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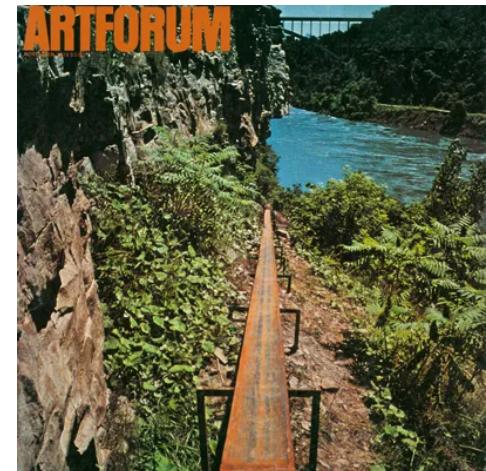
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## INSIDE THE WHITE CUBE PART III: CONTEXT AS CONTENT

By Brian O'Doherty

**WHEN WE ALL HAD** front doors—not intercom and buzzer—the knock at the door still had some atavistic resonance. De Quincy got off one of his best passages on the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. The knocking announces that “the aweful parenthesis”—the crime—is over, and that “the goings-on of the world in which we live” are back. Literature places us as knocker (Mrs. Blake answering the door since Mr. Blake is in Heaven and must not be disturbed) and knockee (the visitor from Porlock bringing Coleridge down from his *Kubla Khan* high). The unexpected visitor summons anticipation, insecurity, even dread—despite that it’s usually nothing, sometimes a kid who knocked and ran away.



George Trakas, *Trestle* (detail), installation at Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y., summer 1976.

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### RON DAVIS: BEYOND FLATNESS

If the house is the house of modernism, what knocks can you expect? The house itself, built on ideal foundations, is imposing, even though the neighborhood is changing. It has a Dada kitchen, a fine surrealist attic, a utopian playroom, a critics' mess, clean, well-lighted galleries for what is current, votive lights to various saints, a suicide closet, vast storage rooms, and a basement flophouse where failed histories lie around mumbling like bums. We hear the expressionist's thunderous knock, the surrealist's coded knock, the realists at the tradesman's entrance, the Dadas sawing through the back door. Very typical is the abstractionist's single, unrepeated knock. And unmistakable is the peremptory knock of historical inevitability, which sets the whole house scurrying.

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Usually when we're deep in something a gentle knock draws us to answer it by its lack of pretension—it can't be much. We open the door to find a rather shabby figure, with a face like the Shadow, but very benign. We are always surprised to find Marcel Duchamp there. But there he is, inside before we know it, and after his visit—he never stays too long—the house is not quite the same. He first visited the house's "white cube" in

second time, four years later, he achieved every particle of the

interior space to our consciousness—consciousness and the lack of it being Duchamp's basic dialectic.

The roof, until he “stood” on it in 1938, seemed relatively safe from artists. It's already taken up by skylights, chandeliers, tracks, fixtures. We don't look at the ceiling much now. In the history of indoor looking up, we rank low. Other ages put plenty up there to look at. Pompeii proposed, among other things, that more women than men looked at the ceiling. The Renaissance ceiling locked its painted figures into geometric cells. The Baroque ceiling is always selling us something other than the roof, as if the idea of shelter had to be transcended; the ceiling is really an arch, a dome, a sky, a vortex swirling figures till they vanish through a celestial hole, like a sublime overhead toilet. Or a ceiling is a luxurious piece of hand-tooled furniture, stamped, gilded, an album for the family escutcheon. The Rococo ceiling is as embroidered as underwear (sex) or a doily (eating). The Georgian ceiling looks like a white carpet, its stuccoed border stopping short of the angle of ceiling and walls; inside, the central rose, dimpled with shadow, from which descends the opulent chandelier. Often the imagery up there suggests that looking up was construed as a kind of looking down, which gently reverses the viewer into a walking stalactite.

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With electric light, the ceiling became an intensely cultivated garden of fixtures, and modernism simply ignored it. The ceiling lost its role in the ensemble of the total room. The Georgian ceiling, for instance, dropped a palisade to the picture molding, extending the roof's domain as a graceful,

technician's playground. Up there is yet another undiscovered vernacular, with all the probity of function that certifies its bizarre arrangements of grid and acoustic tile as *honest*—that is, unconscious. So that our consciousness, which spreads like a fungus, invents virtues the schlock designer didn't know he/she had. (The morality of vernacular is our new snobbism.) The only grace technology bestowed of ceiling with the crepuscular smoothness of an Olitski. Indirect lighting is the color field of the ceiling. But up there too is a dazzling garden of gestalts. On the more common regiments of recessed lights, criss-crossing in endless perceptual drill, we can project the esthetic of the serial/Minimal era. Order and disorder smartly lapse into a single idea as we move around below, raising the issue of an alternative to both.

It must have been an odd feeling to come into the International Exhibition of Surrealism at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in 1938, see most of those wild men neatly fitted into their orthodox frames, then look up expecting the usual dead ceiling and see the *floor*. In our histories of modern art, we tend to take old photographs as gospel. They are proof, so we don't grill them as we would any other witness. But so many questions about those *1,200 Bags of Coal* don't have answers. Were there really 1,200? (Counting them is a task to drive Virgos crazy. Was it the first time an artist quantified large numbers, thereby giving an event a quota, a conceptual frame?) Where did Duchamp get those 1,200 bags? (He first thought of suspending open umbrellas but couldn't get that many.) And how could they be full of coal? That would bring the ceiling—and the police—down on top of him. They must have been stuffed with paper. How did he attach them all? Who helped him? You can look through the Duchamp tomes and not discover this. What happened to the ceiling lights? The photographs show them washing out a cluster of bags here and there. And mystery of mysteries: why did the other artists let him get away with it?

memorably as a court for this gesture: But if he were accused of dominating the show, he could say he took only what no one wanted—the roof and a little spot on the floor; any accusation would underline his (gigantic) modesty, his (excessive) humility. No one looks at the roof; it isn't choice territory—indeed it wasn't (until then) territory at all. Hanging over your head, the largest piece in the show was unobtrusive physically, but totally obtrusive psychologically.

In one of those bad puns he loved, Duchamp turned the exhibition topsy-turvy and “stood you on your head.” The roof is the floor and the floor, to drive home the point, is the ceiling. For the stove on the floor—a makeshift brazier made from an old barrel, from the looks of it—became a chandelier. The police rightly wouldn't let him put a fire in it, so he settled for a light bulb. Above (below) are 1,200 bags of fuel and below (above) is their consuming organ. A temporal perspective stretches between, at the end of which is an empty roof, a conversion of mass to energy, ashes, maybe a comment on history and on art.

This inversion is the first time an artist subsumed an entire gallery in a single gesture—and managed to do so while it was full of other art. (He did this by traversing the space from floor to ceiling. Few remember that on this occasion Duchamp also had his say about the wall: he designed the doors leading in and out of the gallery. He made them—again with reservations from the police—revolving doors, that is, doors that confuse inside and outside by spinning what they trap. This inside/outside confusion is consistent with tilting the gallery on its axis.) By exposing the effect of context on art, of the container on the contained, Duchamp recognized an area of art that hadn't yet been invented. This invention of context initiated a series of gestures which “develop” the idea of a gallery space as a single unit, suitable for manipulation as an esthetic counter. From this moment on, there is a seepage of energy from art to its surroundings. With time, the ratio between the literalization of art and the mythification of the gallery is inverse and increasing.

Like every good gesture, Duchamp's *Coal Bags* becomes obvious post-facto. Gestures are a form of invention. They can

assumptions drop out of sight. As an invention, however, the gesture's patent is its most distinguishing feature, far more than its formal content, if any. I suppose the formal content of a gesture lies in its aptness, economy and grace. It dispatches the bull of history with a single thrust. Yet it needs that bull. For it shifts perspective suddenly on a body of assumptions and ideas. It is to that degree didactic, as Barbara Rose says, though the word may overplay the intent to teach. If it teaches, it is by irony and epigram, by cunning and shock. A gesture wises you up. It depends for its effect on the context of ideas it changes and joins. It is not art perhaps, but artlike, and thus has a meta-life around and about art. Insofar as it is unsuccessful it remains a frozen curio, if remembered at all. If it is successful, it becomes history and tends to eliminate itself. It resurrects itself when the context mimics the one that stimulated it, making it "relevant" again. So a gesture has an odd historical appearance—always fainting away and reviving.

The floor transplant gesture might now be repeatable as a "project." A gesture may be a "young" project. But it is more argumentative and epigrammatic, and it speculates riskily on the future. It calls attention to untested assumptions, overlooked content, flaws in historical logic. Projects—short-term art made for specific sites and occasions—raise the issue of how the impermanent survives, if it does. Documents and photographs challenge the historical imagination by presenting to it an art that is already dead. The historical process is both hampered and facilitated by removing the original, which becomes increasingly fictitious as its afterlives become more concrete. What is preserved and what is allowed to lapse edit the idea of history—the form of communal memory favored at any particular time. Undocumented projects may survive as rumor, and attach themselves to the persona of their originator, who is constrained to develop a convincing myth.

Ultimately projects—it seems to me—are a form of historical revisionism waged from a privileged position. That position is defined by two assumptions: that projects are interesting apart from being "art"—that is, they have a somewhat vernacular existence in the world—and that they can appeal to untrained as well as trained sensibilities. Our architects of personal

audience is constituted. We are now aware of a tentative

attempt to contact an audience that postmodernism would like to call up, but doesn't quite have the number. This is not the start of a new populism. It is a recognition of a neglected resource, as well as disaffection with the privileged spectator placed by art education in the gallery space. It marks a move away from the modernist conception of the spectator—abused on the basis of presumed incompetence, fundamentally a Romantic position.

Gestures have a becoming quality and some can, retroactively, become projects. There is a project shrewdness implicit in Duchamp's two gallery gestures. They have survived their naughtiness and become historical material, elucidating the gallery space and its art. Yet such is Duchampian charisma that they continue to be seen exclusively in the context of his work. They efficiently keep history at bay—one way of remaining modern (Joyce is the literary equivalent). Both the *Coal Bags* and the *Mile of String*, done four years later (1942) for the First Papers of Surrealism show at 551 Madison Avenue, are addressed ambiguously. Are they to be delivered to the spectator? To history? To art criticism? To other artists? To all, of course, but the address is blurred. If pressed to send the gestures somewhere, I'd send them to other artists.

Why did the other artists stand for it not once but twice? Duchamp was very obliging about hanging people up on their worst instincts, especially when these instincts are disguised as ideology. The surrealists' ideology of shock sometimes manifested itself as exalted public relations. Shock, as the history of the avant-garde shows, is now small-arms equipment. Duchamp, I feel sure, was seen as someone who could generate attention. In delegating him to provide it, the artists were playing little Fausts to an amiable demon. What is the *Mile of String*? At a level so obvious our sophistication immediately disallows it, an image of dead time, an exhibition paralyzed in premature senescence and turned into a grotesque horror-movie attic. Both Duchamp's gestures fail to acknowledge the other art around, which becomes wallpaper. Yet the artists' protest (did any of them ever say how they felt?) is preempted. For the harassment of their work is disguised as harassment of the spectators, who have to high-step like hens

interference with the spectator's "set" is part of his malign neutrality. The string, by keeping the spectator from the art, became the one thing he/she remembered. Instead of being an intervention, something between the spectator and the art, it gradually became new art of some kind. What inflicts such harassment is innocuous—5,280 feet of continuous string. (Again the unverifiable quantification gives a conceptual neatness to the epigram.)

From the photographs, the string reconnoitered the space relentlessly, looping and tautening across each outcrop with demented persistence. It crisscrosses, changes speeds, ricochets back from points of attachment, clusters in knots, wheels new sets of parallaxes with every step, parcelling up the space from the inside, without the slightest formal worry. Yet it follows the alignment of the room and bays, erratically replicating ceiling and walls. No obliques plunge across the central space, which becomes fenced in, casually quoting the shape of the room. Despite the apparent tizzy of randomness, the room and what is in it determine the string's peregrinations in an orderly enough way. The spectator is harassed. Every bit of space is marked. Duchamp develops the modernist monad: the spectator in his gallery box.

Like all gestures, the string either is swallowed or sticks in history's teeth. It stuck, which means that the formal aspect, if any, hasn't been developed. The string's pedigree borrows from Constructivism and is a cliché in surrealist painting. The string literalized the space many of the pictures in the exhibition illustrated. This *actualization* of a pictorial convention may be an (unconscious?) precedent for the will to actualize of the late '60s and '70s. To paint something is to recess it in illusion, and dissolving the frame transferred that function to the gallery space. Boxing up the space (or spacing up the box) is part of the central formal theme of Duchamp's art: containment/inside/outside. From this angle his scattered artifacts align into a rough schema. Is the box—a container of ideas—a surrogate head? And the windows, doorways, apertures, the channels of sense? The two lock into fairly convincing metaphor. The ricocheting string (association tracts?) wraps up the gallery space, modernism's thinking

insemination or transmission: the creative act: ), the doors (open or shut?) and windows (opaque/transparent?) the unreliable senses through which information flows both ways (as it does in puns), dissolving identity as a fixed location. So that identity lies scattered around in humorously alienated body parts, which contemplate inside/outside, idea/sensation, consciousness/unconsciousness—or rather the slash (glass?) between the two. Lacking identity, the parts, the senses, the ideas decompose the paradoxical iconographer gliding around this anthropomorphic shambles. As the mile of string showed, Duchamp is fond of booby traps. He keeps the spectator, whose presence is always voluntary, hung up on his own etiquette, thus preventing him/her from disapproving of his/her own harassment—a source of further annoyance.

Hostility to the audience is one of the key coordinates of modernism, and artists may be classified according to its wit, style and depth. Like some obvious subjects, it has been ignored. (It's amazing how many modernist historians mime the artist's curatorial shadow, directing traffic around the work). This hostility is far from trivial or self-indulgent—though it has been both. For through it is waged an ideological conflict about values—of art, of the lifestyles that surround it, of the social matrix in which both are set. The reciprocal semiotics of the hostility ritual are easily read. Each party—audience and artist—is not quite free to break certain taboos. The audience can't get mad, i.e. become philistines. Its anger must be sublimated, already a kind of proto-appreciation. By cultivating an audience through hostility, the avant-garde gave it the opportunity to transcend insult (second nature to business people) and exercise revenge (also second nature). The weapon of revenge is selection. Rejection, according to the classic scenario, feeds the artist's masochism, sense of injustice and rage. Enough energy is generated to allow both artist and audience to presume they are fulfilling their social roles. Each remains remarkably faithful to the other's conception of his role—the relationship's most powerful tie. Positive and negative projections volley back and forth in a social charade that wavers between tragedy and farce. One negative exchange is basic: the artist tries to sell the collector on his obtuseness and crassness—easily projected on anyone material enough to want something. And the collector encourages the artist to

from the art he produces. This radical notion is interpreted

as the bad manners expected from superior tradesmen. The militarized zone between artist and collector is busy with guerrillas, envoys, double-agents, runners and both major parties in a variety of disguises as they mediate between principle and money.

At its most serious, the artist/audience relation can be seen as the testing of the social order by radical propositions; and as the successful absorption of these propositions by the support system—galleries, museums, collectors, even magazines and house critics—evolved to barter success for ideological anesthesia. The main medium of this absorption is style, a stabilizing social construct if ever there was one. Style in art, whatever its miraculous, self-defining nature, is the equivalent of etiquette in society. It is a consistent grace that establishes a sense of place, and is thus essential to the social order. Those who find advanced art without contemporary relevance ignore that it has been a relentless and subtle critic of the social order, always testing, failing through the rituals of success, succeeding through the rituals of failure. This artist/audience dialogue contributes a useful definition of the kind of society we have evolved. Each art licensed a premises where it conformed to and sometimes tested the social structure—concert hall, theater, gallery. Classical avant-garde hostility expresses itself through physical discomfort (radical theater), excessive noise (music) or by removing perceptual constants (the gallery space). Common to all are transgressions of logic, dissociation of the senses and boredom. In these arenas order (the audience) assays what quotas of disorder it can stand. Such places are, then, metaphors for consciousness and revolution. The spectator is invited to submit himself to a space where the act of approach is turned back on itself. Perhaps a perfect avant-garde act would be to invite an audience and shoot it.

With post-modernism, the artist and audience are more like each other. The classical hostility is mediated, too often, by irony and farce. Both parties show themselves highly vulnerable to context and the resulting ambiguities blur their discourse. The gallery space shows this. In the classic era of polarized artist and audience, the gallery space maintained its

stuff gives off negative vibrations which we want in. Esthetics

are turned into a kind of social elitism—the gallery space is *exclusive*. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce—the gallery space is *expensive*. What it contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible—art is *difficult*. Exclusive audience, rare objects, and difficult to comprehend—here we have a snobbery social, financial and intellectual which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes so efficiently codified.

The classic modernist gallery is the limbo between studio and living room where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralized ground. There the artist's respect for what he has invented is perfectly superimposed on the bourgeois desire for possession. For a gallery is, in the end, a place to sell things—which is O.K. The arcane social customs surrounding this—the stuff of social comedy—divert attention from the business of assigning material value to that which has none. Here the hostile artist is a commercial sine qua non. For by gassing up his self-image with obsolete romantic fuel, he provides his agent with the means to separate artist and work, and so facilitate its purchase. The artist's irresponsible persona is a bourgeois invention, a necessary fiction to preserve some illusions from too uncomfortable an examination—illusions shared by artist, dealer and public. It is hard now to avoid the conclusion that late modernist art is inescapably dominated by the assumptions—mostly unconscious—of the bourgeoisie; Baudelaire's vicious and noble preface *To the Bourgeoisie* for the Salon of 1846 is the prophetic text. Through reciprocating paradoxes the idea of free enterprise in art goods and ideas supports social constants as much as it attacks them. Attacking them has indeed become a permissible charade from which both parties emerge relatively satisfied.

Which may be why post-modern art—the art of the '70's—conceals its radical notions not so much in the art as in its attitudes to the inherited “art” structure of which the gallery space is a prime icon. The structure is questioned not by

energies of the '70s, they present a low-lying landscape which is traversed by ideas deprived of absolutes and powered by low-grade dialectics. No peaks are forced up by irreconcilable pressures. The landscape levels off partly because the genres involved in mutual recognition and avoidance (post-Minimalism, Conceptualism, color-field, realism, etc.) are non-hierarchical—one is as good as another. The democracy of means contributed by the '60s is now extended to genres, which in turn reflect a demythified social structure (the “professions” now carry fewer rewards and diminished prestige). The '60s still headline most peoples’ perception of the '70s. Indeed one of the “properties” of '70s art is the failure of '60s critics to look at it. Measuring the '70s by the '60s is faulty, but unavoidable (an artist’s new phase is always judged in relation to the one previous). Nor does the skipped decade theory help—the '50s revival turned out to be a bummer.

Seventies art is diverse, made up of non-hierarchical genres and highly provisional—indeed unstable—solutions. Major energies no longer go into formal painting and sculpture (young artists have a fairly good nose for historical exhaustion), but into mixed categories (performance, post-Minimal, video, tuning the environment) which present more temporary situations involving an inspection of consciousness. When necessary '70s art crosses media in a gentle, non-polemical way—understatement being a characteristic of its low profile. It tends to deal with what is immediately present to the senses and the mind, and so presents itself as intimate and personal. So it often appears narcissistic, unless this is understood as a mode of locating boundaries, where a person “ends” and something else begins. It is not in search of certainties, for it tolerates ambiguity well. Its intimacies have a somewhat anonymous cast since they turn privacy inside out to make it a matter of public discourse—a '70s form of distancing. Despite this personal focus, there is no curiosity about matters of identity. There is great curiosity about how consciousness is constructed. Location is a key word. It telescopes concerns about *where* (space) and *how* (perception). *What* is perceived, one gathers from genres as widely removed as photo-Realism and post-Minimalism, is not as important (though a dwarf called iconography schlepps around knocking at every door). Most '70s art seems to

and, for want of a better word, mental. These roughly correspond with available genres. The correlatives are personal space, perceptual revisions, exploration of time conventions and silence.

These verifications locate a body, mind and place that can be *occupied*, or at least partly tenanted. If '50s man was a Vitruvian survivor, and '60s man composed of alienated parts held together by systems, '70s man is a workable monad—figure and place, a transposition of figure and ground into a quasi-social situation. Seventies art does not reject the consequences of '50s and '60s art, but some basic attitudes have changed. The '60s audience is rejected by '70s art. Often there is an attempt to communicate with an audience that hasn't been interfered with by art, thus dislodging the wedge that "art" has driven between perception and cognition. (The growth of alternative spaces across the country outside the formal museum structure is part of this—a change of audience, location and context that makes it possible for New York artists to do what they can't do in New York). Seventies art remains troubled by history, yet so much of it is temporary it rejects the historical consciousness. It questions the system through which it presents itself, yet most of it is passed through that system. Its makers are socially concerned, but politically ineffective. Some of the dilemmas suppressed during the avant-garde era have come home to roost, and '70s art is working through them in its rather elusive way.

With post-modernism, the gallery space is no longer "neutral." The wall becomes a membrane through which esthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange. As this molecular shudder in the white walls becomes perceptible, there is a further inversion of context. The walls assimilate, the art discharges. How much can the art do without? This calibrates the degree of the gallery's mythification. How much of the object's eliminated content can the white wall replace? Context provides a large part of late-modern and post-modern art's content. This is '70s art's main issue, as well as its strength and weakness.

The white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions. Artist and

cube is one of modernism's triumphs—a development commercial, esthetic and technological. In an extraordinary strip-tease, the art within bares itself more and more, until it presents formalist end-products and bits of reality from outside—"collaging" the gallery space. The walls' content becomes richer and richer (maybe a collector should buy an "empty" gallery space). The mark of provincial art is that it has to include too much—the context can't replace what is left out; there is no system of mutually understood assumptions.

The spotless gallery wall, though a fragile evolutionary product of a highly specialized nature, is impure. It subsumes commerce and esthetics, artist and audience, ethics and expediency. It is in the image of the society that supports it. So it is a perfect surface off which to bounce our paranoias. That temptation should be resisted. The white cube kept philistinism at the door and allowed modernism to bring to an endpoint its relentless habit of self-definition. It hot-housed the serial jettisoning of content. Along the way numerous epiphanies were purchased, as epiphanies can be, by suppression of content. If the white wall cannot be summarily dismissed, it can be understood. This knowledge changes the white wall, since its content is composed of mental projections based on unexposed assumptions. The wall is our assumptions. It is imperative for every artist to know that content and what it does to his/her work.

The white cube is usually taken as an emblem of the estrangement of the artist from his society, to which the gallery also provides access. It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to the timeless, a set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location, a reflex to the bald curtain wall, a magic chamber, a concentration of mind, maybe a mistake. It preserved the possibility of art but made it difficult. It is mainly a formalist invention, in that the tonic weightlessness of abstract painting and sculpture left it with a low gravity. Its walls are penetrable only by the most vestigial illusionism. Was the white cube nurtured by an internal logic similar to that of its art? Was its obsession with enclosure an organic response—encysting art that would not otherwise survive? Was it an economic construct formed by capitalist models of scarcity and demand? Was it a perfect

~~men are necessary: for better or worse it is the single major~~

convention through which art is passed. What keeps it stable is the lack of alternatives. A rich constellation of projects comments on matters of location, not so much suggesting alternatives as enlisting the gallery space as a unit of esthetic discourse. Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. Yet it is the not ignoble symbol for the preservation of what society finds obscure, unimportant and useless. It has incubated radical ideas that would have abolished it. The gallery space is all we've got and most art needs it. Each side of the white cube question has two, four, six sides.

Is the artist who accepts the gallery space conforming with the social order? Is discomfort with the gallery discomfort with art's etiolated role, its cooption and vagabond status as a refuge for homeless fantasies and narcissistic formalisms? During modernism, the gallery space was not perceived as much of a problem. But then, contexts are hard to read from the inside. The artist was not aware he was accepting anything except a relationship with a dealer. And if he saw beyond it, accepting a social context you can do nothing about shows a lot of common sense. Most of us do exactly that. Before large moral and cultural issues, the individual is helpless, but not mute. His weapons are irony, rage, wit, paradox, satire, detachment, scepticism. A familiar kind of mind comes into focus here—restless, self-doubting, inventive about diminishing options, conscious of void and close to silence. It is a mind with no fixed abode, empirical, always testing experience, conscious of itself and thus of history—and ambiguous about both.

This Faustian composite more or less fits numerous modernists from Cézanne to de Kooning. Such figures sometimes convince you that mortality is a disease to which only the most gifted are susceptible. And that the privileged perception resides in the psyche that can maximize the contradictions inherent in existence. Such a figure, whatever its symbolist or existential pedigree, suffers from a romantic infection with the absolute; aching for transcendence, it is detained in process. This figure, which has generated most of modernism's myths, has done great service. But it is a period figure that might well be fully retired. For now contradiction is

we tolerate other people's necessary ambivalence as they do ours. Whoever bends on him/herself the rays of contradiction becomes not a hero, but the vanishing point in an old picture. In our own interests, we are hard on the art that precedes us. We see not so much the art as an emblem for attitudes, contexts and myths unacceptable to us. Finding a code to reject this art allows us to invent our own.

Modernism has also provided us with another archetype: the artist who, unaware of his minority, sees the social structure as alterable through art. A believer, he is concerned not so much with the individual as with the race; is, in fact, a kind of discreetly authoritarian socialist. The rational, reformist urge refers to the age of reason and is nourished on the utopian habit. It also has a strong mystical/ideal component that places heavy responsibilities on the function of art. This tends to reify art and turn it into a device exactly measuring its dissociation from social relevance. So both archetypes alienate art from the social structure with opposite intentions. Both are old Hegelian doubles partners, and they are rarely pure. You can pick your own pairings: Picasso and Tatlin; Soutine and Mondrian; Ernst and Albers; Beckmann and Moholy-Nagy.

But the history of utopianism in modernism is rather splendid. The magnitude of the individual's presumption is clear to us, but it is also clear to him. So while aligning himself with mystical energies, he also courts the rationalities of design—an echo of the Design of the Creator the artist-creator intends to correct. At the end of an era it is easy to be funny about such ambitions. We tend to patronize high ideals after their failure. But the idealist/utopians are dismissed too easily by our New York habit of mind—where the myth of the individual as a republic of sensibility is firmly set. European utopians—who can forget Kiesler moving like a Brownian particle through the New York milieu?—don't do well here. Coming from a different structure, their ideas don't play in a society that reshuffles its classes every second generation. But a kind of European mind could think about social problems and art's transforming powers very well. Now we ask some of the same questions about the missing audience and where it has gone. Most of the people who look at art now are not looking at art; they are looking at the idea of "art" they carry in their minds. A good

What makes artists interesting is the contradictions they choose to edit their attention—the scissors they invent to cut out their self-image. The utopian artist/planner finds that his individuality, which must conform to the social structure he envisions, breaks the rule of such conformity by its individualism. As Albert Boime wrote (*Arts*, Summer '70): ". . . Mondrian opposes subjectivity on the grounds that individualism leads to disharmony and conflict, and interferes with the creation of a 'harmonious material environment' (i.e. a universally objective and collective outlook). At the same time, he is preoccupied with artistic originality because in his view only the uniquely gifted individual could discover the universal order: He therefore urged all artists to detach themselves 'from the majority of the people.'" For such artists, intuition must be thoroughly rationalized. Disorder, covertly suppressed in Mondrian's clear surfaces and edges, is manifest in the whole arbitrary nature of his choices. As Boime says, "Mondrian achieved equilibrium only after innumerable complex steps, and the multiplication of decisions betrays his personality." So what can one say when one enters Mondrian's room, which he himself never entered, since his 1926 sketch for a *Salon de Madame B à Dresden* was not made up until 1970 (for an exhibition at Pace Gallery)?

We are in a proposition that conjugates basic needs—bed, desk, shelf—with principles of harmony derived from the natural order. "Precisely on account of its profound love for things," wrote Mondrian, "nonfigurative art does not aim at rendering them in their particular appearance." But Mondrian's room is as clearly based on nature as if it were lined with trees. The panels are so adjusted that they advance and recede within a narrow compass. The room breathes, as it were, through the walls. This is enhanced by its perspective, producing the obliques Mondrian formally proscribed. The room is not so much anthropomorphic as "psyche-morphic"—its powerful ideas coincide with mental contours perfectly sensed by Mondrian: "In removing completely from the work all objects, the world is not separated from the spirit, but is on the contrary *put into a balanced opposition* with the spirit, since the one and the other are purified. This creates a perfect unity between the two opposites." Since the walls, despite

transcend its own brute nature. In this space, the grossness of the body seems inappropriate; from this room burps and farts are exiled. Through systems of abutment and slide, rectangle and square define a space that places one inside a cubist picture; the occupant is synthesized into a coefficient of order whose motion is in consonance with the rhythms enclosing him or her. Ceiling and floor (which contains an uncharacteristic oval—a rug?) add their vertical pressures. It's a marvelous place to visit.

The vision is not hermetic. Windows allow for discourse with the outside. Random process—what you see through the window—is precisely framed. Is this formally acknowledged in the small bite the lower left corner of the window takes out of a black square (much as Texas bites off a piece of Arkansas)? For all its sober idealist program, the room reminds me that Mondrian liked to dance (though his dancing, which was terrible, was based more on extracting pleasure from the programmed movements while happily coupled than on wild abandon). Mondrian's room proposed an alternative to the white cube that modernism ignored: “By the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as ‘mural art’ which destroys architecture itself, nor as ‘applied’ art, but *being purely constructive* will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty.”

Duchamp's altered rooms—ironic, funny, fallible—still accepted the gallery as a legitimate place for discourse. Mondrian's spotless room—a shrine to spirit and Madame Blavatsky—attempted to introduce a new order that would make the gallery dispensable. The two counterposed categories suggesting a comic slapstick not unknown to modernism: the scruffy and the clean, the bacterial and the hygienic, the sloppy and the precise. Part of the grand irony presiding over such dialectical separations is their frequent mimicking of each other in disguises too elaborate to remove here.

Mondrian and Malevich shared a mystical faith in art's transforming social power. Both men's ventures outside the

sentiments and energy. One figure took Tamm's radical social

program and Malevich's formal idealism and negotiated between them to produce exhibitions that could—and did—alter the public mind. Lissitsky did so through an inspiration that doesn't seem to occur to idealists and radical social planners. He acknowledged the bystander, who became the involved spectator. Lissitsky, our Russian connection, was probably the first exhibition designer/preparator. In the process of inventing the modern exhibition, he also reconstructed the gallery space—the first serious attempt to affect the context in which modern art and the spectator meet.

*Brian O'Doherty is an artist who shows under the name of Patrick Ireland.*

### INSIDE THE WHITE CUBE

#### Part III

#### CONTEXT AS CONTENT

##### BRIAN O'DOHERTY

When we all had front doors—not intercom and buzzer—the knock at the door still had some atavistic resonance. De Quincy got off one of his best passages on the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. The knocking announces that “the awful parenthesis”—the crime—is over, and that “the goings-on of the world in which we live” are back. Literature places us as knocker (Mrs. Blake answering the door since Mr. Blake is in Heaven and must not be disturbed) and knockee (the visitor from Portlock bringing Coleridge down from his *Kubla Khan* high). The unexpected visitor summons anticipation, insecurity, even dread—despite that it's usually nothing, sometimes a kid who knocked and ran away.

If the house is the house of modernism, what knocks can you expect? The house itself, built on ideal foundations, is imposing, even though the neighborhood is changing. It has a Dada kitchen, a fine surrealistic attic, a utopian planter, a critical, clean, well-lit gallery, a room which is silent, volatile, leads to various rooms, a suicide closet, vast storage rooms, and a basement flophouse where failed histories lie around mummifying like bums. We hear the expressionist's thunderous knock, the surrealist's coded knock, the realists at the tradesman's entrance, the Dadas sawing through the back door. Very typical is the abstractionist's single, unrepeatable knock. And unmistakable is the permanent knock of historical inevitability, which sets the whole house scurrying.

Usually when we're deep in something, a gentle knock draws us to answer it by its lack of pretension—it can't be much. We open the door to find a rather shabby figure, with a face like the Shadow, but very benign. We are always surprised to find Marcel Duchamp there. But there he is, inside before we know it, and after his visit—he never stays too long—the house is not quite the same. First visited the house's “white cube” in 1938 and invented the roof—if invention is making us conscious of what we agree not to see, e. take for granted. A third time, four years later, I visited every particle of the interior space to our consciousness—consciousness and the lack of it being Duchamp's basic dialectic.

The roof, until he “stood” on it in 1938, seemed relatively safe from artists. It's already taken up by skylights, chandeliers, tracks, fixtures. We don't look at the ceiling much now. In the history of indoor looking up, we rank low. Other ages put plenty up there to look at. Pompeii proposed, among other things, that more women than men looked at the ceiling. The Renaissance ceiling locked its painted figures into geometric cells. The Baroque ceiling is always selling us some-

thing other than the roof, as if the idea of shelter had to be transcended; the ceiling is really an arch, a dome, a sky, a vortex swirling figures till they vanish through a celestial hole, like a sublime overhead toilet. Or a ceiling is a luxurious piece of hand-tooled furniture, stamped, gilded, an album for the family escutcheon. The Rococo ceiling is as embroidered as underwear (sex) or a doily (eating). The Georgian ceiling looks like a white carpet, its stuccoed border stopping short of the angle of ceiling and walls; inside, the central rose, dimpled with shadow, from which descends the opulent chandelier. Often the imagery up there suggests that looking up was construed as a kind of looking down, which gently reverses the viewer into a walking stalactite.

With electric light, the ceiling became an intensely cultivated garden of fixtures, and modernism simply ignored it. The ceiling lost its role in the ensemble of the total room. The Georgian ceiling, for instance, dropped a palliance to the picture, the picture being the mainstay of a grandly graduated enclosure. Modern architecture simply ran the blank wall into the blank ceiling and lowered the lid. And what a lid! Its pods, feeds, spots, canisters, ducts make it a technician's playground. Up there is yet another undiscovered vernacular, with all the profanity of function that certifies its bizarre arrangements of grid and acoustic space, which is, that is, unconscious. So that our consciousness, which spreads like a fungus, invents virtues like the schlock designs didn't know he/she had. (The morality of vernacular is our new snobism.) The only grace technology bestowed on the ceiling is indirect lighting, which blooms like lily pads on the overhead pond. Or which, from recessed lips, flushes an area of

Marcel Duchamp, *Marcel Duchamp, 1942*, illustration from “First Pictures” exhibition

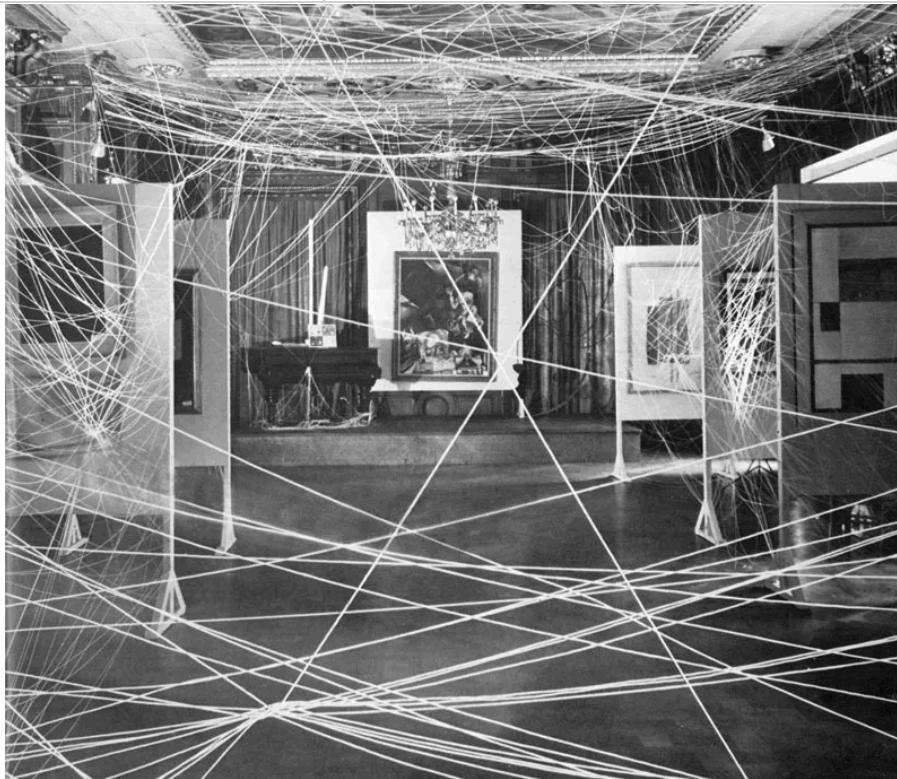
ceiling with the crepuscular smoothness of an Oilski. Indirect lighting is the color field of the ceiling. But up there too is a dazzling garden of gestalts. On the more common regiments of recessed lights, criss-crossing in endless perceptual drill, we can project the esthetic of the serial/Minimal era. Order and disorder smartly lapse into a single idea as we move around below, raising the issue of an alternative to both.

It must have been an odd feeling to come into the International Exhibition of Surrealism at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in 1938, see most of those wild men neatly fitted into their orthodox frames, then look up expecting the usual dead ceiling and see the floor. In our histories of modern art, we tend to take old photographs as gospel. They are proof, so we don't grill them. But the floor is the ceiling, and the ceiling is the floor. Many questions about these 1,200 *Bags of Coal* don't have answers. Were there really 1,200? (Counting them is a task to drive Virgos crazy. Was it the first time an artist quantified large numbers, thereby giving an event a quota, a conceptual frame?) Where did Duchamp get those 1,200 bags? (He first thought of suspending open umbrellas but couldn't get that many.) And how could they be full of coal? That would bring the ceiling—and the police—down on top of him. They must have been stuffed with paper. How did he attach them all? Who helped him? You can look through the Duchamp tomes and not discover this. What happened to the ceiling lights? The photographs show them washing out a cluster of bags here and there. And mystery of mysteries: why did the other artists let him get away with it?

He had a title of sorts: “Generator-Arbitrator” of the exhibition. Did he hang the pictures also? Did he conceive them simply as decor for his gesture? But if he

was accused of dominating the show, he could say he took only what no one wanted—the roof and a little space. The main reason he got away with it is because his (gigantic) modesty, his (excessive) humility. No one looks at the roof; it isn't choice territory—indeed, it wasn't (until then) territory at all. Hanging over your head, the largest piece in the show was unobtrusive physically, but totally obtrusive psychologically.

In one of those bad puns he loved, Duchamp turned the exhibition topsy-turvy and “stood you on your head.” The roof is the floor and the floor, to drive home the point, is the ceiling. For the stove on the floor—a makeshift brazier made from an old barrel, from the looks of it—became a chandelier. The police rightly wouldn't let him put a fire in it, so he settled for a light bulb. Above (below) are 1,200 bags of fuel and below (above) is their consuming organ. A temporal perspective stretches between, at the end of which is an empty



roof, a conversion of mass to energy, ashes, maybe a comment on history and on art?

This invention is the first time an artist subsumed an entire gallery in a single gesture—and managed to do so while it was full of other art. (He did this by traversing the space from floor to ceiling. Few remember that on this occasion Duchamp also had his say about the wall: he designed the doors leading in and out of the gallery. He made them—again with reservations from the police—revolving doors, that is, doors that confuse inside and outside by spinning what they trap. This inside/outside confusion is consistent with lifting the gallery on its axis.) By exposing the effect of context on art, or the container of the contained, Duchamp recognized an area of art that hadn't yet been invented. This invention of context initiated a series of gestures which "develop" the idea of a gallery space as a single unit, suitable for manipulation as an esthetic object. From this moment on, there is a seepage of energy from art to its surroundings. With time, the ratio between the literalization of art and the mystification of the gallery is inverse and increasing.

Like every good gesture, Duchamp's *Coal Bags* becomes obvious post-facto. Gestures are a formal invention that cannot be denied, and no one agrees to forget them. The best way of forgetting something is to assume it. Our assumptions drop out of sight. As an invention, however, the gesture's patent is its most distinguishing feature, far more than its formal content, if any. I suppose the formal content of a gesture lies in its aptness, economy and grace. It dispatches the bull of history with a single thrust. It needs that bull. For it shifts perspective suddenly on a body of assumptions and ideas. It is to that degree didactic, as Barbara Rose says, though the word may overplay the intent to teach. If it teaches, it is by irony and epigram, by cunning and shock. A gesture wises you up. It depends for its effect on the context of ideas it changes and joins. It is not art perhaps, but artlike, and thus has a meta-life around and about art. Insofar as it is unsuccessful it remains a frozen curio, if remembered at all. If it is successful, it becomes history and tends to become history itself when the center mimics the one that stimulated it, making it "relevant" again. So a gesture has an odd historical appearance—always fainting away and reviving.

The floor transplant gesture might now be repeatable as a "project." A gesture may be a "young" project. But it is more argumentative and epigrammatic, and it speculates riskily on the future. It calls attention to untested assumptions, overlooked content, flaws in historical logic. Projects—short-term art made for specific sites and occasions—raise the issue of how the impermanent survives, if it does. Documents and photographs challenge the historical imagination by presenting to it an art that is already dead. The historical process is both hampered and facilitated by removing the original, which becomes increasingly fictitious as its afterlives become more concrete. What is preserved and what is allowed to lapse edit the idea of history—the form of communal memory favored at any particular time. Undocumented projects may survive as rumor, and attach themselves to the persona of their originator, who is constrained to develop a convincing myth.

Ultimately projects—it seems to me—are a form of historical re-organization waged from a privileged position. That position is defined by two assumptions: that projects are interesting apart from being "art"—that is, they have a sensemaking, muscular existence in the world—and that they can appear to untrained as well as trained sensibilities. Our architects of personal space, quasi-anthropologists, perceptual revisionists and mythologists manqué have thus made a break in how the audience is construed. We are now aware of a tentative attempt to contact an audience that postmodernism would like to call us, but doesn't quite have the number. This is not the start of a new populism. It is a recognition of a neglected resource, as well as disaffection with the privileged spectator placed by art education in the gallery space. It marks a move away from the modernist conception of the spectator—abused on the basis of presumed incompetence, fundamentally a Romantic position.

Gestures have a becoming quality and some can, retroactively, become projects. There is a project shrewdness implicit in Duchamp's two gallery space. They have survived their naughtiness and become historical material, elucidating the gallery space

horror-movie atic. Both Duchamp's gestures fail to acknowledge the other art around, which becomes wallpaper. Yet the artists' protest (did any of them ever say how they left?) is preempted. For the harassment of their work is disguised as harassment of the spectators, who have to high-step like hens around it. Two kids (Sidney Janis' boys) played noisy games during the opening, from which Duchamp of course absented himself. A connoisseur of expectations of all kinds, Duchamp's interference with the spectator's "set" is part of his malign neutrality. The string, by keeping the spectator from the art, became the one thing he/she remembered. Instead of being an intervention, something between the spectator and the art, it gradually became new art of some kind. What inflicts such harassment is innocuous—5,280 feet of continuous string. (Again the unverifiable quantification gives a conceptual neatness to the epigram.)

From the photographs, the string reconnoiters the space relentlessly, looping and lauterneing across each outcome with demented persistence. It crisscrosses, changes speeds, ricochets back from points of attachment, clusters in knots, wheels new sets of parallaxes with every step, parceling up the space from the inside, with the same intent as the worm. Yet it follows the alignment of the room and its corners, replicating ceiling and walls. No oblique plunge across the central space, which becomes fenced in, casually quoting the shape of the room. Despite the apparent tizzy of randomness, the room and what is in it determine the string's peregrinations in an orderly enough way. The spectator is harassed. Every bit of space is marked. Duchamp develops the modernist monad: the spectator in his gallery box.

Like all gestures, the string either is swallowed or sticks in history's teeth. It stuck, which means that the formal aspect, if any, hasn't been developed. The string's pedigree borrows from Constructivism and is a cliché in surrealist painting. The string literalized the space many of the pictures in the exhibition illustrated. This actualization of a pictorial convention may be an (unconscious?) precedent for the will to actualize of the late 60s and '70s. To do something is to recess it into space and colonize the frame. To do that in a room is to do that in the gallery space. Boiling up the space (or spacing up the box) is part of the central formal theme of Duchamp's art: containment/inside/outside. From this angle his scattered artifacts align into a rough schema. Is the box—a container of ideas—a surrogate head? And the windows, doorways, apertures, the channels of sense? The two lock into fairly convincing metaphor. The ricocheting string (association traits?) wraps up the gallery space, modernism's thinking bowl; the *Boîte en Valise* is memory; the *Large Glass*, the mock mechanical apotheosis of aperture and insertion (the insemination of tradition? the creative act?); the doors (open or shut?) and windows (opaque/transparent?) the unreliable sensor through which information flows both ways (as it does in puns), disolving identity as a fixed location. So that identity lies scattered around in humorously alienated body parts, which contemplate inside/outside, idea/sensation, consciousness/unconsciousness—or rather the slash (glass?) between the two. Lacking identity, the parts, the senses, the ideas decompose the paradoxical

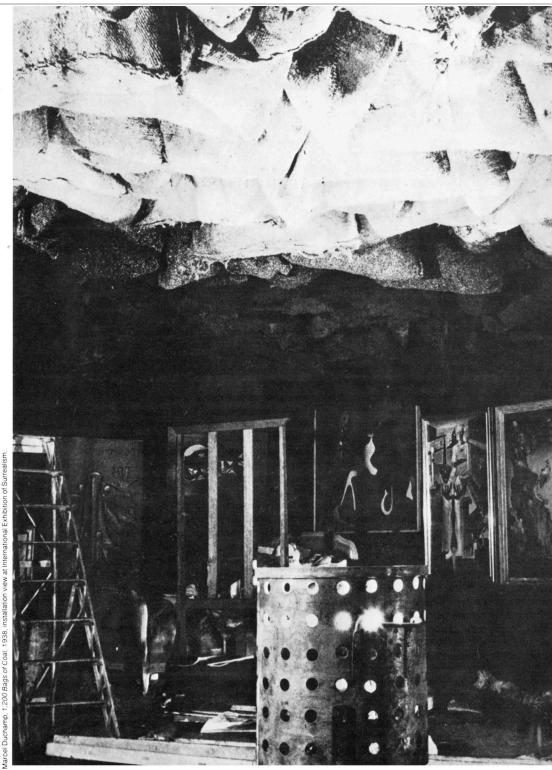
**The formal content of a gesture lies in its aptness, economy and grace. It dispatches the bull of history with a single thrust. Yet it needs that bull.**

and its art. Yet such is Duchampian charisma that they continue to be seen exclusively in the context of his work. They endlessly keep history at bay, one view of modernism modern. (See the literary tradition of *Boîte*.) Both the *Coal Bags* and the *Mile of String*, done four years later (1942) for the First Papers of Surrealism show at 551 Madison Avenue, are addressed ambiguously. Are they to be delivered to the spectator? To history? To art criticism? To other artists? To all, of course, but the address is blurred. If pressed to send the gestures somewhere, I'd send them to other artists.

Why did the other artists stand for it not once but twice? Duchamp was very obliging about hanging people up in their worst instincts, especially when the avant-garde shows, is now small-arms equipment. Duchamp, I feel sure, was seen as someone who could generate attention. In delegating him to provide it, the artists were playing little Fausts to an amiable demon. What is the *Mile of String*? At a level so obvious our sophistication immediately disallows it, an image of dead time, an exhibition paralyzed in premature senescence and turned into a grotesque

nates of modernism, and artists may be classified according to its wit, style and depth. Like some obvious subjects, it has been ignored. It's amazing how many modernist historians mimic the artist's curatorial shadow, directing traffic around the work. This hostility is far from trivial or self-indulgent—though it has been both. For through it is waged an ideological conflict about the nature of life and the nature of art, of the social matrix in which both are set. The reciprocal semiotics of the hostility ritual are easily read. Each party—audience and artist—is not quite free to break certain taboos. The audience can't get mad, i.e. become philistines. Its anger must be sublimated, already a kind of proto-appreciation. By cultivating an audience through hostility, the avant-garde gave it the opportunity to transcend insult (second nature to business people) and exercise revenge (also second nature). The weapon of revenge is selection. Rejection, according to the classic scenario, feeds the artist's masochism, sense of injustice and rage. Enough energy is generated to allow both artist and audience to presume they are fulfilling their social roles. Each remains remarkably faithful to the other's conception of his role—the relationship's most powerful tie. Positive and negative projections volley back and forth in a social charade that wavers between tragedy and farce. One negative exchange basic: the artist tries to sell the collector on his obtuseness and crassness—equaling the artist on his own lack of desire to want something. And the collector encourages the artist to exhibit his irresponsibility. Once the artist is assigned the marginal role of the self-destructive child, he can be alienated from the art he produces. His radical notions are interpreted as the bad manners expected from superior tradesmen. The militarized zone between artist and collector is busy with guerillas, envoys, double-agents, runners and both major parties in a variety of disguises as they mediate between principle and money.

At its most serious, the artist/audience relation can be seen as the testing of the social order by radical propositions; and as the successful absorption of these propositions by the support system—galleries, museums, collectors, even magazines and house critics—evolved to barter success for ideological anesthesia. The main medium of this absorption is style, a stabilizing social construct if ever there was one. Style in art, whatever its miraculous, self-defining nature, is the equivalent of etiquette in society. It is a consistent grace that establishes a sense of place, and is thus essential to the social order. Those who find advanced art without contemporary relevance ignore that it has been a relentless and subtle critic of the social order, always testing, failing through the rituals of success, succeeding through the rituals of failure. This artist/audience dialogue contributes a useful definition of the kind of society we have evolved. Each



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art licensed a premises where it conformed to and sometimes tested the social structure—concert hall, theater, gallery. Classical avant-garde hostility expresses itself through physical discomfort (radical theatricality), not through the social space (the peripatetic constancy of the gallery space). Common to all are transgressions of logic, dissociation of mind, sense and boredom. In these arenas order (the audience) assays what quotas of art it can stand. Such places are, then, metaphors for consciousness and revolution. The spectator is invited to submit himself to a space where the act of approach is turned back on itself. Perhaps a perfect avant-garde act would be to invite an audience and shoot it.

With post-modernism, the artist and audience are more like each other. The classical hostility is mediated, too often, by irony and farce. Both parties show themselves highly vulnerable to context and the resulting ambiguities blur their discourse. The gallery space shows this. In the classic era of polarized artist and audience, the gallery space maintained its status quo by muffling its contradictions in the prescribed socioesthetic categories. Now, however, the artist and audience still carry off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics are turned into a kind of social elitism—the gallery space is exclusive. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods: jewelry or silver. Esthetics are turned into commerce—the gallery space is expensive. What it contains is, without inflation, well-nigh incomprehensible—art is difficult. Exclusive audience, rare objects, and difficult to comprehend—here we have a snobby social, financial and intellectual which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning value, our social habits at large. Never was a space to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes so efficiently codified.

The post-modern gallery is the limbo between studio and living room where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralized ground. There the artist's respect for what he has invented is perfectly superimposed on the bourgeois desire for possession. For a gallery is, in the end, a place to sell things—which is O.K. The arcane social customs surrounding this—the stuff of social comedy—divert attention from the business of assigning material value to that which has none. Here the hostile artist is a commercial sine qua non. For by gassing up his self-image with obsolete romantic fuel, he provides his agent with the means to separate artist and work, and so facilitate its purchase. The artist's irresponsible persona is a bourgeois invention, a necessary fiction to present something from the outside—art as a function—illusions shared by artist, dealer and public. It is hard now to avoid the conclusion that late modernist art is inescapably dominated by the assumptions—mostly unconscious—of the bourgeoisie: Baudelaire's vicious and noble preface *To the Bourgeoisie for the Salon of 1846* is the prophetic text. Through reciprocating paradoxes the idea of free enterprise in art goods and ideas supports social constants as much as it attacks them. Attacking them has indeed become a permissible charade from which both parties emerge relatively satisfied.

Which may be why post-modern art—the art of the '70s—conceals its radical notions not so much in the art as in its attitudes to the inherited "art" structure of which the gallery space is a prime icon. The structure is questioned not by classical resentment but by project and gesture, by modes, dialectics and playfully alternative. There are the hidden energies of the '70s: they possess a low-lying landscape which is traversed by ideas deprived of absolutes and powered by low-grade dialectics. No peaks are forced up by irreconcilable pressures. The landscape levels off partly because the genres involved in mutual recognition and avoidance (post-Minimalism, Conceptualism, color-field, realism, etc.) are non-hierarchical—one is as good as another. The democracy of means contributed by the '60s is now extended to genres, which in turn reflect a demythified social structure (the "professions" now carry fewer rewards and diminished prestige). The '60s still headline most peoples' perception of the '70s. Indeed one of the "properties" of '70s art is the failure of '60s critics to look at it. Measuring the '70s by the '60s is faulty, but unavoidable (an artist's new phase is always judged in relation to the one previous). Nor does the skipped decade help—the '50s revival turned out to be a bummer.

**The history of utopianism in modernism is rather splendid. The magnitude of the individual's presumption is clear to us, but it is also clear to him. So while aligning himself with mystical energies, he also courts the rationalities of design—an echo of the Design of the Creator the artist-creator intends to correct.**

Seventies art is diverse, made up of non-hierarchical genres and highly provisional—indeed unstable—solutions. Major energies no longer have a formal painting and sculpture (young artists have a fairly good nose for historical exhaustion), but into mixed categories (performance, post-Minimal, video, tuning the environment) which present more temporary situations involving an inspection of consciousness. When necessary '70s art crosses media in a gentle, non-political way, it is not because it is better informed, but it is more profile. It tends to dash what is immediately present to the senses and the mind, and so presents itself as intimate and personal. So it often appears narcissistic, unless this is understood as a mode of locating boundaries, where a person "ends" and something else begins. It is not in search of certainties, for it tolerates ambiguity well. Its intimacies have a somewhat anonymous cast since they turn privacy inside out to make it a matter of public discourse—a '70s form of distancing. Despite this personal focus, there is no curiosity about matters of identity. There is great curiosity about how consciousness is constructed. Location is a key word. It telescopes concerns about where (space) and how (per-

ception). What is perceived, one gathers from genres as widely removed as photo-Realism and post-Minimalism, is not as important (though a dwarf called iconography schleps around knocking at every door).

On an underlying scale—physical (out there), psychological (internal), psychological (in), want of a better word, mental. These roughly correspond with available genres. The correlatives are personal space, perceptual revisions, exploration of time conventions and silence.

These verifications locate a body, mind and place that can be occupied, or at least partly tenanted. If '50s man was a Vitruvian survivor, and '60s man composed of alienated parts held together by systems, '70s man is a workable monad—figure and place, a transposition of figure and ground into a quasi-social situation. Seventies art does not reject the consequences of '50s and '60s art, but some basic attitudes have changed. The '60s audience is rejected by '70s art. Often there is an attempt to communicate with an audience that hasn't been interfered with by art, thus disclosing the wedge that "art" has driven between perception and cognition. (The growth of alternative spaces across the country outside the formal museum structure is part of this—a change of audience, location and context that makes it possible for New York artists to do what they can't do in New York.) Seventies art remains troubled by history, yet so much of it is now past that it is not a problem. It is a problem if it questions the system through which it presents itself, yet most of it is passed through that system. Its makers are socially concerned, but politically ineffective. Some of the dilemmas suppressed during the avant-garde era have come home to roost, and '70s art is working through them in its rather elusive way.

With post-modernism, the gallery space is no longer "neutral". The wall becomes a membrane through which esthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange. As this molecular shudder in the white walls becomes perceptible, there is a further inversion of context. The walls assimilate, the art discharges. How much can the art do without? This calibrates the degree of the gallery's mythification. How much of the object's eliminated content can the white wall replace? Context provides a large part of late-modern and post-modern art's content. This is '70s art's main issue, as well as its strength and weakness.

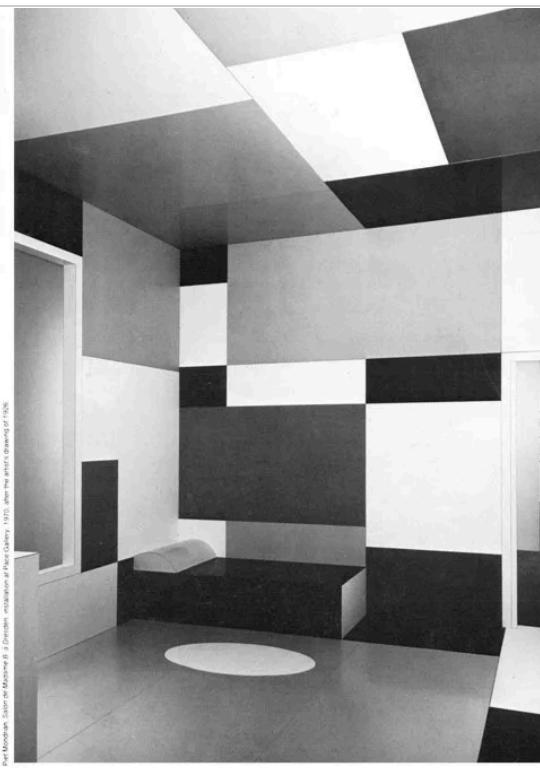
The white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It holds the art's meaning with uncommunicative ideas and assumptions. Artist and audience are, as it were, invisibly spread-eagled in 2-D on a white ground. The development of the pristine, placeless white cube is one of modernism's triumphs—a development commercial, esthetic and technological. In an extraordinary strip-tease, the art within bares itself more and more, until it presents formalist end-products and bits of reality from outside—collaging the gallery space. The walls' content becomes richer and richer (maybe a collector should buy an "empty" gallery space). The mark of provincial art is that it has to include too much—the context can't replace what is left out; there is no system of mutually understood assumptions.

The spotless gallery wall, though a fragile evolution-

house the sense of meaning or content. Along the way numerous epiphanies were purchased, as epiphanies can be, by suppression of content. If the white wall cannot be summarily dismissed, it can be understood. This knowledge changes the white wall, since its content is composed of mental projections based on unexpressed assumptions. The wall is our assumptions. It is imperative for every artist to know that content and what it does to his/her work.

The white cube is usually taken as an emblem of the estrangement of the artist from his society, to which the gallery also provides access. It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to the timeless, a set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location, a reflex to the bald curtain wall, a magic chamber, a concentration of mind, maybe a mistake. It preserved the possibility of art but made it difficult. It is mainly a formalist invention, in that the tonic weightlessness of abstract painting and sculpture left it with a low gravity. Its walls are penetrable only by the most vestigial illusionism. Was the white cube created by a kind of logic similar to that of art? Was its obsession with enclosure an erotic response—encysting art that would not otherwise survive? Was it an economic construct formed by capitalist models of scarcity and demand? Was it a perfect technological shrinkage resulting from specialization? Or a constructivist hangover from the '20s that became a habit, then an ideology? For better or worse it is the single major convention through which art is passed. What keeps it stable is the lack of alternatives. A rich constellation of projects comments on matters of location, not so much suggesting alternatives as enlisting the gallery space as a unit of esthetic discourse. Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. Yet it is the not ignoble symbol for the preservation of what society finds obscure, unimportant and useless. It has incubated radical ideas that would have abolished it. The gallery space is all we've got and most art needs it. Each side of the white cube question has two, four, six sides.

Is the artist who accepts the gallery space conforming with the social order? Is discomfort with the gallery discomfort with art's elevated role, its cooption and vagabond status as a refuge for homesick fantasies and narcissistic formations? Or is it the gallery space that is not perceived as much of a problem. But then, contexts are hard to read from the inside. The artist was not aware he was accepting anything except a relationship with a dealer. And if he saw beyond it, accepting a social context you can do nothing about shows a lot of common sense. Most of us do exactly that. Before large moral and cultural issues, the individual is helpless, but not mute. His weapons are irony, rage, wit, paradox, satire, detachment, scepticism. A familiar kind of mind comes into focus here—restless, self-doubting, inventive about



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diminishing options, conscious of void and close to silence. It is a mind with no fixed abode, empirical, always seeking experience, conscious of itself and thus of history—and ambiguous about both.

This Faustian composite more or less fits numerous modernists from Cézanne to de Kooning. Such figures sometimes convince you that mortality is a disease to which only the most gifted are susceptible. And that the privileged perception resides in the psyche that can maximize the contradictions inherent in existence. Such a figure, whatever its symbolic or existential pedigree, suffers from a romantic infection with the absolute, aching for transcendence, it is detained in process. This figure, which has generated most of modernism's myths, has done great service. But it is a period figure that might well be fully reborn. For now contradiction is our daily vernacular, our attitudes to it a passing blemish (a short-term synthesis), humor and a kind of bemused shug. We tolerate other people's necessary anesthesia as they do ours. Whoever bends on himself/the rays of contradiction becomes not a hero, but the vanishing point in an old picture. In our own interests, we are hard on the art that precedes us. We see not so much the art as emblem for attitudes, contexts, and dynamics as acceptable. We are willing a code to reject this art allowing us to invent our own.

Modernism has also provided us with another archetype: the artist who, unaware of his minority, sees the social structure as alterable through art. A believer, he is concerned not so much with the individual as with the race; is, in fact, a kind of discreetly authoritarian socialist. The rational, reformist urge refers to the age of reason and is nourished on the utopian habit. It also has a strong mystical/ideal component that places heavy responsibilities on the function of art. This tends to reify art and turn it into a device exactly measuring its dissociation from social relevance. So both archetypes alienate art from the social structure with opposite intentions. Both are old Hegelian doubles partners, and they are rarely pure. You can pick your own pairings: Picasso and Tatlin; Soutine and Mondrian; Ernst and Albers; Beckmann and Moholy-Nagy.

But the history of utopianism in modernism is rather splendid. The magnitude of the individual's presumption is clear to us, but it is also clear to him. So while aligning himself with mystical energies, he also counts the rationalities of the age. Echo of the Design of the Order, the utopian creator intends to change the world. At the end of an era it is easy to be funny about such ambitions. We tend to patronize high ideals after their failure. But the idealists/utopians are dismissed too easily by our New York habit of mind—where the myth of the individual as a republic of sensibility is firmly set. European utopians—who can forget Kiesler, moving like a Brownian particle through the New York milieu?—don't do well here. Coming from a different structure, their ideas don't play in a society that reshuffles its classes every second generation. But a kind of European mind could think about social problems and art's transforming powers very well. Now we ask some of the same questions about the missing audience and where it has gone. Most of the people who look at art now are not looking at art; they are looking at the idea

of "art" they carry in their minds. A good piece could be written on the art audience and the educational fallacy. We seem to have ended up with the wrong audience.

What makes artists interesting is the contradictions they choose to edit their attention—the scissors they invent to cut out their self-image. The utopian artist/planner finds that his individuality, which must conform to the social structure he envisions, breaks the rule of such conformity by its individualism. As Albert Boime wrote (*Arts*, Summer '70): "... Mondrian opposes subjectivity on the grounds that individualism leads to disarray and conflict, and interferes with the creation of a 'harmonious material environment' (i.e. a universally objective and collective outlook). At the same time, he is preoccupied with artistic originality because in his view only the uniquely gifted individual can discover the universal order. He therefore urged all artists to detach themselves 'from the majority of the people.' For such artists, intuition must be thoroughly rationalized. Disorder, creativity suppressed in Mondrian's clear structures and edges, is manifested in the whole arbitrary nature of his choices. As Boime says, 'Mondrian achieved equilibrium only after innumerable complex steps, and the multiplication of

realism, represent a sublimated nature, the occupant is similarly encouraged to transcend his own brute nature. In this space, the grossness of the body seems inappropriate; from this room burps and farts are exiled. Through systems of abutment and slides, rectangle and square define a space that places one inside a cubist picture; the occupant is synthesized into a coefficient of order whose motion is in consonance with the rhythms enclosing him or her. Ceiling and floor (which contains an uncharacteristic oval—a rug?) add their vertical pressures. It's a marvellous place to visit.

The vision is not hermetic. Windows allow for discourse with the outside. Random process—what you see through the window—is precisely framed. Is this formally acknowledged in the small bite the lower left corner of the window takes out of a black square (much as Texas bites off a piece of Arkansas)? For all its sober idealist program, the room reminds me that Mondrian liked to dance (though his dancing, which was terrible, was based more on extracting pleasure from the programmed movements while happily coupled than on wild abandon). Mondrian's room problem is the same as the cubist's: culture must ignore it. In the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting, a new plastic reality will be created. Painting and sculpture will not manifest themselves as separate objects, nor as 'mural art' which destroys architecture itself, nor as 'applied art' but being purely constructive will aid the creation of a surrounding not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty."

Duchamp's altered rooms—ironic, funny, fallible—still accepted the gallery as a legitimate place for discourse. Mondrian's spotless room—a shrine to spirit and Madame Blavatsky—attempted to introduce a new order that would make the gallery dispensable. The two counterposed categories suggesting a comic slapstick not unknown to modernism: the scruffy and the clean, the bacterial and the hygienic, the sloppy and the precise. Part of the grand irony presiding over such dialectical separations is their frequent mimicking of each other in disguises too elaborate to remove here.

Mondrian and Malevich shared a mystical faith in art's transforming social power. Both men's ventures were to create a planned society, both were politically innocent. Tatlin, in contrast, was all social involvement, full of great schemes and energy. One figure took Tatlin's radical social program and Malevich's formal idealism and negotiated between them to produce exhibitions that could—and did—alter the public mind. Lissitsky did so through an inspiration that doesn't seem to occur to idealists and radical social planners. He acknowledged the bystander, who became the involved spectator. Lissitsky, our Russian connection, was probably the first exhibition designer/ preparator. In the process of inventing the modern exhibition, he also reconstructed the gallery space—the first serious attempt to affect the context in which modern art and the spectator meet. ■

Brian O'Doherty is an artist who shows under the name of Patrick Ireland.

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