

INTERPRETING EXHIBITIONS

What is the most effective type of exhibition format for exhibiting contemporary art? Do you think contemporary art should be exhibited in a way that is different from exhibitions of other types of art – or not? If yes – in what ways should a contemporary art exhibition differ, for example, from an exhibition of 20th century? Looking at references to literature on contemporary art/curatorship/new exhibition spaces and recently developed spaces/exhibition approaches, this paper examines the various exhibition formats of Contemporary Art.

SYNOPSIS

Defined as ‘the medium through which most art becomes known’, exhibitions amplify aesthetics, and are a medium for artists and curators. They are a precis reflecting social, cultural and political constructs associated with objects on display. They function as broad narratives of prevailing aesthetics, showcasing the essence of a time period. Although, Contemporary Art is looked at as a movement which initiated in the 1980s, the ideas around it are not static. The scope of its definition widens through the years, its limits expand encompassing multiple facets. In turn its exhibition spaces may visually draw from the White Cube, but the underlying rationales transgress beyond the ideological confines of a White Cube space. Oftentimes, one can also identify the underlying principles which are in opposition to the tenets of a White Cube space.

Exhibitions, defined as ‘the medium through which most art becomes known’, serving as a stage. They amplify aesthetics while acting as a medium for artists and curators. They are a precis or a point of departure reflecting and elaborating on social, cultural and political constructs associated with the objects on display. Exhibitions also function as broad narratives of prevailing aesthetics, showcasing the essence of an epoch. They deliberate on the notion of pulchritude associated with disposition of a specific civil stratum. Their dependance on temporality shifts the quality, content and context of the material culture held in premise. With every chronological repositioning, the art at hand transforms as a result its dispensing methodology alters. An exhibition suited for a particular division of time will always vary from another. Since there is a transposition in the *Weltanschauung*, the fundamental core of beings, values and duties refashion, its technique of presentation will naturally alter.¹ For instance exhibits catering to Modern Art set out in the 20th century; mirroring the movement of Modernism. Modernity can be traced back to Kant’s Enlightenment, aiming at attaining perfection and searching for the true order that governed nature.² Science and reasoning penetrated, then dismissed the older ways which were directed by the Church.³ The exhibits of Modernism predominantly accommodate media of painting and sculpture. They are suited to serve works such as Degas’ bronze, Matisse’s brilliant hues, Pollock’s abstract rhythms or Mondrian’s geometrical composition.



Life above Everything’ at the Irish Museum of Modern Art

courtesy : the Irish Museum of Modern Art

Although stylistically diverse, 20th century art was restricted to two or three dimensional works which fit comfortably in the modernist ‘White Cube’ space. The White Cube employs stark white walls to direct focus on the displayed works on art. Introduced by schools De Stijl and the Bauhaus, its initial intent was to use minimise spatial noise, subtracting the excess architectural or decorative featured. It aimed at maximising the use of light to use the blank walls as a framing device for the displayed works.⁴ For instance if one examines the exhibition, ‘Life above Everything’ showcasing

¹ a particular point of view of a person or community

² Characteristics of modern art — TDMUV, n.d

³ Characteristics of modern art — TDMUV, n.d

⁴ Characteristics of modern art — TDMUV, n.d

works of Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats at IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art).⁵ Freud's portraits and Yeats' expressionist works, both two-dimensional and encompassed in gold, wooden frames come to life in the White Cube.⁶ In the space stripped off colour, the works hold high spirits and an aura of freedom. The warm and cool tonalities are enhanced, differently scaled works interact seamlessly without negating rationalism or order.⁷ The ideological thread sown through the concept of the White Cube is in accordance with the principles of modernity i.e industrialising or embodying character of mechanically linear progress. It also withholds a seal of 'internationalism', which tends to Euro-centric aesthetic positions.

Contemporary Art is identified as a product of practices, values and concerns encompassed in the conditions of contemporaneity.⁸ The idea of contemporaneity differs geographically and therefore, time is relative to the physiographical setting in focus.⁹ For the purpose of this paper, the movement of Contemporary Art is recognised as cultural material produced after the 1980s.¹⁰ In the publication, *Art to Come : Histories of Contemporary Art*, Terry Smith delineates three factors which define the extant of Contemporary Art.¹¹ First, it is an institution driven by the complexities of global subculture. This includes its distinct values, discourse, spectacles and markets.¹² Second, it



The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2021

courtesy : Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

⁵ Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud And Jack B. Yeats Exhibition - IMMA, 2020:

⁶ Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud And Jack B. Yeats Exhibition - IMMA, 2020:

⁷ Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud And Jack B. Yeats Exhibition - IMMA, 2020:

⁸ Contemporary art – Art Term | Tate, n.d.

⁹ Dumbadze and Hudson, 2021

¹⁰ Contemporary art – Art Term | Tate, n.d.

¹¹ Smith, 2019

¹² Smith, 2019

is seen as a ‘spirit’ encompassing the immediate.¹³ Contemporary Art is a reflection of present-day urgency, lying in the significant issues of today.¹⁴ Thirdly, it is seen as the internalisation of a style that mirrors cultures of post modernity, driven dominantly by an aesthetic.¹⁵ It surpasses previously recognised scales. The three facets substantially manoeuvre strategies employed to exhibit Contemporary Art.¹⁶



courtesy : Kena Betancur/AFP/Shutterstock

Therefore, Contemporary Art becomes a result of a divergent evolution in philosophy and politics. Ethics of production have been prioritised throughout the fabrication and execution of Contemporary Art. Yves Alain Bois calls it ‘the Esperanto of globalism’.¹⁷ There is a vie for representation.¹⁸ Contemporary Art is known to embrace discourse in and around hefty socio-political issues which were once left unaddressed. Moreover, they were gone unnoticed. These include dialogue around feminism, inclusion and celebration of non-western cultures and its people, rights to space i.e appropriating land to its Indigenous community, visibility of people from the LGBTIQ+ community and global issues such as climate change. Instead of glorifying the establishment which was common during the times of Renaissance, Contemporary Art conscientiously critiques it.

¹³ Smith, 2019

¹⁴ Smith, 2019

¹⁵ Smith, 2019

¹⁶ Smith, 2019

¹⁷ Dumbadze and Hudson, 2021

¹⁸ Dumbadze and Hudson, 2021



The Upper Room, Chris Ofili in collaboration with Architect David Adjaye

courtesy : Chris Ofili and Victoria Miro, London

For example, the display of The Upper Room exhibit at Victoria Miro gallery by artist Chris Ofili, in collaboration with Sir David Adjaye.¹⁹ The Upper Room is a room size installation of thirteen paintings at the gallery in London. Chris Ofili, a British artist born into a Nigerian household and Sir David Adjaye, a Ghanaian-British architect, manifested an experiential environment using art and architecture.²⁰ The paintings encased in an organic space, perform for the viewer in semi-darkness. The Upper Room was later bought by and included as a permanent exhibition at Tate Britain.²¹ On examining this install is evident that Ofili and Adjaye draw from their African heritage as a source of inspiration as they plan the spatial character the space. The geometrically ordered nature of the White Cube is dismissed. An oblong shape forms the container of the works. The form and materiality of the walls are a derivation of mud architecture, a vernacular to African lands. The works of art rest on the ground humbly rather than imposing aesthetics on the viewer tête-à-tête. Traditional Nigerian spiritual iconography in the form of the elephant dung is incorporated within the works, opposed by the contemporary minimal seating.²² The lighting system highlights the works of art without a sharp focus. It is subdued, carrying a dream-like quality. The space is not obtruding but embraces a sense of wonder. There is a conspicuous chatter between the space and the works. The exhibition exudes contemporaneity without submitting to the traditions of western display culture. Theories, concepts of canon and curatorial directive in the The Upper Room exhibit experience a drastic change. They challenge art historical conventions.

With globalisation and the distend of conversations surrounding its occurrence, there are myriad lenses through which Contemporary Art is viewed. There is an active dialogue around who is

¹⁹ The Upper Room', Chris Ofili, 1999–2002 | Tate, 2021

²⁰ The Upper Room', Chris Ofili, 1999–2002 | Tate, 2021

²¹ The Upper Room', Chris Ofili, 1999–2002 | Tate, 2021

²² The Upper Room', Chris Ofili, 1999–2002 | Tate, 2021

defining Contemporary Art, and what practices are engaged while situating its realm. With decolonisation of the art practice being a trending subject of debate, there is an operational restructuring of display within institutions. For instance, in 2005 there was the birth of the Yellow Box at Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The exhibition, 'The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan', was the first of its kind to challenge the predominant westernisation of Chinese cultural discourse.²³ The conception of the Yellow Cube was a critique of the modernist ideology as well as an adaptive diversification of the same.²⁴ The notion developed by curator Chang Tsong-zung, internalised the bareness of the modernist system, while honing in on elements of Chinese ways of displaying cultural connoisseurship.²⁵ Tsong-zung's strategies are reminiscent of Okwui Enwezor's rationale. On the stage of Documenta 11, he stated "The notions of hybridity, metissage, cosmopolitanism have been deployed and reworked in order to capture the polycentric and polysemic aspects of new configurations."²⁶



The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan

courtesy: Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM)

While the Yellow Box aimed for contemporary aesthetics of exhibition-making, it also stimulates the traditional principles of Confucianism.²⁷ It embraces post-colonial ideologies and resists it. There is a widening of periphery, restructuring of the centre with questioning narratives of contemporaneity.²⁸ The exhibition showcased Chinese literati spirit by employing 70 different style of scrolls.²⁹ Its design incorporated elements which would typically be shunned if proposed in a delineated structure of a White Cube.³⁰ The parti included viewing of artworks while standing

²³ The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

²⁴ The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

²⁵ Rethinking the Curation of Chinese Contemporary Art, 2021

²⁶ Enwezor, 2010

²⁷ The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

²⁸ Rethinking the Curation of Chinese Contemporary Art, 2021

²⁹ Rethinking the Curation of Chinese Contemporary Art, 2021

³⁰ The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

behind a hanging bamboo screen to induce intimacy between the viewer and the work.³¹ The interaction involved leaning on a red, temporary railing installation which personalised the encounter with art.³² The pedestals were also painted an auspicious red. Stylistically, the exhibition tailored the interior space to appropriately examine a diverse range of scrolls, while straying away from mechanised, unadulterated association with the display. The exhibition was intentionally executed to solidify a non-western spatial format, emancipating the ‘standard’ system of the 20th century.



Michelle Handelman: Irma Vep, the last breath at the Broad Art Museum.

courtesy: Eat Pomegranate Photography

Contemporary Art as presented in the traditional, modernist White Cube is confronted by numerous confines. It goes beyond the media of painting and sculpture, incorporating photography, performance, and moving image. The addition of moving image in Contemporary Art museums has led to the formation of the Black Box. Similar to the concept of White Cube, the Black Box is a minimalist space which aims at minimising the digression of audience attention from the work on display. The absence of colour within the Box allows for enhanced viewing of a piece of film or video art. The idea of a Black Box was drawn from the field of theatre and its need for modularity. Today in spaces of Contemporary Art, it shuns the purity of white to fit requirements of the medium of moving image. For example, Michelle Handelman's film presented at the Broad Museum.³³ The install included three screens in a darkened space.³⁴ Different stills from the film were played on the screens, allowing a newly admitted viewer to begin watching the moving image, from the part which suited them. The audience is given agency to choose where they would like their interaction to initiate. They are immersed in an experience that goes beyond a uni-dimensional viewing system.

Similarly, there is the Gray Zone. This zone is formatted in accordance with expression through performance or dance, where actions and reactions may be erratic.³⁵ There is an ongoing

³¹ The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

³² The Yellow Box: Contemporary Calligraphy and Painting in Taiwan | TFAM, 2004

³³ MICHELLE HANDELMAN: IRMA VEP, THE LAST BREATH

³⁴ MICHELLE HANDELMAN: IRMA VEP, THE LAST BREATH

³⁵ Bishop, 2018

behavioural negotiation.³⁶ The zone fluctuates, it continually transitions inviting documentation by the means of smart phones. Hence, the Gray Zone is an archive which can be revisited by the



Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich

courtesy: Stephanie Berger

masses.³⁷ Thereby, magnifying the range of the institution and the work of art. It not only feeds the spectacularity essential for sustaining a work of Contemporary Art but also caters to the increasing integration of digital transformation in routine. For both, the Black Box and the Gray Space as exhibitors of Contemporary Art two essential components play a huge part. First, the lighting system which dissimilar to the White Cube. It is dramatic, unevenly distributed. It does not equally highlight the space and the work of art. In fact, it drowns out the space while escalating its character. Secondly, the acoustics are of utmost importance in the two concepts. The White Cube is visually invigorated. A variation in perceptible factors may change the organisational structure of the White Cube. For example, if one considers the ceiling of a White Cube space such as that of the Museum of Modern Art. The ducts of the air conditioning system, the electrical wiring as well as the fire-prevention apparatus are all concealed under the vaulting. The indication of any of these would immediately draw the attention of the viewer from the display. Whereas in the case of a Black Box, if the same arrangements were visible, the darkened space along with the stark light from or on the work of art would deluge its presence. The Black Box and Gray Zone are derivatives of the auditory.³⁸ It is the auricular shifts within the space, such as people whispering, snacking or coughing that could considerably alter the ongoing relationship between the work of art and its viewer.³⁹ Therefore, Contemporary Art is heavily reliant on not just the illumination of space but also its aural quality.⁴⁰

In 2020, with the pandemic the world of art saw an incontestable move towards digital technology. Not only were art institutions taking up virtual space by exhibiting online, there were also substantial sales taking place via online viewing rooms.⁴¹ Fairs and auction houses, both of which

³⁶ Bishop, 2018

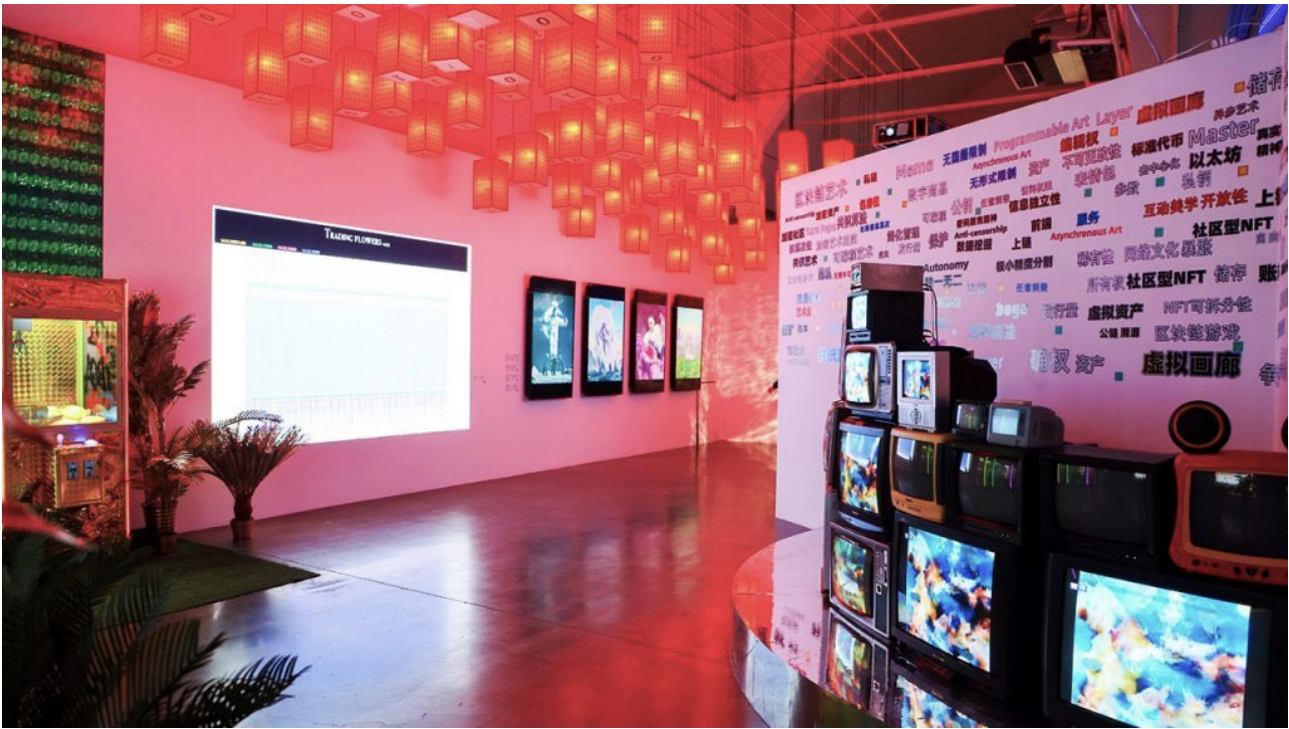
³⁷ Bishop, 2018

³⁸ Bishop, 2018

³⁹ Bishop, 2018

⁴⁰ Bishop, 2018

⁴¹ Wang, Li, Wang and Chen, 2021



Virtual Niche: Have You Ever Seen Memes in the Mirror?

courtesy: UCCA Lab

are integral to the exhibition of Contemporary Art took to digital platforms. Furthermore, during the pandemic a novel mode of art making took the world by storm.⁴² Non F ungible Tokens, popularly known as NFTs, gained traction to an extent by which millions of dollars worth artworks were being traded.⁴³ Newly formed galleries as well as established ones, regaled conversations circling the new medium of art production. Institutions found innovative ways to display and deal in NFTs.⁴⁴ For example, using digital frames or high-quality projectors. The pioneering technology leader, NetGear, developed frames specifically for the display of NFTs. These were connected to mobile applications for them to be viewed appropriately and according to whims of the viewer. A stellar exhibition of NFTs was conducted by UCCA Lab, called 'A Virtual Niche: Inside UCCA Lab's NFTExhibition'.⁴⁵ The exhibit showcased crypto art by more than 60 artists. These works were divided into two zones by red and blue lighting, out of which one was fabricated on the blockchain, while the other one was about it.⁴⁶ This exhibition proves that not only is the mode of creating works of art is transforming but the subject matter too, is gradually embracing the digital. NFTs are exploring peculiar subjects of fantasy, meme-culture and gaming.⁴⁷ The curatorial tactics of these contemporary exhibitions include humour and playfulness. Adorned with bright lights, futuristic and techno-savvy elements, they are welcoming to a wide scope of viewers.⁴⁸ They are no

⁴² Wang, Li, Wang and Chen, 2021

⁴³ Wang, Li, Wang and Chen, 2021

⁴⁴ Wang, Li, Wang and Chen, 2021

⁴⁵ Whiddington 2021:

⁴⁶ Whiddington 2021:

⁴⁷ Whiddington 2021:

⁴⁸ Whiddington 2021:

longer formal with stringency to follow a certain conduct in the gallery.⁴⁹ They are interactive and educational, without the didactics of theories.⁵⁰

The scope of what is viewed as Contemporary Art seems to be widening as years pass by. Unprecedented changes in the global socio-political fabric cause ripples to modify the definition of Contemporary Art. With globalisation and ever-growing digital transformation, there is an amplification of voices which goes beyond the 'white, pale, male' structure prevailing in the practice. Additionally, there is an inclusion of narratives which brawl with the dominant Eurocentric perspective. Art history is experiencing a reshaping which is swifter than previously noticed transitions. Consequently, exhibitions of Contemporary Art are significantly different from an exhibition of 20th century. Their audience has changed. Ideas of migration, memory and displacement add to the communicational interchange around Contemporary Art. As a result, its exhibitions are wider in scope, deeper in discourse, exploring novel cultural-scapes which have emerged over time. They have the need to be highly dynamic, piercing the impounds of the White Cube which worked ideally for Modernist works of art. The design of the space must integrate a variety of media, new and old, while also ensuring the sociological needs are met. The scale of contemporary art is magnified to one that is incomparable to previous art historical movements. The exhibitions must cater to this gigantcity and peregrinate from staying passive towards its audience. They must be interactive, social media friendly and culturally appropriate in their display. They also have the weight of ensuring contemporary issues of concern are highlighted and consciously examined. For the exhibitions of Contemporary Art curatorial and exhibition design strategies may optically align, seemingly following the aesthetic of a White Cube, but the underlying rationale transgress beyond the ideological confines of a White Cube space. Oftentimes, even oppose the tenets of the White Cube.

⁴⁹ Whiddington 2021:

⁵⁰ Whiddington 2021:

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