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MA Contemporary Art

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Whiteness, Emptiness, Cleanliness in Contemporary Arts

MA thesis

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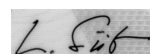


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Summary & introduction

I intended to investigate a theme on three characters 'whiteness', 'cleanliness' and 'emptiness' by a practice-based research approach. I start from identifying the related artworks in art history, further discuss with few key concepts encompassing from oriental aesthetic; The second half of the research aimed to contextualise my series of practices based on the theme within 2019–2021 by reflective analysis. I attempt to develop 'whiteness', 'emptiness', and 'cleanliness' as visual metaphors and language to a certain extent.

The trigger of the research was based on personal interest and experience with the white-cube¹ space. The white-cube acts as a major component of the art institution, operating like a universal container for most of the artworks, no matter how diverse they are in material, form, size, meaning, etc. The white-cube is eventually a part of the artwork that adds the exhibition a special attractiveness.² The art practitioners get used to exhibit artwork in white-cube and create artwork with acceptance to the ideology.

Furthermore, White-cube is set and assumed as a blank space, neutral and purified from context. Artistic meaning generates and is legitimised from exhibition to exhibition. At the same time, the content of the white-cube keeps repeating in the building-demolish cycle within a period.

Inspired by the notion of the white-cube, I started to develop the topics for my practices and study, 'whiteness', 'cleanliness' and 'emptiness'. They are arguably the main characters of white-cube and also can be found either in western contemporary arts or in the root of oriental aesthetics, For example *i po tang hei* and the void technique in Chinese art³, and Zen buddhism in Japanese culture⁴. The practices, a series of artworks, under the three topics is mentioned in according chapters, that are conducted as a major part of the research, and considered as a series of questions to the theme. In order to illustrate the content and correlated reflection, the process of the practices will be documented and analyzed.

¹ "Refers to a certain gallery aesthetic characterised by its square or oblong shape, white walls and a light source usually from the ceiling", Tate Modern, Art-terms <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/w/white-cube>

² Inside the white-cube (B. O'Doherty, 1986) pp.9

³ Murck, A., Fong, W., & Gung, Q. (1991). Chinese Lyrics Aesthetics. In *Words and images: Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting* (pp. 86). essay, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "This speaks to the intense interest in the use of empty space in landscape painting. The blank space in the mind certainly could not have been treated in the then-prevailing realistic manner. The repertoire of Kuo Hsi's structure of space and of Han Cho's interpretation of border zones, together with the maxim to 'use blank space as ink colour' (*i po tang hei*), completes a topography of mental space which decisively shape the evolution of landscape painting."

⁴ Zen and Japanese Culture (D.T. Suzuki, 1959)

The background & the triggers

The reason to begin this research topic is not entirely based on the criticism of art institutional critique. To a certain extent, that is related to personal experience. Before I learned about the history of white-cube space, three related incidents happened in my art study period; those three incidents influenced personal artistic direction. The first story starts with where I was living.

At first sight

I was in high school at the time, and I chose visual arts among many elective subjects. I was not considered to have excellent performance, but more toward art thinking or criticism. My home is far from the city centre. The entire community has no cultural facilities, not even a tiny library, theatre or cinema. Compared with the general public in Hong Kong; I felt that I have a less cultural life than others. Until high school, I had never set foot in an art museum⁵. And among the same generation, everyone thinks an art museum is a noble place, not so welcoming for public engagement, even though it did not cost much for entry.

The visual arts teacher asked us to visit at least one exhibition and write a report for it, a qualification for the elective subjects. For this reason, I spent the time traveling alone to the city centre and visited the only public art museum in Hong Kong at that time. I didn't make any preparations beforehand, didn't know anything about the exhibition; then I saw my first exhibition like this.

At that time, the museum had only one exhibition in progress: an installation art exhibition and the entire show had only two works. At the time, I was not familiar with installation art, and even the general public did not have a favourable impression of it. As I remember, in that hour after I arrived at the exhibition site, no more than five people visited.

⁵ The Hong Kong Museum of Arts - "Hair Dialogue – An Installation Art Exhibition" 2006
<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200607/19/P200607190085.htm>



Figure 1.: Leung Mee Ping, *Memorize of Future*, 2006

I thought there was no way to write the report, but I stayed a little longer alone. At that moment, I tried to force myself to participate in the exhibition to guess the artist's⁶ intentions. In the white-cube space, I feel that I have come into contact with art for the first time, interpret art freely, and think about the importance of space for viewing. Later, *I realized that this kind of spatial experience of emptiness is scarce in a crowded and cramped Hong Kong.*

Unknown requirements

The second incident happened when I was studying product design.

I studied product design in a well-known design school⁷. The subject covered design principles, industrial production processes, and computer-aided design. The instructors spent most of the teaching hours on foam model making, when every course required students to produce foam models in presentation.

Since instructors have the highest requirements for models, students generally spend the longest time making models.

⁶ *Memorize the Future* (2006) Leung Mee Ping

⁷ Hong Kong Polytechnic University - School of Design

At that time, all the foams used by the students were in pink, which indicated the density of it. When some students expressed their wish to replace them with other materials, the instructor would decline; even if the shapes were easier to make with other materials.

The most unclear requirement is that the instructor will ask the students to apply a plaster layer on the surface and polish it after completing the foam model. For this, the students would have to spend an extra half-day to complete, and the process was quite messy and tedious. It is pretty challenging to grasp the thickness of the plaster during the process. Too thick will affect the shape, and too thin will easily cause cracks, and there are always problems with surface finishing.

After several repeated exercises, I decided to question the instructor's decision. When I asked the teacher why I was adding the plaster layer, his answer made me quite profound.

He said that the purpose is *to make the finished form in white to eliminate the noise. It is easier to evaluate the structure. And after adding plaster, the visual weight is changed, and every student's finished models look unified.*

The temporary graduation show venue

I was in my second year of university and was helping to prepare for the first graduation exhibition of the faculty⁸.

Due to inexperience, the faculty members and graduates worried that the exhibition would not run well. Significantly, the faculty lacked exhibition space within the campus for over 80 graduates. Everyone is worried about the venues; Some of the graduates even consider withdrawing from the improper exhibition.

Later, everyone came up with a way to refit all classrooms on campus, including installing spotlights for exhibitions and erecting temporary gallery walls, turning the campus into a temporary white-cube.

This arrangement was unprecedented in Hong Kong at the time, and many graduates doubted or even rejected this arrangement.

Of course, I also doubted it, especially the 'temporary construction' that feels a bit low standard. At that time, the essential requirement of an exhibition site in my mind was somewhere similar to a gallery, a formal white-cube.

⁸ Hong Kong Baptist University, Academy of Visual Arts



Figure 2. Hong Kong Baptist University Graduation show venue - AVA campus

Another senior and I were assigned to make and install all more than 80 wooden exhibition walls, including caulking, sanding and applying white paint.

The former classroom gradually transformed into a slightly unfamiliar exhibition venue after a week of effort. After cleaning, the exhibition space construction was completed. And the graduation show was successfully launched, with a lot of positive feedback on the site.

This process made me understand that *as long as there is suitable lighting, white walls and a certain degree of cleanliness, there can be an exhibition venue.*

Revelation from the three incidents

The three seemingly independent incidents are all connected with my thoughts on the theme, and I can't ignore the implication from the experiences; that I have come-up with an idea that querying the operation of the white-cube makes its beauty being covered.

The text analysis and practice part of this thesis is based on the assumption that whiteness, emptiness, and emptiness hidden inside the white-cube or related art institution, and I hope to reflect the theme on this through a series of practices and expansion.

Inspiration of the white-cube space

The white-cube space has become popular as the exhibition format compliant with modern art development in the 20th century. It can even be regarded as dominant in the museum world⁹. The format enables an extra attraction for the exhibit objects inside and even sees itself as an aesthetic object, just like curator, Simon Sheikh once described it (the white-cube space) is an aesthetic object in and of itself.¹⁰ to summarise what Brian O'Doherty's book 'Inside the white-cube'¹¹. Subsequently, the white-cube space spread worldwide and was imported to my birthplace in the 1960s.

Even though the exhibition hall has different architectural appearances, the interior spaces are generally pure white walls and cleaned floor, conceived as a place free from context; regarded as excluded from the social context and geographical location.

The artist David Batchelor once described how a similar white space would feel. 'The kind of ostentatious emptiness that only the very wealthy and the utterly sophisticated can afford. It was a strategic emptiness, but it was also accusatory'¹². The writer has not described 'white-cube' in the fiction, but how he isolated the white space as an aesthetic object from exhibited artworks has impressed me. He also mentioned a similar idea that Tony Barnett¹³ valued 'Inside this house was a whole world, a very particular kind of world, a very clean, clear and orderly universe.'¹⁴. Undoubtedly, the words 'clean' and 'orderly' drew the most attention.

The white-cube space is not just an architectural form; it also operates with a bunch of protocols, which is seen as a 'general understanding' within the global art circle even if there is no written tenet between the institution and artist. For instance, the white-cube has to resume in white, plain and empty after each exhibition. No matter how successful or controversial it is, the following exhibition will be conceived as nothing related to the past and future shows. Each show cut off from time conceptually and repeated like a timeless circle from one another exhibition.

⁹ To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic white-cube (W.Birkett 2012) p.20 'Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Museum of Modern Art in New York that most significantly and lastingly changed the museum landscape with the development of the modernist concept of the 'white-cube' display that rose to prominence in the 1930s and continues to dominate the museum world today. '

¹⁰ Positively white-cube Revisited (Simon Sheikh 2009).

¹¹ Inside the white-cube (B.O'Doherty 1986).

¹² Chromophobia (D.Batchelor, 2000) pp.10.

¹³The Exhibitionary Complex(Tony Barnett) pp. 74 focus on the power and order of things
'...Exhibitions thus located their preferred audiences at the very pinnacle of the exhibitionary order of things they constructed. '

¹⁴ Chromophobia (D.Batchelor, 2000) pp.10.

As a result, the artist is too hard to create without considering within the framework. Like Hal Foster questioned the white-cube and its popularity in 'After the white-cube'¹⁵, he thinks that the current museum is too large, which complicates displaying typical art objects. He also agrees artists will conceive works for the exhibition to fit in the space.

Undoubtedly, the discussion about the white-cube space is much more than what has been mentioned above and inevitably generalised. The intention for me to illustrate the critical inspiration is for pointing out the inquiries upon the practices in this research. Most of the discussion about white-cube space is mainly related to its power relationship and spectatorship; less consider white-cube space and its operations as aesthetic objects. I rarely hear about the aesthetics of white-cube space, even though it has been dominant in art history for over 60 years.

I am curious why people are so obsessed with white-cube, spending a lot of resources on building and maintaining it, and at the same time, people refuse to accept them as aesthetic objects solely or objects to interpret.

This tension is what I want to explore.

- How should we understand the relationship between white-cube space and the artworks displayed inside?
- Should we assume the white-cube as a pure format?
- Does the white-cube have its beauty?
- Should we say the white-cube is the main body of modern art, and the artwork supports the whole idea?

I have no intention to treat the above questions as research topics, but these questions remain tested in my practice, and then the practice leads to more questions. For example, I started to explore the theme by setting up mobile, outdoor white-cube spaces that somewhat interfere with the objects in the public, to highlight that particular ordinary objects into art interpretation. I wonder what will happen if we start framing the material world outside the museum. What if the artist (me) does not create an art object, instead builds white-cube for art purpose?

¹⁵ After the white-cube (H. Foster 2015) 'Bigness has also led to bad by-products like immense atria, which, however important they are to museums as event spaces, are deadly as art galleries. '

Examples from art history

During the practising process, the COVID 19 outbreak. The world has fundamentally changed; not surprisingly, governments suspended many physical art activities, including access to white-cube. Therefore I started to conceive and execute an illustration project with the white-cube items during the dates; I imagined myself being locked inside an empty white-cube. I tried to present the white-cube into isolated objects, including the pedestal, the partition wall, the caption label, and the gallery bench, where they used to be seen as one entity. I found that it was a good attempt that evaluates the concept down to the white-cube items, which helps me to come up with the theme topic of this research in the three characters.

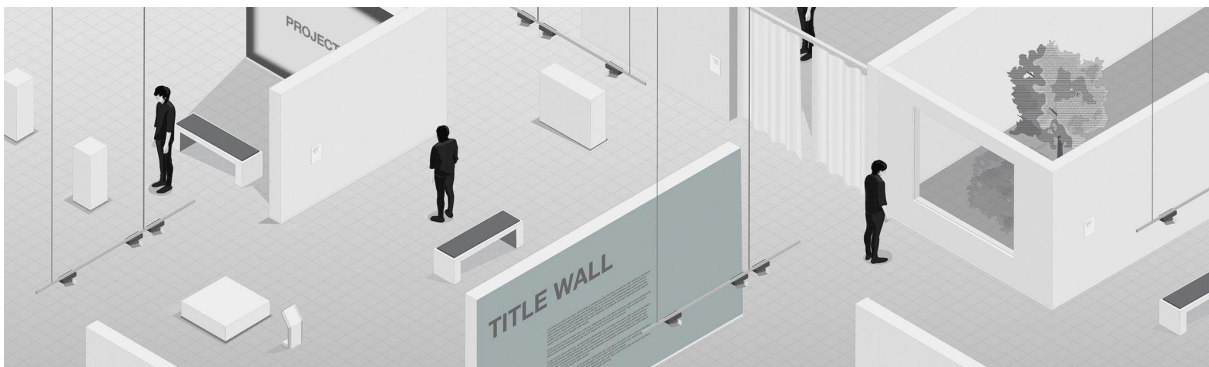


Figure 3. Reds Cheung, *Portrait (Inside White-Cube Space)*, 2020

To build up the theme, I tend to gain inspiration from artist practices. They include primarily western art history and some from oriental art. In this chapter, I prefer to illustrate the inspirational artwork in my practising process, combined with possible inference on two key oriental art concepts considered as a way to re-examine white-cube space.

I declare there is no such ambition to compare western and eastern art and culture. The purpose of this chapter is more toward a self-investigation and exploring the multiple dimensions inherent in my practices, attempting to categorise the examples into three characters, whiteness, emptiness, cleanliness. As an artist who grew up in an international city, which always emphasises the identity upon 'east meets west'.

Example from Western art history

It is not difficult to find many works in art history related to the white-cube and its display form. I can even find a museum called 'No show museum'¹⁶ where there is no physical location, but showing like an archive collected many significant artworks related to nothingness online and named it a museum.

¹⁶ NO SHOW MUSEUM : <https://www.noshowmuseum.com/>

'The NO SHOW MUSEUM is the world's first museum dedicated to 'nothing' and its various manifestations throughout the history of art. '

The curator tried to present the artworks in a different 'exhibition room' that was actually spaceless except for online storage. Visitor can find the famous empty room projects like Yves Klein's *The Void* (1958), Michael Archer's *Untitled intervention* (1974), Superflex's *More than a show* (2005) and Urs Fischer's *You* (2007) and numerous more examples in the museum, 'located' next to each other. In 2010, Pompidou Centre in Paris presented the exhibition *Voids, A Retrospective*(2010), where nine historic 'empty' art exhibitions have been rebuilt in the gallery, treated as the ordinary collection of art. Two years after the exhibition, Ralph Rugoff curated another similar exhibition titled *Invisible: Art about the Unseen, 1957–2012* (2012) in London Southbank Centre.



Figure 4. Michael Asher, *Untitled*, 1974

These examples showed a solid statement to contemporary art that white-cube space can be a material form, art material. They can be interpreted in the art context, collected by art institutions even though they have no identical differences to an empty white-cube space or the other 'empty' room works. In other words, the audience assumed to conceive the artwork only by its concept.

The previous examples reminded me of Arthur Danto commented on Andy Warhol's *Brillo box* (1964) in his influential book *After the end of art*¹⁷(1995). He stated why the *Brillo box* signified the end of art because the visitors could not distinguish everyday objects and artworks with the bare eyes. Under

¹⁷ After the end of art (A.Danto 1995) p.13 '... 'mere real things.' To use my favorite example, nothing needs to mark the difference, outwardly, between Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the Brillo boxes in the supermarket. And conceptual art demonstrated that there need not even be a palpable visual object for something to be a work of visual art. That meant that you could no longer teach the meaning of art by example. It meant that as far as appearances were concerned, anything could be a work of art, and it meant that if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from sense experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy. '

Danto's idea, the 'empty rooms' paradigm might go even further over 'the end of art' because no objects have shown at all. In comparison, the objects (the room) were treated as empty or invisible in many cases. On the contrary, treating white-cube space as a 'mathematical zero' has a more significant impact on the definition of art because it has never been. (how about eastern, they have a way to appreciate emptiness, whiteness but not treat it as art.)

I hope to re-examine the direction of the white-cube as an object, physical entity and nuance like minimalist and include the regular operation of the white-cube. All of the above: inspired me to look at the white-cube from the perspective of artistic creation and consider it into three characteristics. I am not sure whether the method helps understand the history and political operation of the white-cube. Still, it inspires me to think about artistic practices from these characteristics.

Pinpoint related ideas from oriental art history

*I po tang hei*¹⁸ *paying attention to the dark area (estimate white from black)*



¹⁸ Murck, A., Fong, W., & Gung, Q. (1991). Chinese Lyrics Aesthetics. In *Words and images: Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting* (pp. 86). essay, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "This speaks to the intense interest in the use of empty space in landscape painting. The blank space in the mind certainly could not have been treated in the then-prevailing realistic manner. The repertoire of Kuo Hsi's structure of space and of Han Cho's interpretation of border zones, together with the maxim to 'use blank space as ink colour' (i po tang hei), completes a topography of mental space which decisively shape the evolution of landscape painting."

Figure 5. Fan Kuan, *Travellers among mountains and streams*¹⁹, (11th century CE)

Before discussing *i po tang hei*, I must explain the concept is widely applied to black and white Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy.

The saying 'Calligraphy and painting have the same source' (Shu Wua Tung Yung)²⁰, meaning they have similar creation and appreciation techniques. For example, the tools used to create Chinese paintings and Chinese calligraphy are the same: Shuen paper and ink.

Adding different proportions of water to the ink will result in a dark colour that is highly variable, and the brush strokes that are made on the Shuen paper will also change due to the ink density.

Most of the time, Chinese calligraphy and painting will only add ink (black) instead of white paint.

The artists present white or light-toned objects by leaving white or empty space, and estimate the different depths of black in the entire painting.

i po tang hei is proposed by Chinese calligraphy master Deng Shiru, which means that it calculates white (paper) proportion regarding black (ink) in painting, deliberately managing the balance of the blank area.

This reveals the interrelations between Emptiness and Substantiality.

Similar concepts are widely used and can be extended to calligraphy, painting, and poetry.

Therefore, there is a void technique, which means vacating some space without filling in any ink or colour. The purpose is to establish the airflow(chi)²¹ in the landscape painting and the whole composition, to achieve the highest standard of Chinese painting spirit 'vitality'. For example, clouds and fog, the typical white items in Chinese landscape painting, are presented through the void technique.

¹⁹ Travellers among mountains and streams by Fan Kuan (11th century CE). Ink and pigment on paper-mounted silk. National Palace Museum of Taipei

²⁰ Words and Images, Chinese poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting. A.MURCK, WEN C. FONG; 1991 'Calligraphy and painting have the same source' (Shu Wua Tung Yung) The brush, the instrument of the calligrapher, is also used by the painter, and the results produced by the use of dots and strokes are similar.

²¹ *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters* Hsieh Ho (500-535) Concluded six principles of Chinese painting, including "spirit Resonance" & "vitality" as the highest standard in Chinese painting

Chinese painters will regard this painting technique of preserving whiteness as a creative interest.

Zen buddhism

The well known experimental artist John Cage has strong connection to Zen buddhism, he has mentioned²²once about his conversation with Japanese zen master D.T. Suzuki :

“Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen, things become confused. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. After telling this, Dr. Suzuki was asked, “What is the difference between before and after?” He said, “No difference, only the feet are a little bit off the ground.”

What Suzuki told Cage basically covered the principle of Zen. While zen buddhist not encourage verbal explanation of zen, instead the zen master prefers to present it by ambiguous wording, to avoid over interpretation for the student²³. In fact, the zen buddhist monk has to practise several years, even decades to perceive a standard of knowledge of zen. Most of the practices are repetitive, direct action, including cleaning, craft making and writing poems and many other practical acts inductive to self-reflection.

What I would like to mention zen Buddhism in this thesis is because the philosophy emphasizes on the absolute status of the mind , a mind with nothing more than empty. And we could find a lot of artists from oriental culture are influenced by Zen buddhism. Their work of art is usually not complicated or even quite minimal by their outlook. Once might misinterpret the artist as practicing something similar to minimalism in western art history.

I just wonder what will Zen buddhist think about the white-cube, while they are suggesting similar focus. But I am sure the master will not answer my question, intend, encourage me to find the answer by my own from a practical-mindedness approach, not counting on reading or reciting the old master's speech.

“In Suzuki’s teachings, and in all of Buddhism, “silence” and “emptiness” are shorthand terms for the inconceivable ground luminosity—the Absolute “nothing”—out of which all the

²² Where the heart beats: John Cage, Zen buddhism and the inner life of the artist (K.Larson 2012) pp.14

²³ Zen and Japanese culture (D.T.Suzuki 1959) pp5 “Zen is not necessarily against words, but it is well aware of the fact that they are always liable to detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions.”

“somethings” of the world arise in their multitudinous splendor.”²⁴

From my point of view, among many artworks, only the white-cube can be naturally combined, whether it is from the East or the West. All over the world, no matter what type of art has been exhibited under the white-cube.

Whiteness

Terminology

Before going into the discussion of the whiteness in this chapter, I would like to define the word by the following sentence, that helps clarifying the interpretation on each subject and how it is different from others like emptiness and cleanliness in the research;

Whiteness : White, the color is the integral part of the artworks and represents some metaphorical meaning/message in the art.

It is not hard to find out that white has been dominantly used in exhibition spaces. In many cases, the institution is highly rigid to apply specific white colour to every corner to unify the outlook. In some sense, we could say the art institution showed authority by the white paint.

Except for the white-cube, there are many cases in our commodity culture that are in white. I prefer to regard the white-cube as one of the many objects in white. Examine similarities and differences with the white-cube and those daily objects produced in white in their original conditions, such as A4 paper, eraser, canvas, Chinese painting paper, billboard, and website.

To use the famous examples, Robert Rauschenberg's work *White Painting* (1951), need not explain how controversial it is; the white painting seems to have no visual difference from stretched canvas that everyone can find from the art supply store. The audience might question where the artist's involvement was and even refuse to accept this is art. The perception of white canvas equal to empty canvas is dominantly over to take it as an artistic tactic that the artist intended to challenge. In a similar case, supremacist painter Kazimir Malevich's *White on white* (1918), the audience could barely appreciate the subtle variations of the white with artistic brush strokes. The painting is a pure abstraction without any trace from reality.

²⁴ Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists (K.Larson 2012) pp.17

Just imagine what if these two artworks were in other colours? Are they still capable of projecting the 'nothingness' effect? And I query that the artist did not create the effect, rather adopted from historical context instead.

Maybe we could find some hints from Edmund de Waal's exhibition, *White*-exhibition project²⁵(2015). The ceramics artist has selected various objects from different parts of history to explore the colour white. Including Ai Weiwei's *Marble Lantern* (2014), Darren Almond's photographic work, Kazimir Malevich's teapot (1920) and some other objects chosen by the curator to study the topic from the object color to the idea of white in a classic British library. Waal mentioned in the exhibition interview²⁶ that he intends to travel all the way around the world to think what are the most special white objects in the world. Insist to bring those special objects together unexpectedly.



Figure 6. Edmund de Waal, *White - exhibition project*, 2015

²⁵ *White* (exhibition project) curated by Edmund de Waal for the Library and Print Room of the Royal Academy. The exhibited objects include a sculpture by Cy Twombly, a painting by Giorgio Morandi, an edition of Laurence Sterne's 1759 novel *Tristram Shandy*, Kazimir Malevich's revolutionary teapot and John Cage's 4'33" score etc. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/edmund-de-waal-video-highlights>

²⁶ Edmund de Waal: video highlight of 'white' <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/edmund-de-waal-video-highlights>

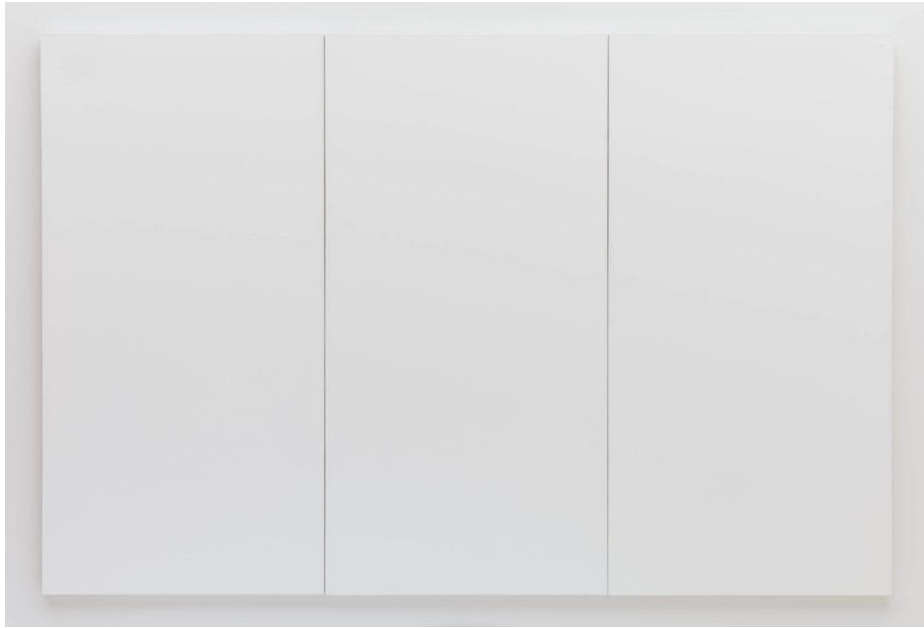


Figure 7. Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951

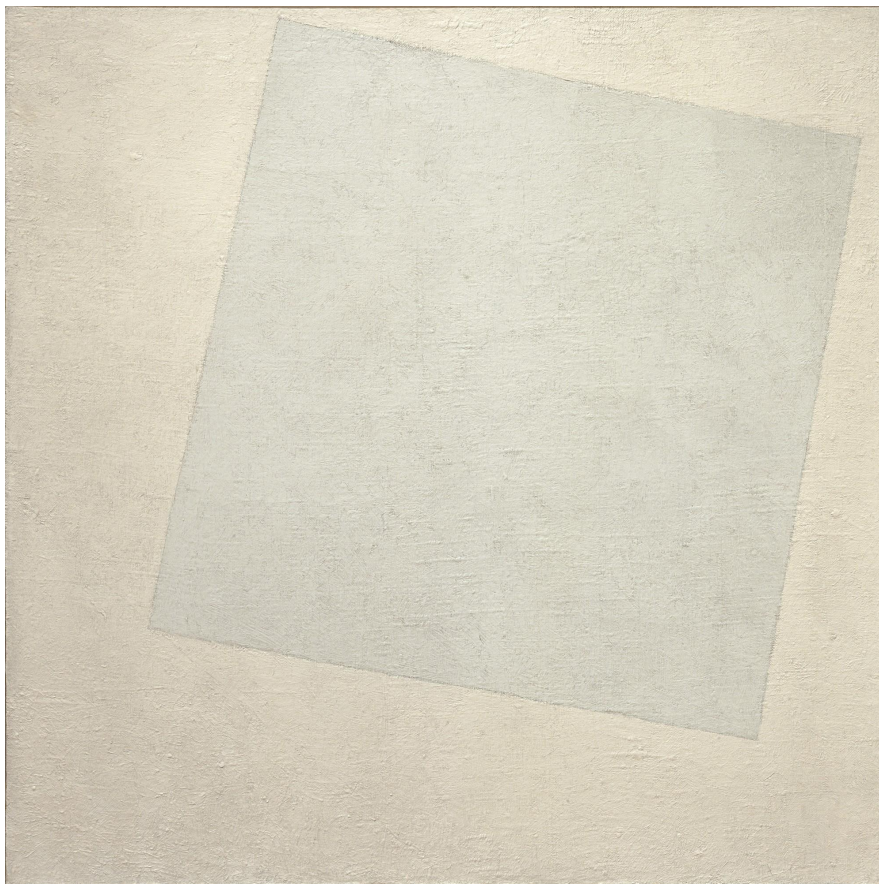


Figure 8. Kazimir Malevich - *White on white*, 1918

Exhibiting A4 white papers

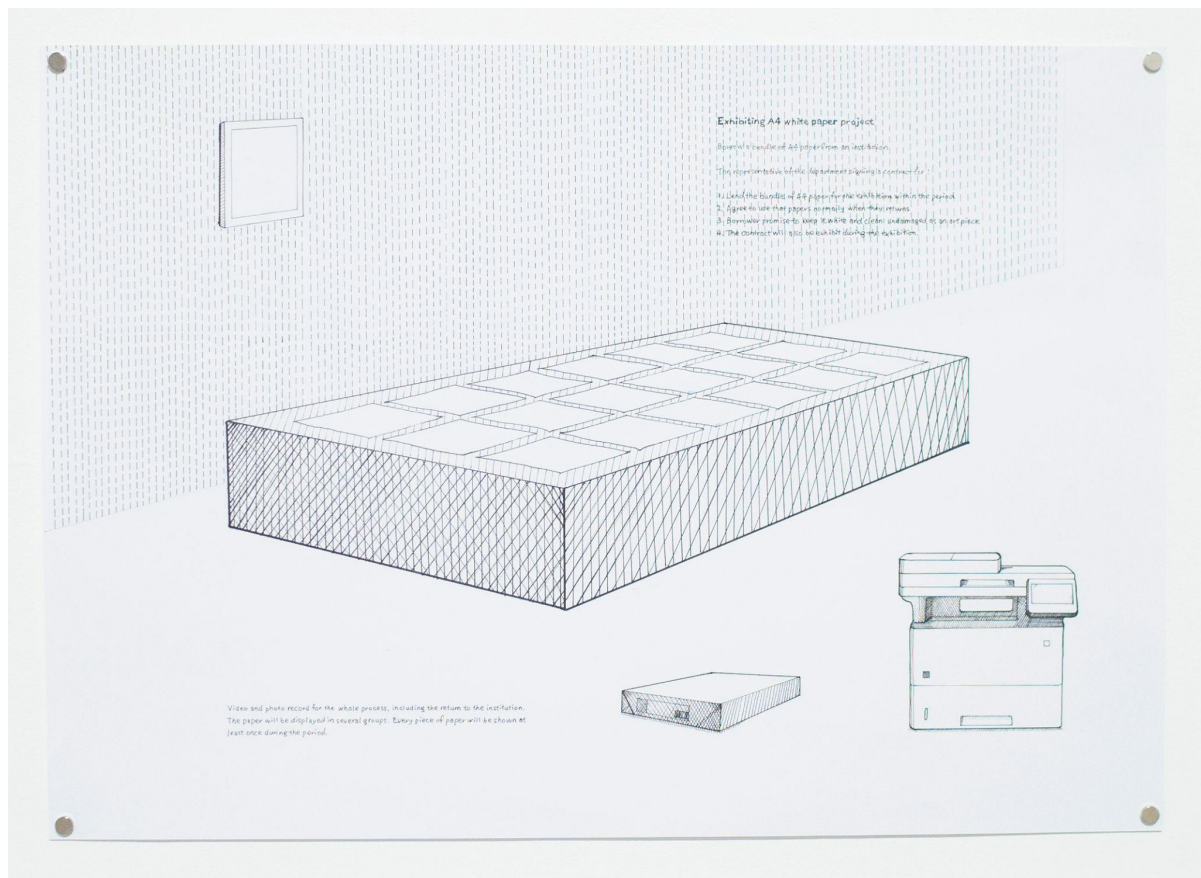


Figure 9. Reds Cheung, *Exhibiting A4 Paper*, 2020

Introduction:

This is a conceptual art proposal.

It is a proposal to borrow a complete stack of office A4 paper (with packaging) from an art institution. The exhibition will display each piece of A4 white paper like a work of art. A contract between the institution and me will also show the origin of the A4 papers. After the exhibition, the works(A4 paper) will be reorganized and re-packaged and sent back to the original office.

Keywords:

Lending objects with aesthetic value from an art institution;

In the name of art, the beauty of A4 white paper is affirmed in the white-cube;

The white paper will inevitably be stained with marks, dust, human touches, or slight creases during the process;

The object returns to the art institution.

Reflection:

Even if the paper will not be directly related to white in the end, it is expected to be related to white. Assume the audience will doubt whether the blank paper is 'white' or as white as the original 'white'.

Global white B&B

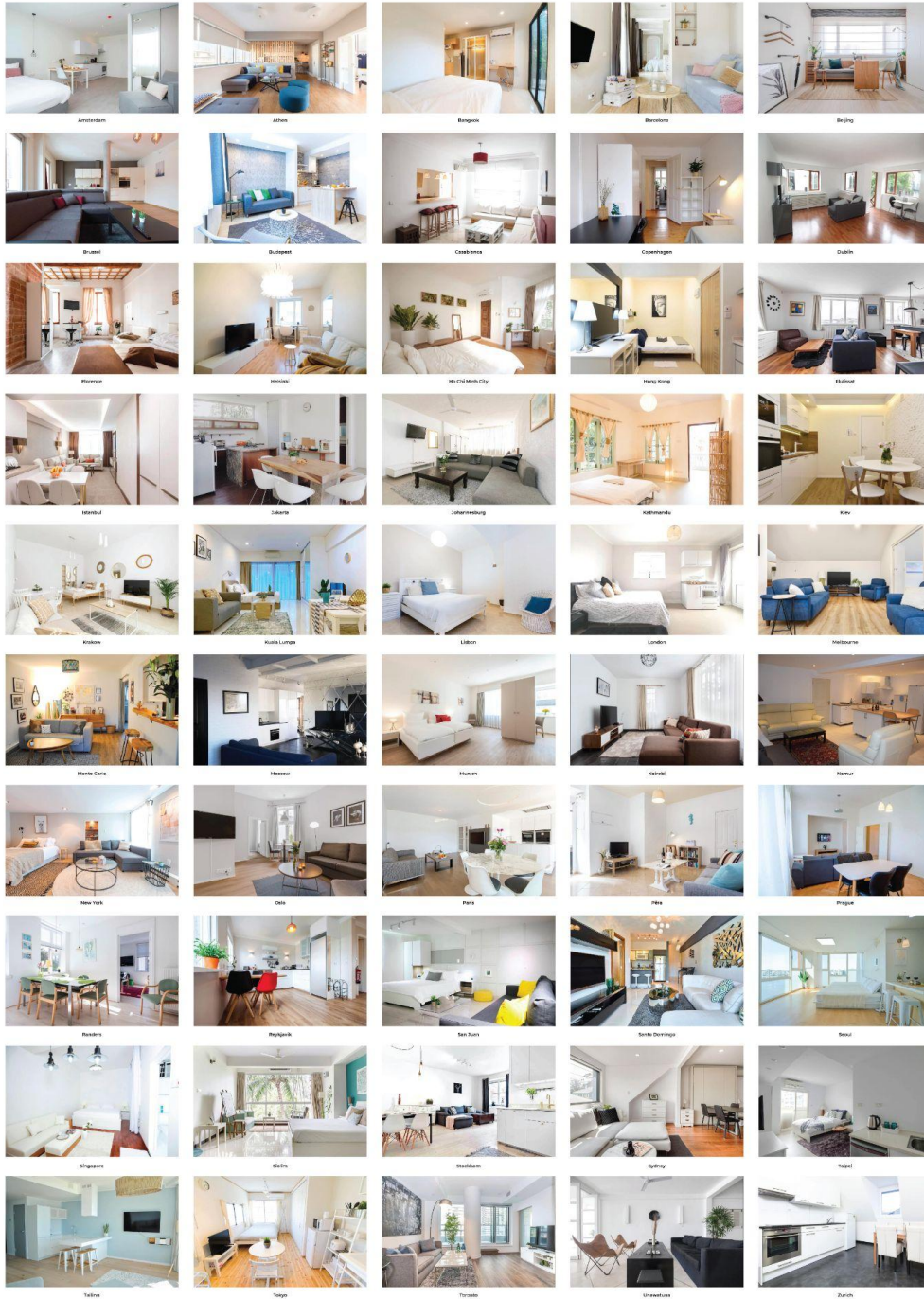


Figure 10. Reds Cheung, *Globe white B&B*, 2020

Introduction:

In the global pandemic in 2020, I was trapped at home like many people worldwide. I miss the days of travelling. Occasionally, I came up with the idea of checking the Airbnb website, wondering if the accommodation price was reduced. By the way, I would like to experience travel aseptically in the online world.

At that time, I lived in a studio flat without much decoration, only white walls, an open kitchen, and Scandinavian-style minimalist furniture. I deliberately checked the travel apartment similar to this studio flat on the website. I chose a specific appointment date and found similar houses in various cities around the world.

As a result, whether in Europe, Asia, or Africa, I can easily find similar white and simple houses in different cities. So I comforted myself that even if I stayed where I was, it was almost the same as living elsewhere. I found that viruses are widespread globally, and this kind of interior design style is very similar to the situation in the white-cube a few decades ago.

Keywords:

Using the collection as a creative means

Every flat was able to book, even though there was no way to accommodate. That is a representative irony of the phenomenon.

International obsession for white studio flats.

Reflection:

This work is significantly different from other practice in this thesis, but it contains a sense of humour. It also reflected more cultural aspects. It is a new perspective compared to my past works. I also notice the correlation between the work and the pandemic. When it is impossible to leave a small house, my practices tend to be more conceptual, and online materials became an alternative. I began to find openness or flexibility in different materials application and interpretation.

School library blank pages



Figure 11. Reds Cheung, *School library blank pages*, 2019

Introduction:

School library blank pages is my first artwork after studying in Estonia.

I liked staying in the library since I was young. After I came to Estonia, I still spent a lot of time inside the student library (before the epidemic). It is pretty exquisite and I was gaining a lot when I walked around in the library.

Not surprisingly, I found there are many books written in Estonian. Some are new, and some are extraordinarily old. Although I can't understand it, I still hope to go through all the pages and feel like I can read them. In the end, I selected ten Estonian books in the library and photographed the first and last pages of them. They were all pure white blank pages but showed different degrees of yellowish and other time traces. I seem to be able to read a small part of them.

Keywords:

We can see history through white;

Whiteness remains in the yellowed object;

The analogy between reading text and reading objects

Reflection:

We have learned that white is semantically primitive, precious, and new by knowing the object appears not white is relatively old or damaged. When I conceived the subject matter white, I found it can also be presented the concept of white by showing non-white. I gradually determined that I like to create works that do not involve many skills but high-sensibilities. I also started to have the confidence to deal with a minimal concept.

Emptiness

Terminology

The artwork involves usage of empty space or the artist's action to empty something or somewhere normally 'filled' by the concept of art.

In the history of art, many works use empty venues as context. For example, as we mentioned before, Yves Klein's *Void*, or the No Show Museum collection, show nothingness as creative content. In terms of the concept of emptiness, I hope to broaden this concept from the inductive use of empty physical space to understanding 'emptiness' as an action or idea, which is more like the oriental aesthetics mentioned by D.T. Suzuki.

In oriental aesthetics, emptiness can also mean hollowing something that can apply to a physical space, an object, or soul. From this perspective, the well-known conceptual work, John Cage's *4'33"*, is an example of this classification. The *4'33"* literally hollowed every note from the score intended to fill with ambient sound during the performance or even silent. It can say that the comprehension of this score from a musical point of view is quite open, waiting for each performance, unexpected and unpredictable accidents.

I also found that other works in art history contain meaning from 'empty' objects in addition to the empty white museum and the conceptual works. For example, Duchamp's *50 cc of Paris Air* is an empty bottle. Fill in the meaning. This work connects a particular area with the empty object. The artist's actual creation is precisely this abstract connection. From now on, in the meaning of this work, this empty bottle is inseparable from Paris. In other words, if the bottle is not empty, we can regard it as deconstructed or contaminated.

When we discuss Martin Creed's work, there is another way to understand emptiness. In 2001, the Turner Prize won by Martin Creed highlights what a blank white-cube is. The artist designed a light source switch. The lights will automatically turn off every 5 seconds, and after a while, they will light up again, repeating.

We can think of it as a work that constantly fills in light and takes away light. But it is clear that no matter whether the gallery is bright or not, we can regard it as an empty room. The audience's perception has disturbed because of the work, and started to think of which situation is more close to empty comparably. And the lighting in this work is not just for lumination but also represents the art

authority, accurate processing, deep into the audience's habit of perceiving the subject, the white-cube. When discussing emptiness, one must pay attention to the opposite. What is filled in or waiting to be filled?

Example from art history

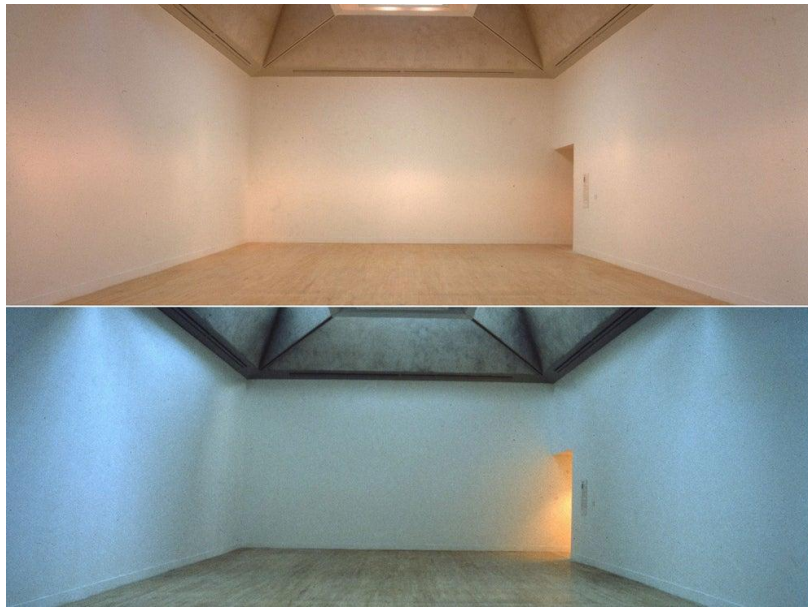


Figure 12. Martin Creed, *The Lights going on and off*, 2000

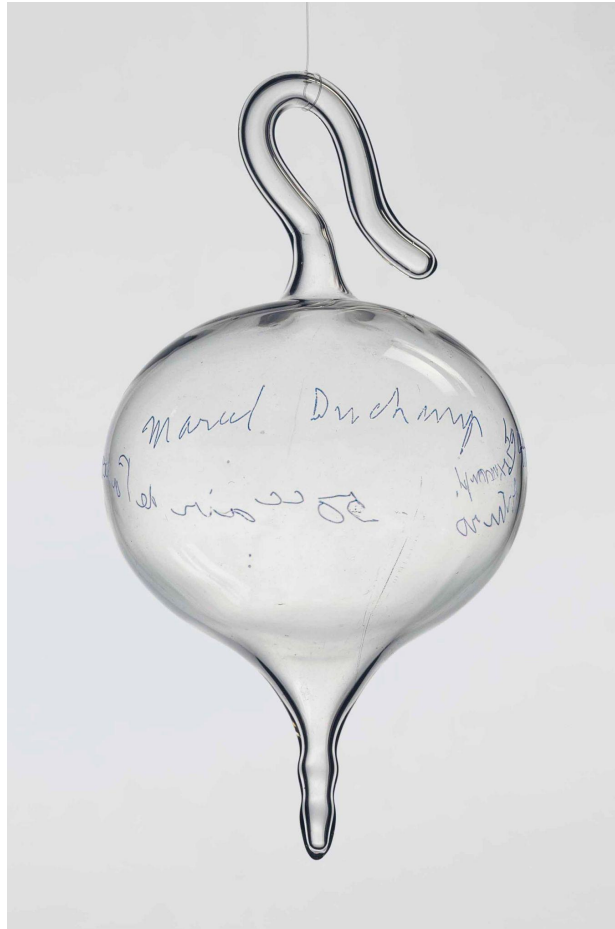


Figure 13. Marcel Duchamp, *50cc Paris Air*, 1919

4'33"

for any instrument or combination of instruments

John Cage

I

The score for Section I consists of five staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a tempo marking of 60 ♩ = \longleftrightarrow and a 4/4 time signature. The second staff is a treble clef with a measure rest of 3 measures and a .16 measure rest at the end. The third staff is a treble clef with a measure rest of 5 measures. The fourth staff is a treble clef with a measure rest of 7 measures and a .32 measure rest at the end. The fifth staff is a treble clef with a measure rest of 9 measures and a 33" measure rest at the end.

II

The score for Section II consists of two staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a tempo marking of 60 ♩ = \longleftrightarrow and a 4/4 time signature. The second staff is a treble clef with a measure rest of 3 measures and a .16 measure rest at the end.

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Figure 14. John Cage, 4'33", 1952

1/2 white-cube



Figure 15. Reds Cheung, *1/2 white-cube*, 2020

Introduction:

As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, I have a special feeling about these temporary white walls, just like the graduation exhibition in my previous studied academy. To be more precise, I feel delighted about the persistent behaviour of people spending a lot of resources to erect temporary white walls to exhibit artwork.

Last year, I participated in an art fair, and I had the opportunity to document these temporary white walls. Before I went there, I planned to photograph the border of the white wall. According to my previous experience at an art fair, many workers would gather there. A group of people who consider themselves incapable of understanding art is responsible for building up the temporary structure. Temporary white walls clearly distinguish where the high-value art belongs and which place is not for art.

To a certain extent, this is a ritualization of the exhibition. I hope to shoot on the boundary from these white walls, the concrete and physical edges.

Keywords:

Temporary white-cube;

Boundary;

Outside;

Inside

Reflection:

Even if the building is not a permanent white pavilion, people can handle the ritual by building temporary white walls. After the exhibition, the white wall is subject to removal, and that space will return like the beginning. This kind of manipulation of the art venue is crucial to art, audiences, participated artists, and the exhibitions' curator. This feeling of needing to fill in the blanks is vital, and at the same time, this kind of emptying operation is also essential.

Emptiness includes a cycle state, and the void is the state between being filled up. The alternation between the exhibitions' period must go through the restoration process so that the two shows can take place in the same physical space. Still, it is regarded as entirely unrelated conceptually.

Bouncing ball



Figure 16. Reds Cheung, *Bouncing ball* (Still image from artist's animation clip), 2020

Introduction:

This is an exciting project that took place in Vitriin-gallery²⁷. Four artists and curators and I were invited to exhibit at this place. Vitriin-gallery is a small display box outside the EKKM museum²⁸.

However, conceptually, we can still understand it as a gallery entity. To a certain extent, the restrictions are relatively small. I have conceived three works in this exhibition plan, and the bouncing ball is one of them. I want to respond to the exhibition with this work, such as the exhibition period.

Generally speaking, I pay attention to whether the exhibition can have more possibilities. For example, can we keep changing the content of the same show? And can the exhibition content be assembled into continuous work, involving time elements? So I conceived to exhibit 24 consecutive drawings during the one-day exhibition and only displayed each image for about 15 minutes.

²⁷ Vitriin-gallery - The gallery is located on the facade wall of the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM), Põhja pst. 35.

²⁸ EKKM, Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia. Non-profit initiative at Põhja pst. 35, Tallinn

During the exhibition, I recorded each drawing one by one. At the same time, the changing daylight in the gallery has also been recorded. These twenty-four photos are combined to form a simple continuous animation, a bouncing ball.

Keywords:

Animation;

Changing the content in the exhibition;

Waiting as the artistic content

Reflection:

It is easy for us to think that the exhibition is a static situation. Once the show is started, all content should remain unchanged until the exhibition period is completed. Those exhibition organizers also avoid exposing the exhibition's process.

I like the way I have considered waiting as the content of the work.

Eventhrough, there were not many viewers visiting during that time, but I enjoy the exhibition moment even if there are only me and the work. It helps me reconsider whether work done is the only thing we could do for creation. Can this period of waiting be regarded as artistic content?

White billboard

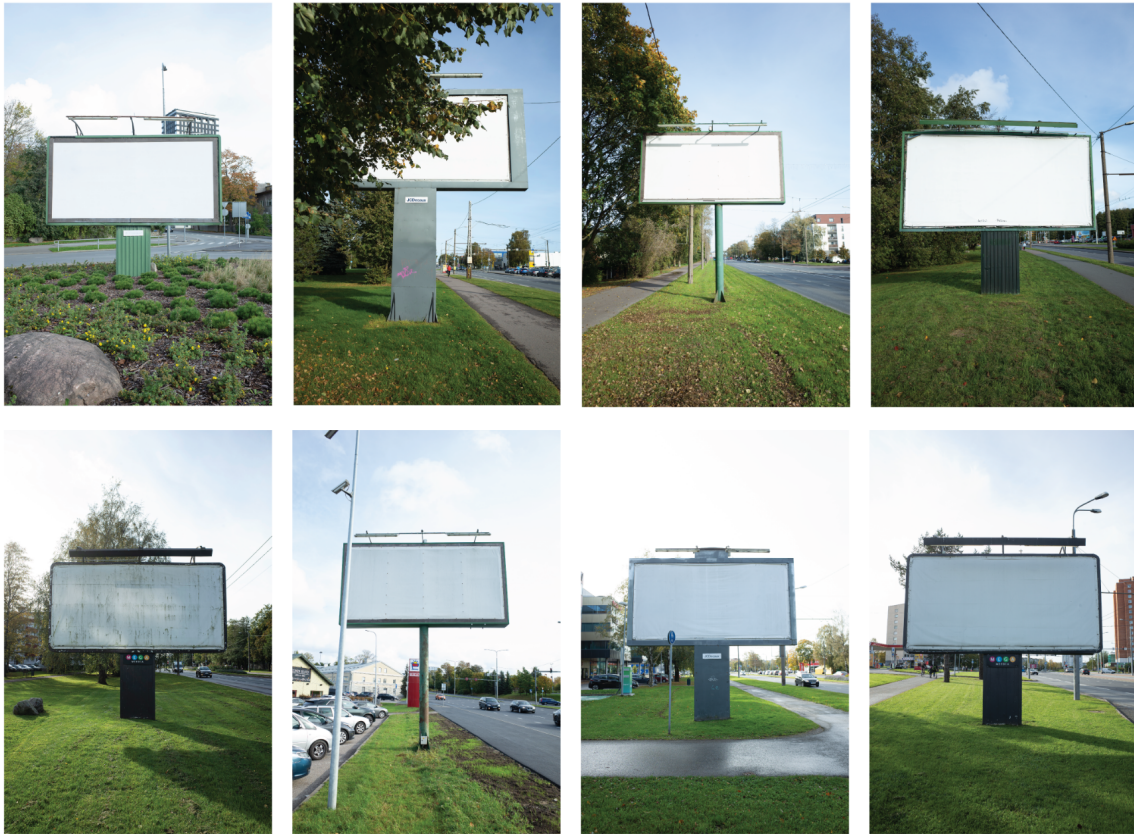


Figure 17. Reds Cheung, *White billboard*, 2020

Introduction:

White billboard is a comparatively straightforward artwork. Half a year after the epidemic began, I found that there were more vacant billboards in the urban area of Tallinn. Most of these blank billboards are white, which is probably the same as a white restaurant. White means blank and waiting to be filled.

In Hong Kong, advertisers generally won't let it happen. Instead, they all think that blank billboards are not very good-looking, as if they are not lively enough. So even if the billboard has no new tenants, most advertisers will leave the old advertisements in place. Let the promotions expire or fade, and rarely spend extra work to remove the old advertisements and replace them with white canvas. I like this operation very much. The white canvas makes the entire billboard structure more prominent. After the advertisements are eliminated, the whole city is unified because of the giant whiteboards.

Keywords:

Large-scale blank advertisement;
Advertisement operation and urban;
Commodity fetishism

Reflection:

Initially, my idea of this work was to show the economic depression during the epidemic. But then there have been new developments. I began to reflect on why advertisers can have the privilege to occupy public space and make money by selling advertisements. And what if residents want to change the content of the billboard? For example, can they use those large areas of white canvas for outdoor community screening? Can an artist occupy a billboard to do artwork?

Cleanliness

Terminologies

The artist involves cleaning activities to create meaning of the artwork, thereby implying something understandably stated as 'unwanted'.

It is relatively difficult to find examples directly related to cleanliness in art history. One typical example is Mierle Laderman Ukeles's Maintenance art (1969), a series of cleaning performance in the museum's exhibition hall²⁹ and museum entrance, which the work is responding to authority and power within the art museum by its cleanliness and maintenance.

Among them, outside the museum, Ukeles uses mopping and water on the entrance stair expressively, those dramatic strokes are just like Jackson Pollock's action painting, and the Japanese calligraphy artist Koji Kakinuma uses a giant brush and ink to write on the ground. In Ukeles' work, cleaning is not just a domestic act. The main entrance performance is not barely about cleaning. It is a performance and an expression of expressiveness.

Cleanliness is relatively challenging to express because the artwork is assumed to be clean and spotless most of the time. At least it should avoid that uncleanness or dirty can be regarded as an accident. Therefore, it is easier to express dirt in the white-cube than clean. For example, Maria Abramovic's *The cleaning the mirror*, that the performance artist record herself cleaning the grimed skeleton covered with dirt. The action actually can be seen as metaphor, the last mirror in life, death, and impermanent.

We can also learn from more examples the artists using the material which should be seen as an unclean object, and being the subject of the artworks. Xu Bing's *Where does the dust itself collect?* (2010), the artist filled the whole exhibition hall with dust and stated 'As there is nothing from the first, Where does the dust itself collect?'³⁰

The dusty work did not let people feel dirty, in contrast, it made people feel calm. In particular, it is like thinking about the poetry left by the artist, what is the source of the dust? When the audience inquires for the answer, they will find that it is from the former World Trade Center, a substance mixed with different stories after the 11th September.

²⁹ Queens Museum

³⁰ Zen Buddhist poem

The artist presented not only the memory of the 9/11 but also the Buddhist idea that all living beings will eventually turn into dust, then what exactly is impermanence and eternity. Do these dust in the work need to be distinguished from other dust?

From my point of view, maybe related to my oriental background, I can see the similarity of Urs Fischer's, *you* (2017) and Xu's work. While they are both setup in white-cube space and the installation work is made by raw material. Every time I see a picture of Fischer's work, I feel amazed that there is someone attempting to break down the typical white-cube. At the same time I will question the work making the white-cube even powerful while it is capable of displaying a ruined self.

Examples in art history



Figure 18. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance art*, 1969



Figure 19. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance art*, 1969



Figure 20. Koji Kakinuma Shodō performance, 2008

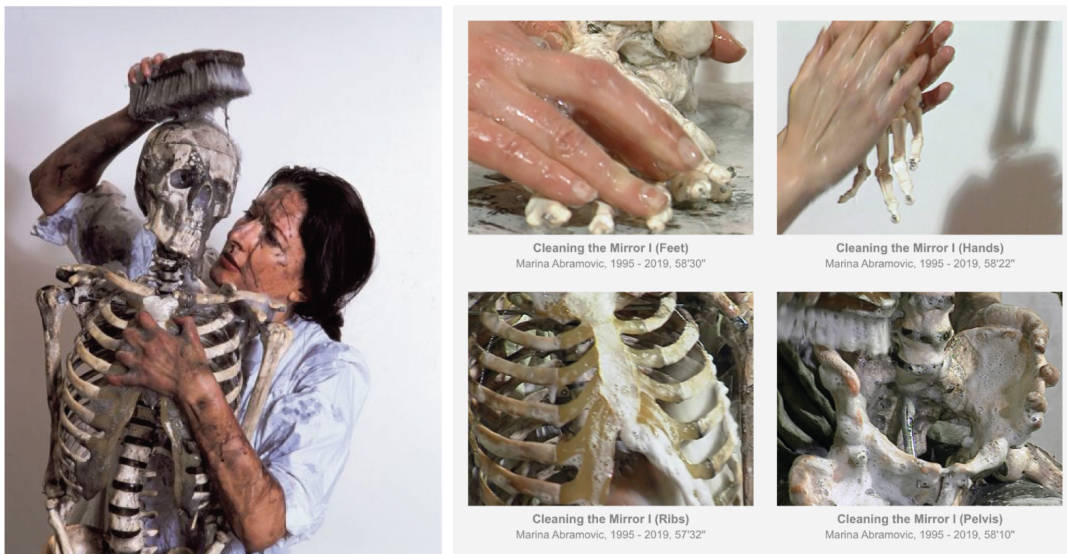


Figure 21. Marina Abramovic, *The cleaning the mirror*, 1991, 1995

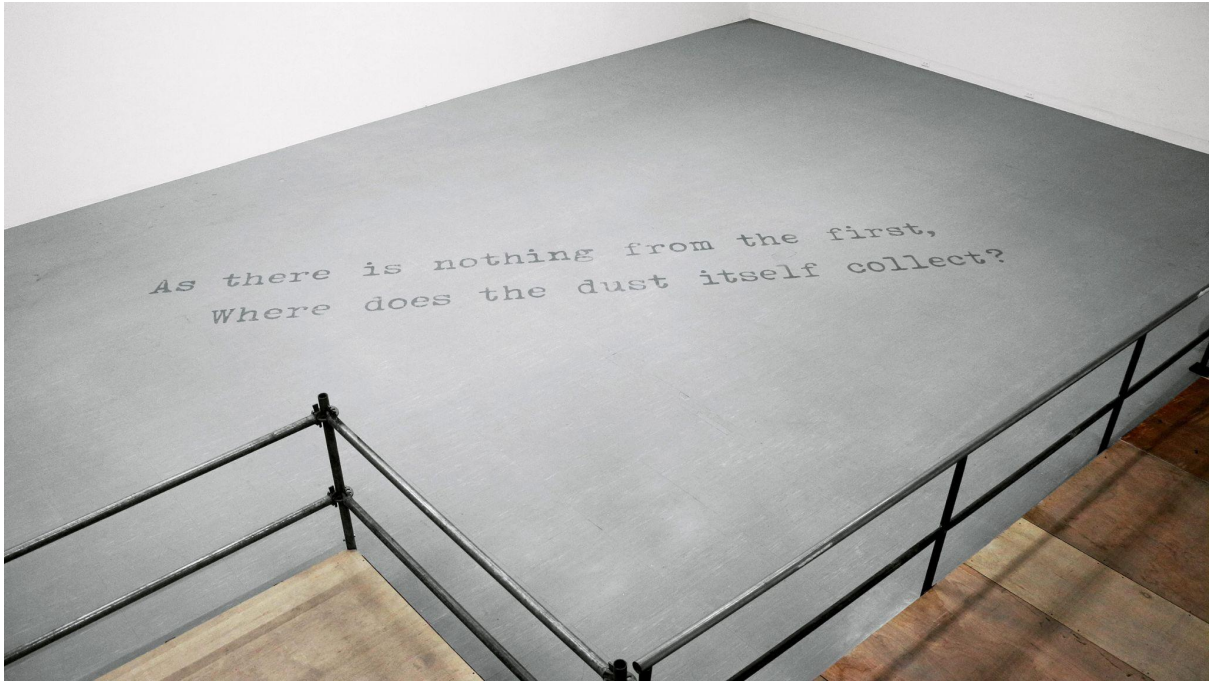


Figure 22. Xu Bing, *Where does the dust itself collect*, 2011



Figure 23. Urs Fischer, *you*, 2017

Cleaning



Figure 24. Red Tsang, *Cleaning*, 2020

Introduction:

This work is based on a simple assumption. I assume that the white-cube is immaculate and spotless to avoid noise from the artwork as much as possible. This work intends to clean a particular area, that supposed to be clean becomes more clean than the other area. The action makes the rest of the exhibition space become noise of this work simultaneously.

Keywords:

Using clean as creation; Noise in the exhibition site; Intervene with partial cleaning.

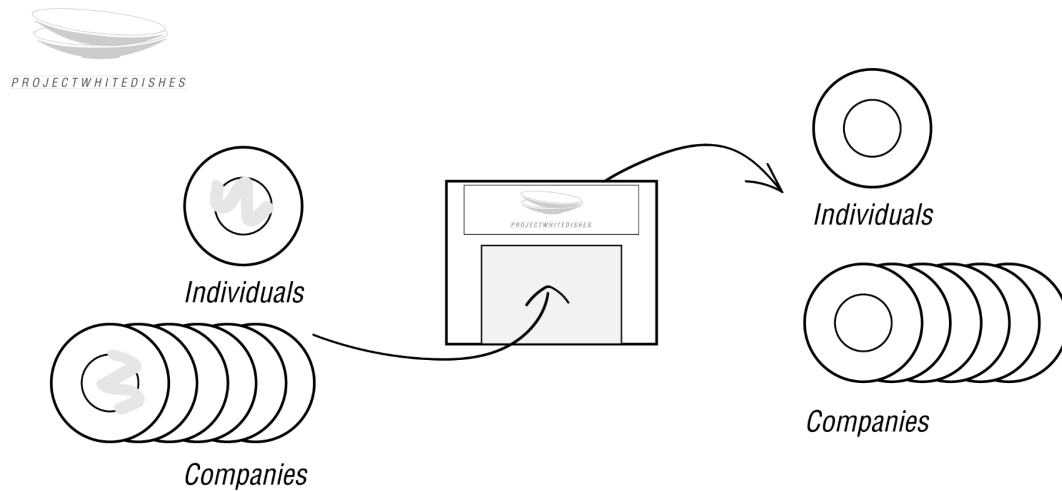
Reflection:

I find that expressing cleanliness in a white-cube is not that easy. The artist has a higher chance to create chaotic inside the white-cube, probably because the white-cube is too clean already.

However, even if you want to make some resistance to the spotless space, it seems like it is arranged within the white-cube order, and being absorbed.

Cleanliness is not necessarily only related to cleaning agents. It may also be related to order. For example, when a thing is arranged chaotically, we will not describe it with cleanliness ; That is why we find satisfaction in orderly objects.

Second hand dishes store



MACA19
@2020

Figure 25. Reds Cheung, *Second hand dishes store*, 2020

Introduction:

This is an artistic project that uses cleaning of second-hand objects as a means. The idea is relatively minimal. This plan is to collect only the most common round dishes with the slightest changes, clean them, and put them into the market again. I hope to design a self-sustainable plan so that individuals and even companies can reuse the second-hand tableware. The company only sells limited types of white utensils. The purpose is to let people who provide second-hand dishes and those who receive second-hand items do not need to choose. When they think of white dishes, they will first think of this company.

Keywords:

Clean & recycle;

Different items in second-hand stores.

Second-hand objects need to be curated.

Reflection:

The second-hand store culture seen in Tallinn is something I have never seen before. In Hong Kong, such a culture is not popular. People dispose of their unwanted item directly to the landfills, seldomly think of its second life.

I have never tried to conceive of a shop as a creation. I also considered the shop as a public art project, creating a close relationship with the public. Which might help the audience understand the statement from daily practices. On the other hand, the concept could be extended to other consuming items, such as white t-shirts.

Conclusion

About Medium

It is always tricky for me to speak comprehensively about the theme because artistic creation is continually developing, and there is no inevitable answer. But after a systematic arrangement, I probably have a deeper understanding of my creative direction. During the process, I am aware of applying different methodologies in artistic practice. In search of other methods to express a concept is more satisfying than establishing a signature style. After these two years, I also began to appreciate my characteristics.

I probably derived different concepts from art media. My works will often respond to these concepts, and more often, they are a combination of each medium. In this research process, I deliberately use different media to practice the theme. For example, public art, photography, sketching, performance art, art projects, collections, etc. Even though I can not regard these practices as important works of their respective media, I enjoyed using multiple media approaches to testify the topic and discover something new. For example, in this research, I accidentally found potential creative methods such as 'waiting' and 'cleaning'. These discoveries are what I enjoy most.

About Theme

Regarding the topic in each of my previous artwork, I rarely concern about developing a common theme in my works; instead, I respond more often to the issues I am concerned about at the time. I rarely make art based on singular subject such as landscapes, people, cities and families; nor specific topic such as self, gender issues, politics, etc.

I tried to avoid my work to reflect something directly nor indulge in a specific image. This makes my artistic positioning unclear. As a result, opportunities are relatively difficult to obtain. At the same time, I easily get lost due to a lack of reference. It was not until I chose the white-cube as the subject matter and accumulated the theme bit by bit.

After studying the practice, I slowly established a direction and found a language to represent myself. As I said in the introduction, my interest in the white-cube dates back to my experience when I was studying, but I have never looked into the reasons for my preference. I always felt that the white-cube was only a part of the art institution, and it was rarely regarded as an aesthetic object. After that, I also began to analyze it in the same way as a general reference object for creation. For example, a sculptor

would analyze the structure of the human body; a painter would analyze the composition of a landscape.

I try to divide the white-cube space into three aspects to understand and reorganize it. Because of this, I found that even though the Eastern and Western art field is used to the white-cube space, they may have quite different understandings and interpretations of whiteness, emptiness, and cleanliness, the main characteristics of the white-cube.

About context

During the research and practice development, my birthplace and the entire world are undergoing drastic changes. It is inevitable to spend a lot of time reading the news, and the practice will also be affected by these issues. For example, when I was thinking about cleanliness, I noticed that cleaning is a rather social behaviour. This situation is pronounced during the pandemic, and people have also raised the standards of cleanliness to unprecedented heights; At the same time, when I interpret cleanliness is to remove unwanted objects, I also connected to the new laws of Hong Kong and myself. I hope that I can continue to develop in the direction of cleanliness or even empty my mind through practices someday.

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Artistic CV

ArtVilnius 20 - EKA Gallery - Participated artist 2021
'Carry On' - Arts Go Digital Scheme - Art education program (Hong Kong) - Participated artist 2021
'Enjoy the white' - Vent space (Tallinn) - Participated artist - 2020
'1a space', Art Basel Hong Kong 2019
'Listen up?!', 1a space
'Transparency Cube Space', solo exhibition, 1a space, 2018
'Yuan Yang – City at the Mixed of Time
(Performative Art Tour to the hidden Hong Kong)', 1a space
'Berlin wall festival', Goethe Institut Hong Kong
'In search of the peachland', C&G apartment
'Mind the gap', 1a space
'I Think it Rains', Burger Collection+ 1a space
'Mobile MaD+', Free Fest 2012
'MaD@West Kowloon'
'Tuna' Joint Contemporary Art Exhibition
'DETOUR 2011'
'Exhibition of Impression- Eillen Chang', Painting Exhibition
'New Trend 2009", Group Exhibition
'.', Graduation Exhibition
'Circle', Painting Exhibition
'Nagoya Zokei University- Transit Program', Group Exhibition
'Subtracting Addition', Sculpture Exhibition
'Works', Painting Exhibition
'HKx9' Design Exhibition
'Point Duo', Chinese Calligraphy and Seal Engraving Exhibition

Public Art

'Cement Ping Pong Table', Commission by Art Promotion Office Hong Kong

Curatorial work

'Independent 2' @ 1a space 2015 - Curator
'Independent' @ 1a space 2013 - Curator
'Familiar stranger', group exhibition @ Red Elation Gallery – Guest Curator
'Look! For food', group exhibition @ Detour 2011 -Curator
'Aus Eins . Zwei Ende', group exhibition by Mesa Wong and JoePHY Wong – Curator
'The great dilemmas of life', group exhibition -Curator
'Artalive@Park'- 'wishPark', Public art exhibition -Exhibition Concept Development