Installation View
Or: Making History by Pixel

BY TIM ROSEBOROUGH

If an art exhibition is mounted and no one is there to witness it, did it occur? If an exhibition is thoughtfully documented with images disseminated through networked technologies, is it possible that the show is best viewed through this set of perfectly tuned images?

In his essay, "Why I Hate Post-Internet Art," writer Brian Droitcour makes a number of observations about contemporary art practice in this era in which the Internet and digital media have been widely adopted. Some of his comments are particularly relevant to "digital artists," or artists whose work is both formed and informed by, and often distributed through, digital technology.

This essay is not concerned with debating the definition of the phrase "Post-Internet." Rather, I would like to use an assertion the author makes as he attempts to articulate a working definition of the term as a starting point for discussion. About "Post-Internet," Droitcour writes:

> "I know Post-Internet art when I see art made for its own installation shots, or installation shots presented as art. Post-Internet art is about creating objects that look good online: photographed under bright lights in the gallery's purifying white cube (a double for the white field of the browser window that supports the documentation), filtered for high contrast and colors that pop."[1]

The presence of the Internet and digital technology has deeply influenced the manner in which we create, disseminate and interpret images and information. I concur with Droitcour that "Post-Internet" is, broadly, a condition of art making after the widespread adoption of networked technologies. The change in our relationship to images extends to the manner in which people view art exhibitions, since the Internet has facilitated the viewing of artwork from around the globe on discrete, network-connected devices.[2] Of particular relevance is Droitcour's focus upon the convention of the "Installation View" (or, "Installation Shot"): the set of photos that document

the look and layout of an art exhibition. Exhibitions have become more easily documented since the advent of the photographic medium. A more recent development is the ability to alter photographs with digital image-making tools, thereby presenting a unique opportunity for artists working with these technologies.

I submit that, in order to propagate their ideas in a crowded, competitive and stratified field, artists can leverage their skills in digital photographic manipulation to influence viewers' perceptions of an exhibition long after it has closed. By altering the installation view to align it with the "White Cube," a specific visual trope of the contemporary art milieu, artists can infer a level of relevance and prestige for their work that may not be accessible through the art world's standard channels.

HISTORY AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE WHITE CUBE

Let us first examine the White Cube, the premier exhibition space and the primary context that serves as marker of what is commonly understood and evaluated as "fine art." Brian O'Doherty's set of essays, "Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space," first published in series in Artforum magazine in 1976, proves helpful in delineating the parameters and clichés of contemporary gallery design. O'Doherty relates the aura of religious reverence with which the typical late-20th century gallery is imbued, likening the design of the space to a place of worship. He writes:

> 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 source of light…. The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life."[3]

Over the past few decades, the codification of the White Cube has become more exacting, with a focus upon an aggressive whiteness. This includes tall, uninterrupted walls, atrium-like spaces, and a thin horizon of shadow at the intersection of floor and wall, along with a move from warm tungsten spot lighting to even, high-wattage fluorescent lighting.[4] The overall effect of these efforts is to eliminate signs of disorder, decay and transition. As such, these spaces are designed to proffer a quality of timelessness to what resides within them.

A survey of installation views from the past reveals a fascinating

consistency. Save for a few minor developments, the tropes for displaying contemporary art have remained remarkably homogeneous over a number of decades. A photo from a 1964 exhibition of Frank Stella's shaped canvases demonstrates just how well systematized White Cube design has become, given that nearly half a century has passed since that exhibition was mounted.[5]

Not only are the architectural elements of the contemporary gallery steeped in a mystical aura, but to present one's work in these secular temples requires a form of deification, a journey beset with arcane rules and necessitating sanction of the myriad priests, clerks and clerics who populate the art world, viewing themselves as the guardians of high culture. Not coincidentally, this state of affairs is of greatest benefit to top-tier commercial galleries and well-funded institutions, which can afford the most awe-inspiring and cathedral-like environments, thereby maintaining a firm hold on the creation of monetary and cultural value for any particular cultural production that happens within those hallowed halls. Given that the ranks of self-defined artists continues to expand, and given the proliferation and nearly infinite forms of artistic expression, the White Cube stands as the last certification that the object or gesture it contains is, verifiably, Art. It is an all-encompassing demarcation for what lies inside of it – much like elaborately carved and gilded frames assert the work of Old Masters at the Louvre.

The White Cube's dimensions and aesthetics have become so refined over nearly a century that it has become – to incorporate another relevant metaphor – Plato's notion of the Ideal, or the "Form." Still, like all of Plato's Forms, the White Cube – hermetically sealed, pristine, eternal – resides on a plane of existence far beyond the reach of human physical experience.[6]

DIGITAL ART'S RELATION TO THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD

So, what is the digital artist's current relation to the White Cube and the art world that supports it? In order for the stature of technology-steeped arts to gain legitimization and acceptance – to reach an apotheosis, as it were – a level of visibility and critical attention is necessary, the kind that is largely afforded to painting and sculpture and, perhaps still begrudgingly, photography and video, gestures that are more easily incorporated into the White Cube paradigm.

In this particular era, it can be argued that digitally formed and distributed artwork is, at best, an auxiliary branch of the contemporary art world. Works that derive from or reside natively on digital platforms such as screens and browsers are still being assimilated into the concerns of the

mainstream art world.[7] An example of such cooptation is "Digital Revolution," a historical survey of digital art that premiered at London's Barbican Centre in 2014. The exhibition utilized many of the tropes of standard institutional exhibitions (placards, vitrines), while simply inverting the whiteness of the cube to black to accommodate glowing screens and monitors.[8]

Although the Barbican exhibition demonstrates that the relation between digital art and the mainstream art world is evolving in the 21st century, the White Cube is still the marker of legitimate and noteworthy, if not "real" art. It is also worth noting that much of the digital art in the United States garners its legitimacy from institutions such as Rhizome – a premier supporter of digital arts – that gleans prestige from its current association with New York's New Museum – with a Lower East Side address boasting four floors of pristine white cubes.[9][10]

The White Cube may not yet be a place to which the digital artist has full access. It may be some time before mainstream galleries and institutions are fully prepared to embrace artwork that incorporates, derives from or is delivered through digital technologies, leaving creators at a disadvantage in terms of securing opportunities to exhibit and bring attention to their work.[11] Often the digital artist must exhibit in spaces that are not fully endorsed or recognized by the art world's clerics: the studio, artist residencies, corporate laboratories, Web sites, Internet discussion boards and blogs, the public gallery or exhibitions organized by the resourceful artist and his or her colleagues.[12]

THE INSTALLATION VIEW AS STRATEGY

For all of its legitimizing power, however, the real gallery space harbors inherent limitations. The gallery's power is temporal: Exhibitions are transitory, with most lasting for three months or less. In addition, an exhibition that takes place "in real life" is staged in one location, one that might be out of range for most potential visitors. For both of these constraints, the Internet and digital technologies can serve as remedies. Current online art journals compile, archive and present installation views from exhibitions around the world on a daily basis, broadening their visual and temporal reach.[13]

Despite the aforementioned hurdles, an extraordinary confluence of technology and art-world custom now present an opportunity for the digital artist to enter these hallowed spaces in the virtual realm. The White Cube – the art world's most carefully refined visual convention – can be digitally fabricated through its primary proxy: the installation view. Digital manipulation –

reorganizing the pixels that form the installation view photos – creates a window into the White Cube plane and facilitates the virtual legitimation of unsanctioned spaces.

An exhibition can be perfected through its images. Using digital software and tools, the artist can erase unsightly marks, occlude awkward furniture, seal off intruding doors, smooth and polish scuffed floors, brighten and freshen walls, eliminate any taint of corruption or imperfection, purify and legitimize the space, even if only in the mind of the viewer. In most cases, the installation view is the primary way in which most viewers will ever experience an event so time- and location-bound as an art exhibition. Distributing these installation shots through networked technologies creates an impression of timelessness that can reach all corners of the globe. Viewed through the network, the installation view becomes the exhibition.

THE INSTALLATION VIEW AND META-PRACTICE

Using technologies to influence the perception of an exhibition is a facet of my notion of "Meta-Practice" as defined in my 2013 essay, "Meta-Practice: Artistic Production As Promotion." Meta-practice is "after-practice:" the set of processes (and products) through which an artist's practice are communicated to and disseminated throughout the art world and general society.[14] To elaborate this connection, the body of work that an artist presents in an exhibition is a result of his or her "practice." The process of capturing, preparing and disseminating images from that exhibition to the art world and larger society, presented formally as an "installation view," is part of the artist's "Meta-Practice." Manipulating the images digitally – bringing the perceived exhibition environment closer to the ideal of the White Cube – is a potential Meta-Practice strategy the artist can utilize to prepare the exhibition's passage into history.

Expending thought and effort in the construction of an artifact so seemingly pedestrian as an installation view might strike some as disingenuous, or as something for which the artist should not be concerned. In his essay, Droitcour asserts, "Post-Internet art preserves the white cube to leech off its prestige."[15] As opposed to "leeching," and the negative connotations it implies, the validity that the White Cube bestows upon objects and gestures within it can be constructively appropriated by the digital artist, out of experimentation, necessity or critique. The inventive labor of preparing the installation view is a creatively fertile and necessary component of being a rounded, informed and engaged artist of the 21st century.

Giving careful thought to the production of the installation view displays a concern for the precarious and transitory nature of the art system. Capturing the perfect vision of an exhibition enters it, in some small way, into art history. Just like one can "see" an exhibition staged half a century ago through its documentation, a perfected and preserved installation view allows that exhibition to be witnessed in the most dignified light possible for viewers far into the future.

Notes

1. Brian Droitcour, "Why I Hate Post-Internet Art," *Art In America* (November 2014): 112. Print.

2. Michael Sanchez, "2011: Michael Sanchez on Art and Transmission," *Artforum International* (22 June 2013): 297. Print.

3. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 15. Print.

4. Sanchez, 297.

5. O'Doherty, 28.

6. R. M. Dancy, *Plato's Introduction of Forms* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 13. Print.

7. Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide: Claire Bishop on Contemporary Art and New Media," *Artforum International* (1 September 2012): 436. Print.

8. Dani Admiss, Conrad Bodman and Neil McConnon, eds., *Digital Revolution: an Immersive Exhibition of Art, Design, Film, Music and Videogames* (London: Barbican International Enterprises, 2014): 11. Print.

9. "New Museum Building," *New Museum,* accessed February 23, 2015. Web.

10. "Rhizome | About"," *Rhizome*, accessed February 23, 2015. Web.

11. Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011): 117-118. Print.

12. Julius Vitali, *The Fine Artist's Guide to Marketing and Self-Promotion* (New York: Allworth Press, 1996): 80. Print.

13. Sanchez, 297.

14. Tim Roseborough, "'Meta-Practice: Artistic Promotion as Production,' an Essay by Tim Roseborough," *"Meta-Practice: Artistic Promotion as Production," an Essay by Tim Roseborough* (1 September 2013): 2. PDF.

15. Droitcour, 112.

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    Media." *Artforum International* 1 Sept. 2012: 434-42. Print.

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