's return to the point of departure: the empty white space. About the monad, the simple substance, in Leibniz's philosophy, Gilles Deleuze writes: "The monad is a cell. It resembles a sacristy more than an atom: a room with neither doors nor windows, where all activity takes place on the inside." Is the monad a gallery showing the most global of exhibitions? "The monad is the autonomy of the inside, an inside without an outside," says Deleuze. And yet the world in its entirety is being reflected inside the monad, the future as well as the past. It's an infinitely simple and at the same time endlessly complicated structure. A space closed from the world, yet containing everything: a perpetual mirror of the universe. Now compare this to Brian O'Doherty's classical description of the white cube gallery: "A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the only source of light." The traditional understanding of the ideology of the white cube can be summed up like this: "In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing dance, or make love." In short: the white cube is a structure of exclusion.

In a number of exhibitions in (above, or around) the Portikus we tried to demonstrate the opposite: the gallery can be seen as a structure of inclusion. This is a strategy of expansion which step by step, lets the cube comprise everything it traditionally is meant to exclude: the body, social life, the city, the mediascape, nature, the hallucinations of the "super urban" First of all: Elasticity. With the project "Powerless Structures, Fig. 111," Elmgreen & Dragset made the cube elastic and thus turned the viewer's attention to the space itself. Arching the gallery's floor and skylight to each other in a drastic

way via construction measures, they reminded us of the strict conventions of the White Cube while simultaneously poking fun at the tradition of alleged neutrality. The white cube promotes the myth that we are there essentially as spiritual beings - the eye is the Eye of the Soul. Climbing through Elmgreen & Dragset's deformed space, we were reminded that our eyes are very much part of an organism. A body with its own spatial and kinesthetic coordinates. A second stage was Hospitality. While leaving Elmgreen & Dragset's deformed space unaltered, Rirkrit Tiravanija inserted a platform for various activities into the Portikus. His "untitled, 2001 (demo station no.1)" represented an exhibition in the exhibition. The elasticity of the space was thus pushed one step further so as to make the white cube completely permeable. For six weeks the gallery was filled with almost hysterical activity: cooking, music, dancing, fashion, literature.

Cinema and the City. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's installation turned the Portikus into a cinema in the most reduced sense: a dark-blue space lighted by "stars," a screen, red seats. The white cube was transformed into a black box which represents another dialectic between exclusion and expansion: that of cinematic imagination - in this case a kind of urban dreaming. Two films, "Riyo" and "Central" were screened, both 10 minutes long and projected in 35 mm. They show Asian urban landscapes: the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto, the bay of Hong Kong. In both films the cities form the backdrop for deeply personal narratives and melancholy moods. Philippe Parreno's "El Sueno de Una Cosa," on the other hand, cut the institution into two distinct halves, separated only by time. For four minutes and thirty-three seconds the space appeared as a conventional modernist gallery with a group of large-format, white monochrome paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, painted in 1951. The soundtrack is by John Cage: silence. Then suddenly the shutters descend and turn the space into a dark cinema. This dialects between white cube and black box continues in the shows of Ceal Floyer, Salla Tykkä, Bas Jan Ader, and Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller. The latter's "The Berlin Files" again turned the Portikus into a cinematic structure, one resembling the perceptual and mental machinery in that it constantly forced the viewer from one level to the next: What is part of a dream, what is perception? What is a memory, what is a hallucination? Working with elaborate forms of narration, reminiscent of romantic irony and Brechtian "verfremdung," the artists let us inhabit many places simultaneously.

René Green's exhibition "Phases + Versions" contained several works using sound as well as moving imagery, all co-ordinated according to a subtle color key. The visually most prominent work "Imaginary Places: Variation 1" enfolded on the walls. The imaginary places spelled out in the whole color spectrum also ask the question of the site of art. Does the installation happen "Here" or, as one of the other works in the show suggest, always "Elsewhere"? Peter Cook's intricate installation "Hidden City," which took us beyond the individual city to a kind of meta-urban level, poses similar questions concerning location. A juxtaposition of statements and collages, Cook's exhibition represents a mazelike route through cities, buildings, parks and traffic networks. We travel from Houston via an "inspirational chain" - he Italian Hill, London, Los Angeles - back to something which is Houston but also beyond and more than Houston. A sort of "Super Houston."

A series of works involved physical displacements. For instance, Rivane Neuenschwander's exhibition "Spell" marked a moment when the art displayed forced us beyond the architectural confines of the rectangular space. The Portikus received its first annex, a wing accommodating a cinema. Simon Starling's "Cactus House," which turned the Portikus into a green house, continued the logic of expansion and displacement. A heating system raised the temperature in the space to about 35° C, the ideal condition for a cactus that has been transported in a Volvo from southern Spain. The heating system

consisted of a Volvo engine, the vehicle itself being parked behind the Portikus. The tubes surround the exhibition space turning the Portikus to an extension of the car. The show was started from the driver's seat. Pascale Marthine Tayou on the other hand extended the Portikus vertically. He closed the entrance with large block letters announcing "CLOSE." His project "Erection" took part on the roofs of the Portikus and of the adjacent nurses' home where the artist erected flagpoles with flags of all fifty-four African nations. Through the emphasis on verticality, the show magnified to absurdity the symbolism of power inherent in flagpoles and the classical column architecture. An imaginary African Union was established in the air above the Portikus.

A radical physical displacement: For three weeks the Portikus made a guest performance on two considerably larger and more prominent facades, those of the Brandenburger Gate in Berlin. Two huge images, by Thomas Bayrle and Michel Majerus, draped the gate entirely. Bayrle's autobahn pattern (German highways with cars climbing the national monument) covered the western facade, and Majerus photo of the so-called Sozialpalast, a highly controversial 1970s housing project, was displayed on the eastern facade. Thus two German artists of different generations embedded the symbolic edifice into social and political realities that one tends to forget about in front of nationalistic monuments. Since the two massive images were up during the night of the German election, several international TV networks, including CNN and BBC World, made this Portikus project visible globally.

Michael Foucault coined the concept of "heterotopia" to describe "places which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." These places, he continues, "are outside of all places" and they are "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about." These exhibition projects, most of which happened in a certain German city, can be understood in terms of a search for such places which are outside of all places. Such a search can never be described in terms of a harmonious linear narrative. The route will always be turbulent. These shows have taken us around the world via a long series of dislocations. After passing through this "inspirational chain," the white cube is no longer a white cube. It's now what Peter Cook would refer to as a Super White Cube - a place which is outside of all other spaces, at once very local and totally global. The idea that the global and the local are intimately intertwined has never been more clearly emphasized than in Leibniz's Monadology: "Souls are living mirrors or images of the universe." The most local of perspectives, that of the single mind, contains the universe in its entirety. Can one imagine a kind of Leibnizian curating, a staging of shows that lets the gallery space mirror the all, not by stuffing the space full of objects but rather by showing that everything was actually already there, folded into an infinitely complicated labyrinthine space which always opens upon another space? Of course most of these exhibitions are little more than an amassment of stuff in a small room. And yet, and yet...

We were hoping that they would also show something else. That they would show that our small white box is not a structure of exclusion but one of infinite inclusion and ongoing displacement. The box itself is now sent on a journey. So far it's been a turbulent one. It may look just like any other white box, but in fact it's a space outside all spaces. The kind of maze that the most incredible of Leibniz's modern disciples, Jorge Luis Borges, was dreaming of: "I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at a secrete crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms. . . I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars. . ."



## ABOUT DANIEL BIRNBAUM

Daniel Birnbaum is the Director of the Städelschule Art Academy and its Portikus Gallery, both in Frankfurt am Main. He is also a member of the board of Frankfurt's Institut für Sozialforschung. For three years (1998-2000), he was Director of IASPIS (International Artists' Studio Program in Sweden). In the 1980s and early 90s he was primarily involved in academic philosophy and worked as a translator and commentator of books by, among others, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. He also wrote a dissertation on phenomenology, "The Hospitality of Presence" (1997). Since 2004 he became an associate curator of Magasin 3 in Stockholm. A contributing editor of the New York-based magazine Artforum International, he has published extensively on art and philosophy, in both a journalistic and an academic context. He has organized some fifty exhibitions and was co-curator of the 2003 Venice Biennale and of the first Moscow Biennial that opened January 2005. His most recent book, "Chronology," was published by Lukas & Sternberg in 2005.