

CONTENT CHANGES QUICKLY FOR- MATS CHANGE SLOWLY

As we consider the possibilities for original digital spaces and immersive augmented environments, we should reflect on the spaces in our built environment that have historically been designed to take us out of the ordinary world. Specifically, we should reflect on the nature of the spaces dedicated to the display and reception of visual art. To speculate on the potentials for digital environments, we must recognize the out-of-the-ordinariness of the spaces we know as museums and galleries – any institution of cultural influence whose primary purpose is the display of fine art, artifacts, or evidence of material culture for an audience. This essay is not about particulars, it is about influence and experience through a type of space. As we move into the second quarter of this century, the nature of our experiences with visual art, and its spaces of influence, is irrevocably changing. The physical spaces of museums and galleries are increasingly supplemented by digital content, and the prevalence of augmentation and VR may signal their lasting value. Steadily more, the sources of cultural influence and the means of our interpretation of visual art are being removed from physical space altogether.

¹ Stephen Bann connects modern display practices to the pilgrimage and reliquary culture of the Middle Ages, see: Stephen Bann, *Shrines, Curiosities and the Rhetoric of Display*, in: *Visual Display. Culture Beyond Appearances*, edited by Lynne Cooke & Peter Woolen, Seattle 1995, pp. 14-29.

² The word 'exhibition' comes from the Latin *exhibere* meaning 'to hold out' in one's hand. This etymology denotes the action of offering an item for examination – to present something. The connotation, though, includes the possibility for exchange or trade.

ON
CHAD
DAWKINS
SPACE!

From the late-17th century to the present, the spaces dedicated to art's display followed some general stylistic and functional forms that we identify as originating in aristocratic palace collections, temporary institutional salons, and church decoration.¹ The palace and the collector's *Wunderkammer* (*Cabinet of Wonder*) were ostensibly private spaces; the church was designed for individual experience as part of the collective ceremony. The grandeur of the palace, being (at least in part) a private home, would have appeared as such, furnished for domesticity and entertainment. These interiors showed the most refined examples

of moldings and trims in wood and plaster, gilt hardware, and very often floor-to-ceiling decorative surfaces, and the collection of visual art was part of this ornament. On the other hand, the impression of the church interior becomes emotionally charged through the ritual and ceremony giving life to the objects and images included in its structure. If, at some point in history, the objects we call artworks had specific metaphysical functions, then the establishment of the modern public collection marks the point in history when their sole function became presentation, and the revelation of the object became its exhibition.² What we understand as the modern, musicological collection, with its classifications of material culture and natural specimens, arose in tandem with Enlightenment ideals of knowledge as well as the development of consumerism. Our actions and expectations of the museum, as a place, are tied to architecture and to what we assume that architecture means; our contemporary exhibition spaces, and our behavior in them, are rooted in these palaces and churches.

FROM THE
WHITE CUBE
TO THE

SCREEN

In the 18th century, the earliest public museums appeared in Europe; for well over 200 years now, museums in the West have adopted a style of cultural significance.³ In many ways, like other civic spaces – the library, courtroom, or church – the purposeful space of art adopted an architecture of authority with a Neo-classical style exterior, materially situating themselves in a lineage of Western culture. This reveals the aspirations of their creators – to make sites modeled on existing examples imbued with concepts like ceremony, influence, and permanence. Having evolved in European capitals, this expression was manufactured in the US to represent a sense of authority.⁴ It is not by accident that cultural, and civic, buildings in the US were built for over a century intended to look like their European predecessors, which in turn were derived from their classical predecessors. Designed to

impress, these buildings were built to insinuate everlastingness – to radiate a sense of *always having been there*. This makes clear the authorial concerns to exert influence, to give a sense of history, and represent their dedication to conservation. What this implies is an inherent conservatism.

While the overall structure of art's purposeful spaces can be traced to aristocratic quarters and longitudinal-plan churches, many of the museum interior's essential features were adopted from spaces of commerce. City shops along glass-covered arcades provided examples for lighting, furnishings, and layouts that became incorporated in renovations and new construction.⁵ These interiors modeled the efficiency of retail display and inventory – natural overhead lighting, the adaptability of rooms, and an emphasis on approach and sightlines to impress upon the individual in the crowd.

Certain retail furnishings became common exhibitionary features. The vitrine is practical for displaying objects under protection. Benches and chairs are accommodating while stanchions and counters prohibit movement, but all these items have influenced our perceptions of a given space and our behavior around it.

By the end of the 19th century, the ideas surrounding the use of spaces dedicated to art and culture had been established, and it is at this point that some significant new developments come into conflict with those traditions. By this time, professional specialization – and the fracturing of humanistic studies into distinct disciplines – manifested separate institutions devoted solely to art, science, literature, medicine, or history. It is also the second half of the 19th century that witnessed a proliferation of World's Fairs – expositions complete with industrial and

agricultural showcases, exhibitions of art, and ethnographic displays complete with living specimens.⁶ For our history, the most important aspect of the expo form was the refinement of temporary display methods. The industrialization and standardization of everything, especially building materials, meant that the methods of constructing a space for the purpose of showing art could be more easily replicated. The efficiency of temporary structures meant less ornament than if made to be permanent. Once the ability to replicate the form and function of the space was made affordable and accessible, the standardization of the apparatus for showing followed. Once the stylistic form was standardized, the individuality of all existing art-specific interiors had to be called into question. The legitimacy of precedents and standards become issues of critique – issues that spur challenges to conventions about space and about what it means.

3 While the idea of a public is far different today, many studies about art and audiences in museological history and curatorial/exhibition practices are intrinsically part of this development. Some specifics include: Mary Kelly, *Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism*, in: *Screen 22* (1981), pp. 41–62; Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, Amherst/MA 1998; Beti Zerovc, *When Attitudes Become the Norm: The Contemporary Curator and Institutional Art*, Ljubljana & Berlin 2018; and many of the essays in Ivan Karp and Steven Levine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington 1991; and Paula Marincola (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia 2006.

4 For specific histories, see: Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, New York 1995.

5 Chantal Georgel recounts C.A. Guillaumot's memoir of designing the Louvre interior. Guillaumot describes the architect's visits to various stores to discover the best designs and lighting options at the time. See Chantal Georgel, *The Museum as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France*, in: *Museum Culture*, edited by Daniel Sherman & Irit Rogoff, Minneapolis 1994, pp. 113–22.

6 See: Coco Fusco, *The Other History of Intercultural Performance*, in: *TDR 38* (1994), pp. 143–167; and Tony Bennett, *The Exhibitionary Complex*, in: *Thinking About Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson & Sandy Nairne, London 1999, pp. 81–112.

7 See Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, New York 1994; and Bernadette Duffrène & Jérôme Glicenstein (eds.), *Histoire(s) d'exposition(s): Exhibitions' Stories*, Paris 2016.



Figure 1: Frederick York, Stereograph of the British Museum, 1865–75, Albumen silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

The transformations of the late-19th to early-20th centuries, are best explained by the confluence of generational shifts – events that broke with the traditions of academic and institutional art making and display practices outside of those environments. A traditional history of the avant-garde is understood as the movements of a few small groups and their followers' negations of tradition so radically changed visual art that we still work in its shadow.

Despite the oversights of this narrative, the changes in art making at that time marked a definitive rift between the old and new. We still have the physical results of the progressive ideals being expressed through new and different spaces intended for art. Artists initiated exhibitions at the turn of the century that greatly influenced expectations of the spaces to hold that work.⁷ Pared-down interior space acted as passive supports to the very active and forthright work of avant-garde practices. Because of this, institutions in support of new art were built or renovated in the manner of those temporary sites used by the artists critical traditional display practice – in this way temporality expresses innovation. Spaces for classical and academic art maintained their conventional facades and interiors. The interiors of new institutions were designed to look like the simple, temporary venues used for fairs and artists' shows. Walls were frequently covered in burlap or painted cloths to cover imperfections and make continuous surfaces. These coverings would be replaced by manufactured gypsum drywall, plywood, and paint by the new institutional adoption of temporality as a way to express innovation.

8 Mary Anne Staniszewski covers the relationship between interior design, the creation of experience and the dogma of aesthetics in the early days of MoMA in: *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge/MA 2001.

As the variety of artistic production increased, it seems that tolerating differences in its environment was reduced. We can see the development of a technology of neutrality intended to do two things: for the collective public, to create physical uniformity, and for the individual, to emphasize an internalization of the experience of art.⁸ Buildings changed in scale and layout following the aesthetic shift from thinking about art as a visual illusion to art as historically - and materially - bound in time and space. All combined, the development of art's purposeful spaces in the 20th century corresponds to the developments of what was to be exhibited in them. The transformation of interiors into formless, white spaces (perceived as visually neutral) has been detailed by artists, critics, and art historians tracking the evolution of art and its locations in their time.⁹

As paintings lost their frames and sculptures came off their pedestals, no part of the exhibition would go unaddressed. More and more, work was being made for specific rooms, buildings, grounds, and natural areas far from the typical exhibition space. While the specificity of these areas was claimed as purposeful, their presence was largely ignored as unique. On a larger scale, the repurposing of disused industrial and retail buildings added variety to the facades and interiors that artists and institutions pursued for their purposes. Large empty spaces could easily be repurposed owing to their generic utilitarian designs. By the 1960s, artists were increasingly making artwork that addressed art itself (as a practice) and its place in the world - figuratively, as it relates to contemporary lived experiences, and literally through design and placement within its intended spaces. However, even earlier, we see the conception of exhibition space as the starting point for the designer and artist alike. In this regard, the appearance of neutrality had become the standard, intended or not. By the start of this century, any object in the space of exhibition is arguably a part of it, and any architectural space seems suitable if it acts the part.

In reaction to the systemic shortcomings (and outright negligence) of some institutions, artists and curators have continued from earlier models by establishing their own venues to show what the established ones would not. For some, it has been contemporary art, for others, it has been artwork by individuals

9 Especially insightful is Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to*

2000, New Haven/CT 2009. I am also thinking retroactively about the notions promoted by

Michael Fried that art, specifically Minimalism, is existentially reliant on its relationship to its surroundings:

Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, Berkeley 1995, pp. 116-147. This history is interestingly complicated by examples of necessity like the

Fridericianum in Kassel. For the earliest iterations of documenta, white curtains were used to create a presentable interior following the building's partial destruction in WWII. The building's exhibition spaces were only renovated further with each iteration of the survey, making permanent areas that were originally temporary.

¹⁰ "The 'downtown' aesthetic," Reesa Greenberg noted, "masks the split between the seemingly open, democratic character of the spaces and the private nature of the endeavor," adding that it just as much "obscures the reasons why so many empty industrial buildings can be converted to the display of private wealth by the moneyed class." Cf. Reesa Greenberg, *The Exhibited Redistributed: A Case for Reassessing Space*, in: *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson & Sandy Nairne, London 1996, pp. 349-367. Also crucial to the topic: Mary Schmidt Campbell, *An American Odyssey: The Life and Work of Romare Bearden*, New York 2018; and Howard Singerman & Sarah Watson, *Acts of art and rebuttal in 1971*, New York 2018.

ignored by prominent organizations. The alternative spaces, as they came to be called in the 1970s, were cradles for innovation, and many have become major institutions themselves. Alternatives were established, in New York as early as the 1950s, to work outside the norms and expectations of the systems they were, in some cases, working against. In this context, the cycle of dissonance and influence that began almost 100 years earlier has continued. Architecturally, most alternative spaces adopted an *anti-style style* that became (like its more traditional predecessors) self-legitimizing through its repetition. Essentially, these spaces have been modeled to be as bare, bright, and casual as possible. In the US, in the 1950s a pattern was verifiably established that whatever was initiated by artists would be followed by commercial galleries and then major institutions. Any moves to a new neighborhood or program changes happened this way, putting our current cycle of gentrification and unaffordability into motion. The alternative spaces in New York in the 1970s were set up in disused light-industrial buildings in lower Manhattan and by the 1990s, this style had spread to all parts of the US.¹⁰ Alternatives, which signified an increased opportunity for representation, very quickly became parts of a larger industry of culture driven by capital. Not surprisingly, these alternatives have been the most influential in terms of self-critical programming technological evolutions. Stylistic differences between established galleries, museums, and smaller alternatives began to break down in the 1990s as institutions large and small adopted a look of experimentation by repurposing industrial spaces. New spaces (and sections of existing ones) added "project spaces" that brought an immediacy to the presentation of new work - as if one were in the artist's studio.

Now alternatives rarely look different from the modern organizations they originally opposed and their motivations have been thoroughly co-opted. But most importantly here, all of these organizations have been expressing their missions in stylistically normalizing architectural spaces.

Industrial shells converted for art's sake, laboratory-like sites, sophisticated studios, were intended to be physically transformable to meet the varied needs of varied artists and art forms. The economic prosperity of the last century contributed to the proliferation of art and its purposeful space in many ways, including easier access to tools of production and distribution. This included technological advances and access to increasingly advanced consumer electronics for audio and video, personal computers, game consoles, and eventually the means of individual cellular connectivity and web 2.0. The impact of these things is undeniable. Artists, designers, and curators were quick to adopt these technologies; and their uses led to modifying spaces too. The practice of displaying film, video, and sound in the last few decades became expected; of course today, the total run-time of the videos in a survey exceeds any viewer's diligence. Heavy curtains, industrial carpets, and high-end AV tech are all stock-in-trade for exhibition practices.¹¹

The development of art's public spaces over the last century have been marked by attempts to balance visual, or physical, influence - a movement away from visual distraction, while maintaining an image of individuality or purpose. These developments have taken different forms and can be seen in the technologies, materials, and methods in use today throughout exhibition spaces, both new and old. Spaces in service to art have their individual faults, strengths, and weaknesses, but their basic purpose remains to facilitate a meeting of art and audiences. This role has never changed, but our expectations have changed along with audiences and artworks. Similarly, this is not the function of any specific institutions - it is the goal of them all. There is no official design for a museum or gallery interior; they have all been determined by fashion and perceived needs. Despite recent periods of cultural proliferation, one type of exhibitionary space has emerged as a standard. The enormous effort and resources expended to build and maintain featureless, climate-controlled expanses of evenly lit, white surfaces should reveal that the prevailing space for art is more than a pragmatic solution to artistic practices.



Figure 2: Mark Bradford, TRAVIS, 2008, mixed-media installation. Artpace, San Antonio.

¹¹ See Boris Groys, *From Image to Image File - and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization*, in: same, *Art Power*, Cambridge/MA 2013.

NOT NATURAL OR NEUTRAL

The most powerful feature of the most dominant art space in our time is the constructed appearance of neutrality. This neutrality is expressed in form and is reinforced by assumptions about the space's use. More than any theory or art historical interpretation, the presence of the white, bare, and well-lit design of the modern gallery has influenced our understanding of visual art over the last century. The ambivalence for this space was most notably expressed in the 1970s by Brian O'Doherty in his collection of articles known collectively as *Inside the White Cube*. The ideas he articulated have been echoed by artists, curators, and critics since. The term white cube, to label the conceptual import of the physical space fitting the description, has become synonymous with the power perceived in the modern art institution. The seemingly neutral and empty interior of the cube became the emblematic exhibition interior because it simultaneously offers everything and nothing at all – it represents nothing but absolute potential. In this way, it appears pragmatic and static, accommodating to anything and anyone that enters. But what appears neutral or idle is really at work, as O'Doherty described it, to “subtract from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is ‘art,’ [...] isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself.”¹² The term white cube implies both physical features and methods; the description of form is also a description of an ideology of art practices that are self-fulfilling. The universal adoption of this style (and mindset) emerged at the same time as the proliferation of the artist's installation as-a-medium and on an insistence on site specificity. Again, once the artist's scope includes the entire exhibition site, any part of it can be read as part of the installation itself. This is only made possible by our belief in the power of the gallery space to incorporate into art whatever enters the space. This fact is not new, but its (mis)recognition is inherent to the unseen style offered as definitive neutrality.

Despite the appearance of neutrality and objectivity, the idea of the gallery itself represents difference. The differentiation of inside and outside, of belonging and exclusion, and between differing spheres of influence are intrinsic to the ideology of visual art's ideal environment.

It also describes the goal of continuity within a space and within a system. Its ideology and conventions are expressed in its form – it is made interesting by appearing uninteresting. Formally, the space is made by subtracting everything from it including the mouldings, baseboards, or trims – all building components intended in part to hide tolerances and ordinary construction flaws. Everything in a room: light fixtures, fire suppression, signage, electrical switches, and plugs – all necessary

things – must be addressed. The ideal of the space calls for increased difficulty. The desire to hide flaws (holes, bad patches, signs of wear) is indicative of something larger. What does the preparation of the revered space reveal? If the idealization of the exhibition space were not a signifying feature for those involved in it, then the cost spent, energy applied, and reverence for its image would not be so prevalent. Ironically, the attention to detail and the effort spent are meant to create a look of invisibility – meant *not to be seen*. This invisibility is synonymous with the necessity to mark the distinction of this space from the

12 O'DOHERTY 1999. The term 'white cube' is credited to O'Doherty, but the sentiment was already circulating. His text was originally published as three essays in *Artforum* magazine in 1976, following a lecture titled "Inside the White Cube, 1855-1974" delivered at LACMA in January 1975. In September 1975, Daniel Buren (whose artwork O'Doherty references) published an essay stating: "This white and 'neutral' cube is therefore not as innocent as all that, but is, in fact, the value-giving repository...[artists] demonstrate that their work does indeed depend on architecture, but not just anyone since it cannot submit to any other which is not cubic or white: ideal." – Daniel Buren, *The Function of an Exhibition*, in: *Studio International* 186 (1973), p. 216. In an interview in 2009, O'Doherty described the origin of the symbol was "to give a sense of density, a block of matter which inside is mysterious." Oral Histories series interview of Brian O'Doherty. Interview by James McManus, November 16, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

13 I recall Robert Nelson's condemnation of art history's inherent conservatism at the end of the 20th century, in that "the promise of that new world will be realized only if the present is not merely digitized into the future." –NELSON 1997, p. 33.

ordinary world. While this might have originated as sympathetic to progressing artistic practices, prevailing ideas, and universalizing worldview at one time, it seems to be less and less relevant. What was once liberating and adaptable became antagonistic, and now it is fundamentally conservative.

It must be emphasized that the significance of the white cube is far more than its sensory appearance. It represents ideas of indeterminacy, autonomy, placelessness, disinterest, and existence without a fixed dimension. It is more that the removal of visual clues, it is the suppression of external distraction and a sense of familiarity with the world. These are not inherently bad, the significance is that the effect is suppressed rather than revealed by the form itself. The broad adherence to a singular form means that institutions are equally implicated in the doctrine. Every formal instance is intended to fit some ideal – which becomes obvious when we enter a space that does not effectively adhere to the principles. We read a missed attempt as revealing more about the competence of those responsible for its appearance than about the space itself. But this is the concern of a specialized audience of practitioners, not the general public, again revealing a long-standing disconnect between the concerns of contemporary art and the world outside.

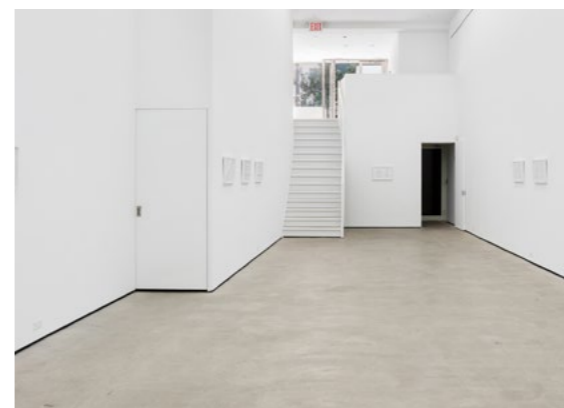


Figure 3: Park McArthur, *Form found figuring it out, show*, 2020. Two pages, Installed according to options, Edition 2 of 10. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham / Essex Street, New York. Shown is the main space of the gallery with large bright white walls and cool fluorescent lighting. On the furthest wall's left side is a large white staircase leading up to the entrance level with windows underneath an EXIT sign, on its right side is a doorway to an elevator lift. On the walls hang ten framed artworks unevenly spaced around the walls.

The influence of the *appearance of neutrality* is not confined to the material space, it has been carried into the digital realm too. Many examples of related, digital spaces are infused with these very same ideas. We can even associate the electrical energy consumed for very formulaic and rudimentary websites with the human and ecological costs of maintaining visual art's industrial sites. The antagonistic nature of the material spaces for art we have inherited, and our evolving notions of how they are to be used, are relevant to conversations about the effects of any similar, digitally-augmented environments.¹³

We have come to see online and digitally-based presentations as exhibition formats in their own right, generally expanding the notion of what works as an art space. All of the material formations of exhibitions have been replicated in the coded template of the website. In other words, the strolling pass around the gallery has become the infinite scroll. Currently, the standard art-centric website is, more likely than not, like its real-life precursor, a plain, endless field of #FFFFFF white. It is very likely that websites for arts organizations are more alike than their physical locations. All of this was made more apparent during the global pandemic when organizations across the world attempted online presentations, webinars, etc., to maintain an audi-

ence that would not be visiting. Mixed results are to be expected, but regardless of their content, the framing for each instance was essentially the same. The standardization of internet protocols, video software, and social media platforms too often negates the artistic pos-

sibilities in these spaces. Our digital experience is more formulaic than its material analog. It's not so much that that matters as much as we have built the expectation of boundless flexibility into our belief in the digital product. What most visual arts websites and online exhibitions are doing well is expressing the connections of art's global social and market systems, suggested by their formal similarity and made explicit through their links.

This similarity becomes redundant only if we perceive the possibilities of the digital realm to meet or exceed those of real-life equivalents. When those possibilities are limited by the commands of an interface or within the constraints of a platform, we should recognize it is the interface or platform we see, nothing more. The same happens in the exhibition gallery: the limitations of one space have been reproduced in the other.

Gaming, design, and robotics have rapidly advanced the production of virtual and augmented space. While many of these applications have been practical for engineering or science, what most of us know of this work has been through arts and entertainment. Video games and animation have been central for sure, but the applications of the digital in the visual arts have been immense. As the expected uses for *in-real-life* art spaces continue to evolve to support digital-born presentations and applications, we must re-think the importance and purpose of these physical spaces. Artistically, that work has long been happening, the curatorial incentive has followed, but what is at stake now is whether collective institutional momentum can be maintained. It is one thing to dabble in video and install some hardware in the exhibition space, or to dedicate website pages to certain projects or institutional archives, but we are now in a moment where some audiences and organizations will successfully lead into new technological directions – in effect forming the next ideological structure – some will fail to keep up, and some will have to opt-out. These movements will be determined by a complicated myriad of factors, but it's worthwhile to make sense of our concept of space as it is now.

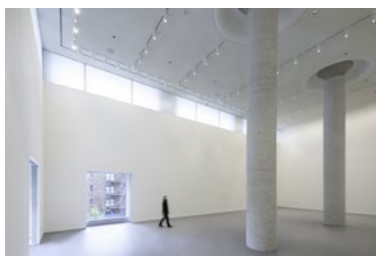


Figure 4: Interior of Sotheby's display gallery, New York headquarters, opened 2019.

14 "On a general level, it is a framework for cognitive representations. It should be seen as a complement to the symbolic and the connectionist approaches that form a bridge between these two forms of representation. On a more specific level, the framework of conceptual spaces can then be turned into empirically testable theories or constructive models by filling in specific dimensions with certain geometrical structures, specific measurement methods, specific connections to other empirical phenomena, and so forth." – GARDENFORS 2004, 30. Scientific research in cognitive mapping aims to describe our mind's ability to model abstract concepts spatially, including the concepts of space and mapping. We could ask whether our understanding of a space is even shaped by its physical attributes or by the mental construction of memory or other associations. For example, see: Levan Bokeria, Richard Henson & Robert Mok, Map-Like Representations of an Abstract Conceptual Space in the Human Brain, in: *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 15 (2021), pp. 1-6; and Stephanie Theves, Guillen Fernandez & Christian F. Doeller, The Hippocampus Maps Concept Space, Not Feature Space, in: *The Journal of Neuroscience* 40 (2020), pp. 7318-7325. For a compelling history of space, memory, epistemology, and structure of the museum see Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London 1992. Foundational theories on the topic are exemplified by Michel de Certeau, *Practices of Space*, in: *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonsky, Baltimore 1985, pp. 122-145; or Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1974.

CONCEPTUAL SPACE

The term 'space' is flexible – I have used it several different ways in the text up to this point. To understand potential directions in visual art, for the spaces where it functions, and for anyone to speculate on the role of exhibitions and performance moving forward, the concept of space needs re-examination. Surely the general thinking of space includes more than physical area – it is also cognitive, chronological, and symbolic. In English, at least, we can say we need "space to think" as much as we look for "a space" to live or to sit in a theater. We can think of descriptions of physical areas and unknown quantities as distinctly different things with the same word. More and more, it seems the word is heard and read in reference to entire industries or disciplines – for example, "traditional banking vs. de-fi space" or the "male-dominated space" of a profession. While this is not a radical departure from previous idioms like "junk space" (and may only represent the mental or linguistic shift this use represents may be significant. This could show a mental shift from thinking of the concept of space as a specific receptacle to a specific identifier. Or maybe conceptual space has never been about physical location.

When we say something is 3-dimensional, we are saying it describes areas and objects that exist (or appear to exist) within a 3-D space. And 2-dimensional things are flat; they lack depth and/or don't exist in a real or illusionistic space. Of course, when we use these descriptions, we are rarely describing the geometric properties of an object or image, we are giving an indication of how we intend to think (or speak) about a certain space. By naming these types of space, or uses of space, we are describing things by their relationship to it. Lengths, widths, directions like left and right are not absolute descriptions, and of course, we know these are contingent on the space we are describing and our *position* in it. In other words, a physical area or illustrative object is always contingent on our reference point to it. Similarly, our understanding of *actual* spaces is informed by the specific descriptive words that represent them; physical areas (or immaterial environments) are also inherently conceptual spaces.

Take 'museum' for example; a building with a lobby, offices, and bathrooms at a street address, none of which matters when we consider what 'museum' as-a-space means. What matters is the connotation of housing and displaying art objects for an audience. If we talk about a

painting in a museum, ordinarily it can be assumed that it wasn't in a stairwell. This is because our current understanding of a museum space is, in part, determined by the field of practices that loosely includes curation, art historical discourse, education, and conservation. The physical space named implies that these specific activities are occurring there. Consequently, activities that happen in the space become part of that implied list—this is the expansion of artistic and exhibitionary practices. Overlaying the thing or place referred to is the conceptual framework into which it belongs – meaning all the implied activities in a field, discipline, profession, or practice. The concept of the area is reinforced by the fact that the activities of any area occur in specifically-named spaces – schools (academics), movie theaters (film industry), newspapers (journalism), hospitals, stadiums, Zoom meetings, exhibition catalogues, airports, etc. We understand these spaces through the conventions and expectations they represent and the systems of knowledge they accommodate. Therefore, the description and the implication support each other; what is done in one place (in thinking or in the physical location) is part of its space.¹⁴

What about the potential linguistic evolution of 'space'? Does the word change by definition, or is this a case of overuse in the way that any act of resistance was to 'occupy' around 2011? The closest comparison may be the use of 'lens' to describe one's perspective or opinion that proliferated in the earliest part of this century. The lens is a useful metaphor since it relates to points of view, perspective, or frame of reference, in the way that a camera only sees the world from a fixed point, or the sharpening effect of reading or seeing with glasses. Frequently, the implication is that a specific theoretical lens will yield a specific reading. Of course, it is a shorthand way of expressing a worldview, but it affords us the opportunity to change our 'lens.' We can assume a temporary perspective with impunity or in bad faith. However, the unspoken implication is in the conceptual shift from the admission of subjective viewpoint to some sort of objective apparatus of seeing. This approach grants us a distinct (albeit subtle) subjective position without commitment – the worldview can be crucial but temporary, explicit but separate from our "real" position.

In much the same way, the current vogue of referring to any field, discipline, practice, or conceptual category as a space metaphorically places it somewhere. Importantly, this implies a sense of place, of a demarcated area that one can enter and exit. This is usually implied to be at a distance from the speaker's own spatiotemporal position. Again, this allows for a temporary encounter, or to describe a conceptual space without claiming a stake in it. Just as the colloquial use of lens implies an ability to adopt biases and faults of a certain perspective or theory without owning them, naming spaces as external and separate structures allows a speaker (or a viewer) to make assumptions based on their own lived experience regardless of the complexities of the conceptual area.

Figure 5: A museum built in Minecraft, 2022, designed by Wolfgang Austin.

The concepts of things like museums, exhibitions, or conferences are combinations of inherited ideas, conventional methods, and the people involved with them. They have always been conceptually overloaded

and determinative, but crucially, they are related in some way to structures in the material world. These spaces, built into the environment, reinforce the purposes of the systems they serve; they are ideas of space made physical. It seems, the difference now is a lack of direct connection to a recognizable social space in the physical world. It is hard to describe, much less conceptually inhabit, any space detached or untethered from any physical reference point. The problem then is not the misuse of 'space' to describe our world and our experience but the need to understand, to name, and to relate new experiences.



15 O'DOHERTY 1999 p. 106. Also see: Simon Sheikh, *Positively White Cube Revisited*, in: *E-Flux Journal* 3,

2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68545/positively-white-cube-revisited/>.

Looking forward, repackaged notions like anonymity transferability and freedom – understood as positive traits and common to digital descriptions – deserve scrutiny as virtues sold to us by tech corporations in the way media theorists critiqued TV and print five decades ago. The institutionalization of expression, by capitalists and sycophants alike, is an inherently conservative practice. The practice of conservation reluctantly admits truly new forms or methods, but the newness of progress is usually recognizable only in contrast to the static appearance of the conservator. Not that any attempt is futile, but as O'Doherty noted, radical gestures must work within – even if working against – a system that includes its site of presentation. As he stated: "The presenting form [...] must create to an existing body of accepted ideas, and yet place itself outside them."¹⁵ This contradiction requires all participants to negotiate with architecture, history, and standard practices. Curators may limit their conceptual or material intrusion, by limiting their additions to an exhibition, but the space of presentation itself cannot be made empty enough to negate its own usefulness and power. Like the white cube, the #FFFFFF screen is a powerful apparatus; its ability to control is hidden in its appearance and its promise of neutrality.