

**Beyond the White Cube.  
An interview with Brian O'Doherty.**

O'Doherty wrote about the social responsibility the artist found in the 70s in his seminal book *Inside the White Cube* (1976). His art in the form of his rope drawings developed further a real concern for the relationship between individual space and the specific space of the gallery. However it was the artistic development of the early 1990s and my interest in the relationship between making art in the studio and other off site experiments that renewed the importance of his practice for me. I met Brian O'Doherty in Barcelona where he was giving a talk in MACBA on his 1976 book *Inside The White Cube*. The conversation started on the roof of Gaudi's La Pedrera while we sat down to enjoy the view.

**BE:** Where did you get the name for the book 'Inside the White Cube'?

**BO'D:** I was interested in the context of ideas implicit in the gallery and that began the series of essays. Why didn't I call it a white box? Well it's not as interesting, it doesn't give an interesting idea so I thought of something dense that could be penetrated by a thought – a white cube. So now everybody has accepted this – such is the power of a slogan, a label.

**BE:** In describing the characteristics of the white cube you write that the gallery space separates the art work from life, from the world, from the outside and creates a different environment for an art work to exist. What happened to the artists of your generation who escaped the gallery space and went into nature, into the landscape to make their work? Was this part of the criticism of the white cube?

**BO'D:** I think there is a consistent question asked by artists since the 60s. How do you escape the white cube? How do you escape the gallery? How do you get away from it. Smithson did it with *The Spiral Jetty*, as we saw in his film in the museum (MACBA) and Michel Heizer went out into the desert, Morris was always threatening to do things outside, so there was a time when the pressure on the white cube from the inside became so intense that something had to give. So you have to this day, it seems to me, pressure from the outside and the

pressure from the inside to escape. The pressure from the outside is also social. So in the 60s, all this came to a head with artists wanting to get out of the gallery, and they did get out. Well, I was talking to the French scholar Hubert Demeach about how the white cube has to give way - to what I don't know. And Catherine David did a Documenta, trying as she said, to destroy the white cube. She didn't actually succeed but when you say this – that you want to destroy the white cube – you must remember that it has done a great deal, a lot has been made possible by the white cube, its walls are saturated with ambiguity. And as with everything, there are advantages and disadvantages but in my mind the white cube trembles because of all its many ambiguities.

**BE:** Would you agree that your book gives an argument that the big machine that we call art production, as understood in the second half of the 20th century, has changed little? The white cube is the dominant space for showing art, even the architectural fantasies such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao still work with the mechanism that you describe in your book.

**BO'D:** I think that was brought home very sharply recently because if the white cube back then did anything it made things more transparent, people were not aware of the gallery as the containing space and it was accepted, as such, by artists, although there was a sort of counter white cube from the beginning.

Again speaking of trying to see things broadly most artists limited themselves to their own trade and it often results in the exclusion of artists from the social discourses. Now I don't mean social discourse in terms of the art because often as not that's not very profitable – but social discourse in terms of being a citizen, the artist is also a citizen and I am very conscious of that. So as a citizen you have a voice, and those of us who have a political voice - sometimes it's not very effective, you end up preaching to the choir. The response to *The White Cube* shocked me- it was a huge wave and I said what is this? So therefore it struck a nerve, to the point where several people came up to me and said you know I was about to write that. I was and still am very concerned about the machine in which art is produced, and it is a machine.

I would like to say that the book should have appeared much earlier because I wrote it and sent it into John Copelands in *Artforum* (1974) and it sat on his desk but then something interesting happened. There was an ad in *Artforum* by Lynda Benglis which led to a mass resignation by the editors, including Rosalind Krauss, which was odd for such sophisticated art people and left them with little for the next issue. That's when they rediscovered the text that I sent them. Then the editor asked me do you have another one, and I had - after that I took time to write the rest for publication in *Artforum*.

**BE:** Did you ever get interested in utopian architectural projects during that time such as, say, Situationist ideas? I know from previous conversations you were interested in Herbert Marcuse's aesthetic dimension.

**BO'D:** The tension between the spontaneous and the contained strikes me as recurrent within architecture, within personal lives, and within society. If emancipation is to be equitable, it has to be grounded in rationality, which is a structure of sorts. I was intensely curious, then, what role architecture might play as a mediator between freedom and order. Architecture has always imposed order – monumental, geometric, social. Assembled as cities, nevertheless, it has provided the setting for projects of emancipation – Greek democracy, the Enlightenment, Marxism, anarchism. So I wondered whether Situationist architectures would accelerate emancipation. My interest in alternative sites of production, as Marcuse proposed, grew concurrently. But what really caught my imagination was the degree to which architecture, built, drawn and theorised, is a projection of the social imagination - of how we would really like to live and be. The Situationists, and, to a lesser extent, Marcuse show us alternative reality in the built environment, and in this they function in the best tradition of utopianism – by showing us possibilities and inviting us to consider whether we will choose to live like that.

**BE:** I suppose for me the increased interest in Situationism in the 90s was the greater attentiveness to the everyday. On the one hand, the Situationist 'drift' invited us to complement the sublime as a way of thinking of ourselves beyond everyday life in the modern world. One which is shy of things that might interrupt business as usual. At the same time, Situationism and the philosophy of Henri Lefebvre, drew our attention back to the possibility of critique, opening up the possibility of difference and change starting with everyday life.

**BO'D:** So the the everyday and the sublime might well be part of the same project of enlarging lived experience – much as architecture simultaneously projects images of fact and fantasy.

November 2009