(En)counter the White Cube: Regimes and Experiences of Viewing at the Vancouver Art Gallery

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We think we know a great deal about how modern galleries work: about the ways they organize and affect the viewing body, about how they orchestrate visual and performative clues to produce meaning, about their effectiveness as tools of social control. As gallery visitors we have all observed first-hand and with physical immediacy what is at stake in the theatrically-lit, high-ceilinged, white-walled spaces of the contemporary gallery. We have sensed the underlying struggle to distinguish such spaces from the outside world; the ritualistic arrangement and use of space make us particularly attuned to the potential for meaning. Perhaps we have also felt a strange absence (or denial) of time as we have gazed at objects isolated and frozen on display. How, after all, can one acknowledge the passage of time in a sparse and unchanging space?

The work of scholars such as Brian O'Doherty, Svetlana Alpers, and Carol Duncan has provided meaningful insights into the mechanisms that produce such effects, as well as their social and historical construction. O'Doherty, Alpers and Duncan have theorized the life-effacing transcendental ambition of the contemporary gallery, and how it offers us a glimpse (or a simulacrum) of eternity in exchange for our implicit support for the established social structure from which the gallery site emerges. Through them we learn that the modern gallery space–part temple, part palace, part laboratory–either transforms every object into a *de facto* work of art, or else proves to be so overwhelming a context that it ultimately devours any object on display inside it. Such insights undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the nature and significance of the strange and particular animal that is the contemporary gallery. Yet as intriguing as such theories are for the insights they offer into the experiences of gallery visitors in public exhibition spaces, they have rather less to say about a very different audience and context for art that also exists within the modern gallery environment.

Gallery employees such as exhibition installers, conservators, registrars, photographers and curators all have daily experience with those gallery spaces that are usually hidden from public view–spaces dedicated to the storage and treatment of art, rather than to its reified contemplation. For this audience, there are likely optical regimes at work that have little to with the sacralized and empty space of the public exhibition galleries. Moreover, the movement of bodies through a gallery's art storage areas, its conservation labs, or its photography studios may encourage entirely different relationships to art and art-objects than those implied by the so-called white cube. In this paper I consider the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) as a case study with which to push these ideas forward and to determine what implications they may have for contemporary exhibition practice and display. In particular, I will describe and analyze some of the gallery's behind-the-scenes work and storage spaces not usually seen by casual gallery visitors in order to suggest some possible meanings that arise from the bodily and visual experiences to be had therein.

The behind-the-scenes spaces of the VAG are clearly divided according to the type of work to which they are devoted. Stated bluntly, those people who work upstairs work with words and paper, while those in the basement work with their hands and objects. Additionally, the basement spaces are the least public and the least accessible areas of the gallery. While the above-ground office spaces clearly announce their presence to the public at large, encompassing the entire annex building facing the busy downtown thoroughfare of Robson Street: most visitors to the gallery will never be aware of the vast basement spaces beneath them that constitute the hidden base of labour and production on which the cultural superstructure of the gallery is constructed.

In order to reach the VAG basement, gallery employees must first descend a short flight of stairs, pass through several sets of doors, and then travel along a series of short, twisting hallways before finally navigating the length of a long, narrow hallway which is also a steadily descending ramp (fig. 1). The inherent liminality of hallway spaces in general, the duration of time necessary

Fig. 1. Hallway, Vancouver Art Gallery. *Photo courtesy of the author.*

to navigate the length of these hallways in particular, and the way one has to pass through this series of thresholds all serve to evoke a special kind of expectancy in the viewer. As a result, this entranceway to the VAG basement functions much like the kinds of framing devices that Carol Duncan has discussed in relation to Greek temples, medieval churches and Renaissance palaces. According to Duncan, such architectural gestures signal the ceremonial importance of the spaces within, while also working to separate such ritual spaces from the vulgarities and vagaries of the everyday world.[1]

There is also an obvious parallel between this long, narrow, and descending hallway and notions of the ancient umbilicus that connects the material and spiritual worlds and which, as Thomas McEvilley points out, segregates a kind of non-space, ultra-space or ideal space where "the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled."[2] Considering the fact that, being below ground level, there is an obvious absence of windows in all of the work and storage areas found at the end of this long introductory hallway–there is no visual connection to the outside world at all– the impression of physical and metaphysical distance and difference from the mundane world would appear to be effectively established for gallery employees as they descend this hallway.

Insofar as the experience of descending into the VAG basement announces to gallery employees the other-worldly nature and ritual significance of the space they are approaching, it has this in common with the monumental architecture and dramatic stairways of the gallery's façade that are experienced by visitors as they approach the above-ground galleries. The difference, however, is in the kinds of space that one enters after passing through these framing architectural introductions. In the exhibition spaces of the modern museum or gallery, whether in the Vancouver Art Gallery or elsewhere, one expects to encounter clean, spare and sanitized space. Each framing element, from the dramatic lighting to the expanses of empty wall stretched between objects, is expected and intended to emphasize the singular and unique importance of the work of art on display. Indeed, as Svetlana Alpers has argued, such framing elements activate a museum effect that encourages viewers to attend to

Fig. 2. Overflow storage, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 3. Vault workspace, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 4. Loading dock, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

every object–even fire extinguishers and gallery furniture–as heavy with meaning. Every object in the white cube becomes by default a work of art.[3]

In sharp contrast are the rather more prosaic and utilitarian spaces that one encounters in the VAG basement. At the end of the framing experience of the long, introductory hallway one is less likely to encounter the individually-framed, unique work of art than stacks of overflow storage for artworks and crates (fig. 2), or the incongruous combinations of modern and historic objects in one's work space in the conservation lab. Alternatively, one might find their workspace positioned within the art storage space known as the Vault: that cold, dimly-lit and cavernous space filled with (seemingly) indiscriminate stacks of storage, art objects and packaging (fig. 3). Even the sliding garage-door-like entrance to the Vault itself (visible in fig. 2) is identical to the entranceway to the loading dock (fig. 4) that is used for all the various comings-and-goings associated with the gallery restaurant, garbage collection, and deliveries for the store. Such visual and spatial clues serve to reinforce the mundane-ness of art, the significance of its base material and physical qualities, its status as everyday object. Rather than turning every object into a work of art, as supposedly happens in the white cube upstairs, these basement spaces reverse the process to reinforce the material object-ness of each work of art that they store.

Much of this is obviously the result of the practicalities of museum storage; clearly the VAG does not have the space to store artworks in the same manner that they are displayed in the public exhibition galleries above ground. Regardless of the reasons behind it however, the experience of art in such spaces as these is far more likely to suggest notions of repetition, seriality, and interchangeability (figs. 5 and 6) than it is to highlight the singular or unique importance of any one object in particular. In these spaces everything is equally important: the crating that stores an artwork is attended to and documented in exactly the same way as the art object itself. For the people who regularly use them, these spaces encourage an understanding of and a relationship with art, not as something sacred and otherworldly, but rather as an everyday event whose importance is bound up in the quotidian nature of the encounter with it.

The opportunity for everyday and repeated engagement with objects over time represents another clear difference between the experience of gallery visitors and the experiences of gallery employees in behind-the-scenes spaces. Most visitors to a gallery will see an exhibition once, and the singularity of that encounter lends itself to the impression of the objects as frozen and existing outside of time. For the gallery employee, however, the effects of time on the art object are an issue of great importance and constant consideration. The gallery employee is able to see an object for the first time perhaps while it is still encased in its crating and packing materials, to see it again later being staged in the photo studio or the examination room, and finally to see it being installed and on display in the public exhibition gallery (fig. 7). Employees see the objects lit and unlit, hung singularly and grouped with other objects, and as a consequence they are particularly alert to the ways that objects change over time and in different contexts. This impression is reinforced when witnessing the various experiments with lighting effects, object placement, and wall colours that occur during the exhibition installation process, as first one and then another aspect or detail

Fig. 5. Storage art vault, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 7. Home environment, installed. Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

Fig. 6. Storage art vault, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Photo courtesy of the author.

of the work is emphasized or de-emphasized in turn by the use of different framing elements. It would seem, therefore, that while the outside/above-ground world is effectively distanced for gallery employees in the VAG basement, time and its effects are by no means absent.

Gallery employees also bring with them extensive personal narratives related to the objects on display. When touring through a finished exhibition a gallery employee may see a certain painting in terms of the various complications it caused in shipping, while another piece may recall memories of a particularly eccentric owner. These personal narratives form part of the privileged knowledge that gallery employees possess, and in effect transform the objects on display into personal souvenirs. Like the souvenir, the displayed art object functions, for the gallery employee, as a material and narrative bridge between the present moment and the experience of a previous, unrepeatable event. As Susan Stewart argues, such objects function as nostalgic "traces of authentic experience" that "speak to a context of origin through a language of longing."[4] Such objects/souvenirs are always incomplete in that they must be supplemented through a personal narrative–a narrative of interiority that is always more related to the narrator than the narrated. However, Stewart is resolute in her emphasis on the possession of the souvenir object. For her, the souvenir domesticates; as it internalizes external experience, "the beast is taken home."[5] Although a gallery employee may 'live with' certain objects for several months over the course of an exhibition, this relationship does not carry the same connotations of ownership and possession. I would suggest, however, that it is not necessary for an object to be possessed in an economic sense–with all the associated implications of labour, class and production–in order for it to properly function as a souvenir. Rather, it is the gallery employee's bodily engagement with an object, as it moves through the gallery in various stages and degrees of display and exchange, which allows it to function as a (temporary) possession, and as a souvenir.

Theories of the white cube invariably emphasize the sense of detached contemplation experienced by gallery visitors when encountering the art object on display. There is a unique kind of looking that takes place in the contemporary gallery, where objects can be attended to as artistic events. Similarly, several VAG employees recounted experiencing such as sense of awe or detached contemplation at the moment of opening the crates in which artworks are shipped and often stored. It is at this moment when all the bare statistics of medium, dimension, and colour that one has already known abstractly suddenly

manifest materially in an object that one can experience (finally) bodily. Interestingly, regardless of whether a sense of awe or contemplation is experienced at the moment of unpacking, none of the gallery employees recounted having such an experience when working with the objects: not when cleaning them, nor moving them, nor framing them. During such activities, people described seeing the art object as "just another object." Often it was not until they viewed the objects in the completed exhibitions that gallery employees recounted being struck with a sense of the objects' importance and their status as works of art.

This particular sense of detached contemplation at the moment of final viewing is further enhanced by the privilege (of access) that gallery employees enjoy in being able to visit exhibitions outside of regular viewing hours and often without having to share the exhibition space with other visitors. However, of particular significance is that it seems to imply that, regardless of the previous experience of the mundane and prosaic spaces of art treatment and storage, and despite an awareness of being manipulated by the framing devises of various display practices, once the body enters the white cube it is still highly susceptible to its messages and effects. This raises important questions regarding the status of viewing, and the importance of the frame. I would be reluctant to claim that the art object's status as art is dependent solely on the context in which one views it, and yet that would appear to be at least in part the experience of gallery employees. It seems undeniable that the very different kinds of spaces encountered in the public exhibition galleries and in the workspaces of the gallery basement solicit very different kinds of relationships with art and art objects.

The intimate bodily relationship made possible by the utilitarian spaces of the basement appear to make gallery employees particularly attentive to–and inclined to find significance in–the materiality of an object, while the repeated engagement with objects over time encourages these employees to internalize them as tools of personal narrative. The intimacy of this relationship between gallery employees and objects can be so significant that it can, in turn, promote the belief that in knowing its different nature at different times, in knowing its anecdotal background stories, we can in fact know everything there is worth knowing about the object. Many gallery employees expressed a complete lack of interest in the additional curatorial narratives offered in the finished, public exhibitions or in accompanying catalogues. For such viewers, the much-maligned distancing effect of the white cube, which denies the possibility of bodily or personal engagement with objects, may in fact allow for the re-inscription of mystery and may serve as a reminder that there is always an element of the object which recedes from view and knowability. It is possible, therefore, to see the exhibitionary practices of the white cube as a set of tools wielded by those used to experiencing the art object as a way to make space for the art Thing.

Finally, it is undoubtedly true that a great many more people experience the spatial politics described in theories of the white cube than those outlined here pertaining to the Vancouver Art Gallery basement. Nevertheless, it is precisely these people–gallery employees, visiting artists, curators, etc.–that tends to push forth the contemporary discourse on art and art objects. Those who experience the behind-the-scenes spaces of galleries and museums are exactly those social actors who write about, collect, curate, create and discuss art. Though these people may go on to theorize the experience of the casual public visitor to the white cube, it is important to acknowledge that they do so with the experience of radically different spaces informing their attitudes and approaches to art and art objects.

Moreover, when navigating through the basement of the Vancouver Art Gallery, one gradually senses that the spatial relationship between this other, subterranean gallery and the public and highly visual façade above is being stretched to near impossibility. One discovers, in fact, that the basement occupies a much larger geographical footprint than the visible above-ground structure. Like a submerged unconscious, the basement of the Vancouver Art Gallery pushes up and out, underneath and against, the gallery's public face/façade. It pushes forth an excess of meaning that cannot be entirely contained or encapsulated by an understanding of that which happens only within the gallery exhibition spaces above ground. It is with an awareness of this other, subterranean, submerged, and subconscious gallery and its literal position as the base and basis on which the Vancouver Art Gallery is built, that we may appreciate the significance of the basement spaces as being far out of proportion to the number of people who actually visit or use them.

(Endnotes)

[1] Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 10-11.

[2] Thomas McEvilley, *Introduction to Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 10.

[3] Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): 26.

[4] Susan Stewart, "Objects of Desire," in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993): 135.

[5] Ibid., 134.