

West Space at 20: its about the walls.

Most writing on the white cube has focussed on its institutional, authorising and designative aspects. This model critiques the gallery as hermeneutic and culturally encoded, and the necessity for art to be housed in its rightful context. These arguments suggest that art is mediated by the gallery/museum before it is made; that artists have the conditions of display conceptualised in the work as an *a priori*. Yet as the readymade has confirmed these arguments can be both correct and incorrect, or lets say partly correct depending on the art and the gallery. The readymade proclaims the permeability of the gallery/museum as a mobile and transferrable conception, yet the readymade also depends on the contextualising notion (and space) of the art institution. Therefore the white cube is both self-contained and susceptible to being challenged and undermined. In this way it's framing as a sanctified space akin to a place of worship has resulted in many alternative gallery models that both reject and affirm art's place in the museum, just as art itself may contest it's naturalisation by the museum. These arguments are circuitous. Instead, I want to defer the notion of space as cube, or space as expanded field in order to think about the wall as screen: a screen in the sense of both a veil and point of projection; at once a permeable and a reflective conception.

West Space is now in its fourth location. With each move the role of the walls have played out particular and often idiosyncratic issues for artists (and viewers). The first premises established in 1993 above a cafe in Footscray Mall consisted of brushed brick walls painted white. The defining wall in this space was filled by a multi-paned window looking onto the mall below. This west-facing window threw light across the textured brickwork (as did the original recessed skylights) making the walls perceptually changeable in contradiction to the connotations of the solid double brickwork. The large window provided a kind of cinematic opening into the exterior that rendered the walls curtains as the light brushed their surfaces. In that initial year of operation in the Nicholson Street Mall, none of the exhibitions directly addressed the walls as shifting surfaces.

The relocation to the Albert Street premises in 1994 precipitated a more conventional wall surface of plasterboard. The plasterboard was fixed over existing laminated wood panel walls that were in turn fixed to the triple brick structure of the early 20th century dispensary building. In other words the layering of these skins could only veil the previous life of the building. In the main gallery an arched green tiled fireplace was plaster boarded over, its absence signed by the hearth on the floor. The art installed on these walls—when read as temporary surfaces that clung in flimsy counterpoint to the structure beneath—generated a paradoxical usurpation of the importance of the gallery for art; these walls could never stabilise the art within the white cube tradition.

The move in 2000 to Anthony Street, Melbourne allowed for a more considered and designed approach to walls and space due to the complete fitout required. An architect, Peter Brew, was responsible for this task. The concrete structure of

the light industrial building would again receive a plasterboard skin. Yet it was the indeterminate and playful nature of this skin that would make it the most complex of all the spaces to negotiate. The use of two slightly different whites — one cool the other warm on different walls—would engage problems of surface, subtly shifting perceptual relations with the work. Additionally, the dark grey above the plasterboard, and the ceiling made it clear that the walls could not provide the art with an expanded museum substrate. In other words, the dramatic qualities of the spaces accentuated by the theatre lighting and dark floors, rendered the walls as ribbons to which the art would hang so tenuously. (The moveable wall between the two main galleries further accentuated this instability.) In this sense, art that functioned spatially or with independence to the walls allowed for a porous play of wrapping and unveiling the objects and events within. Exhibitions that interacted with these conditions of making and unmaking, writing and rewriting engaged the walls as ciphers of displacement; permeable and imaginary. It is somewhat telling that towards the end of West Space's tenure at Anthony Street the walls were altered to make the spaces more 'useable'.

The codes of the museum do indeed include the material aspects of walls. And so it is with the move to Bourke Street that the MDF backed plasterboard wall has made its first appearance. No longer a ribbon or veil the walls enact a certain expectation, a certain stability and faith that the substrate for art may materialise in it's 'proper' terms. However, it is now the ceilings and the floor that challenge the sanctity of the walls. The quaint peculiarity of the parquetry floor and the various textures and traces in the unfinished ceiling enact a shift of writing potential to these horizontal surfaces. The museum has entered West Space through the walls, yet it is what happens on the floor, and in between ceiling and floor, where motility and displacement may occur (not to ignore the presence of the window spaces). The walls have been produced (solidified) but the floor space and airspace hold the potential for production. In this way art that regards these walls as backdrops, screens of the imaginary can circumvent the circuitous discourse of the white cube. I propose that the projected gaze should be credited with its radical spatial potential and that the walls become deferred (discarded) objects; the hallucination of architectural plans with no walls.

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