

White Cube, Bermondsey

Gallery Report by Meliz Sabanci



The White Cube is a commercial, efficiently run gallery that derives its profit from sales of artwork and chooses artists that they believe will enhance their gallery's reputation. It is a contemporary, private gallery but takes on museum-like functions. (Frearson, 2011) White Cube opened in Bermondsey, October 2011 by art dealer Jay Jopling who was hoping to show great art, free of price to the people of South East London. Bermondsey is the largest of all the gallery's sites, incorporating more than 5440m of interior space, also allowing for it to be a showroom and a warehouse. (Fund, 2011) Formerly, the location for the White Cube was a small square room on Duke Street, which opened in 1993 before closing and expanding into something much bigger. In that location there was a gallery rule that both British and international artists could only be exhibited once. (Cube, 2017) I consider this to be an interesting and unique rule that allows many artists to have a chance at making themselves known in the art world. The White Cube now spans the globe, spreading out into evolving cities in Hong Kong and São Paulo. (Cube, 2017)

I will be focusing on Bermondsey's space in this report, as this is somewhere I have frequently visited and my understanding of this particular gallery is more developed. Whilst gathering research, I emailed a few specific questions regarding finances to the White Cube but the response was that as they are a commercial gallery they 'cannot release any information'. By not disclosing any further information, the White Cube is keeping the privacy of their clients

and sponsors. However, it is still suspicious that the White Cube's economic dealings are very private and the fact that its annual report does not disclose any financial data is quite secretive. (Bailey, 2013)

The White Cube makes itself visible to many different audiences by the extensive array of networks it contributes to, on a national and international level. Some of these include; India Art Fair, ArtRio, Art Basel Miami Beach, Frieze New York, FIAC Paris and Shanghai Contemporary Art Fair. By being part of these fairs, The White Cube is given the opportunity to further expand their audiences and engage with future potential buyers whilst acquiring a global status. White Cube represents a selection of work by international artists who exhibit at these art fairs, including; Mona Hatoum, Andreas Gursky and Tracey Emin. (Cube, 2017) You can also buy these artists work on the White Cube page where they have an online shop which is a way to help sustain the art gallery.

Charles Saatchi is a critic of the conventional white space that the white cube maintains, stating, "After years of showing art floating in a pristine arctic isolation, it's a revelation to break out of the white-cube time warp." In 2003, Saatchi claimed that this type of environment prevents viewers from seeing the art in a broader context. (Milner, 2003) However, I challenge this view, the white space is essential as to not distract you and lose your attention. I prefer the Director of the Tate's opinion, Sir Nicholas Serota, who states that it is

important the artwork does not become endangered by distraction. (Milner, 2003) A spokesperson for the Tate also claims "Artists like their work to be shown in spaces that are similar to those that they are used to working in - namely, a whitewashed studio". (Milner, 2003) I also agree with this viewpoint, as I too would like the work of art I create to be in the same setting it was once made. By the 1970s, the idea of a white space to show artwork had become ubiquitous. There is a certain allure about a seemingly 'neutral' ground that it offered works of art, a depersonalised space that presented museum functions.

The White Cube also faced criticism by an art group called the 'Stuckists' when they called out the concept of traditional galleries in 1999, declaring that they are "opposed to the sterility of the white wall gallery system", whilst opening up their own gallery with coloured walls in a neighbouring street from the White Cube. Personally, I meditate that the white walls validate the work, making it appear significant and isolated from its surroundings.

The white cube is known for being the first to host solo shows for many of the YBA's, including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. Currently, Anselm Kiefer is exhibiting 'Walhalla', a large-scale sombre installation that features both sculptures and paintings. Kiefer has radically transformed this space compared to the last exhibition that was held there, it is motivating to see how the artists that exhibit at the White Cube often shock you with their ability to renovate a space in a way that will encapsulate the viewer. (Jones, 2016) The

folded up steel beds were swathed in masses of dark grey creased lead, featured in a meagrely lit corridor, which suggests an institutional dormitory or morbid hospital setting, which elicited a sinister sense of claustrophobia. There were also large-scale, moody paintings that appeared to have been attacked by paint and built up layers of texture, showing a sense of trauma. The whole experience of travelling around this type of immersive, violent setting had many people on edge, tiptoeing around the work.

I personally selected this gallery to investigate as I feel that the space would successfully associate my work with past artists who have exhibited there, like Kiefer. My practice involves attacking raw unstretched canvas with oil paints and using materials such as; wire, clay and crushed charcoal to rupture the surface. Much like Kiefer's exhibition, I depict brutal experiences of trauma onto the canvas through layers of thick impasto paint. White Cube is the type of gallery that would accommodate the artists works in a way that encourages participation amongst viewers. With the way that Kiefer's exhibition was laid out, the pieces looked as if they were part of the architecture, the space becoming something that is just as important as the art itself whilst creating a rich spatial experience for the visitor. (Martin Caiger-Smith, 2011)

The space is one that promotes a freedom to think, with wide glass doors, the gallery is accessible and inviting to all. It lets the viewers take on a self-reflective role, having a moment to immerse themselves fully with the artwork,

the white space providing a great distraction from the bustling streets of London outside.

Critic Brian O'Doherty makes a very remarkable point in his essay 'Inside the White Cube', which is about the importance of eliminating the outside world so that artworks could appear 'untouched' by time inside the gallery. (Doherty, 2011) Works that appear in a timeless, isolated setting shows a detachment from any kind of historical or social context. However, white is not necessarily something that is neutral. There are certain attachments that come with the use of white; it is exceedingly loaded ideologically. It is clean and discreet, emphasizing the abstraction of space and the decontextualization that is conventionally present with institutional spaces.

Anthropologist Marc Augé describes that there is an appeal towards the white walled gallery because it gives off an idea of legitimisation. (Nison, 2015)

White Cube is one of many commercial galleries that are competing to sell their artworks to very powerful audiences. It will always have a financial interest in making work appear as if they have already been legitimized, appealing to the buyers and relying on a museum-like exhibition format. Augé also describes how white can be an excuse for laziness, that curators are too dependent and fall back on what has already been done time after time.

Perhaps it is time for a new kind of approach to curation. Museum director Gail Gelburd claims that the white cube should be replaced by alternative art

spaces, declaring that when she sees walls painted white, she is not surprised and wants something refreshing. (Nison, 2015) Maybe there should be a new kind of art space that encourages conversation, allowing for heated discussion. Brian Bettencourt, art collector, states, “It’s no longer enough to offer white walls and hung paintings.” (Nison, 2015) He believes that the Internet is taking over and we have no use for galleries anymore, claiming that artists are able to build careers on social media. He is not alone in this opinion, “Artists are now able to become their own gallery agent”, states Olga Alexander, gallery director of Lab Art Space. (Nison, 2015) It is true that the Internet shows progression but it could be the wrong kind of progress. To truly appreciate a work of art, it is Important you see it in person. The Internet is full of advertisements and you are at risk of becoming jeopardizing the artwork by becoming distracted.

Professor Ivan Gaskell regards the four white walls as a ‘differentiation between the modern and what preceded it’. (Nison, 2015) For instance, there has been a huge shift in the type of artwork being created today compared to the work of the 19th century old masters. The space needs to be able to accommodate the new kinds of artworks being produced. White Cube is a space that I believe is not ‘dated’, (Milner, 2003) despite Saatchi’s comments, the White Cube is successfully showing an adherence to avant-gardism and providing a space that transcends the specifics of any given culture through a universal, pristine and immaculate backdrop.

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