Ideologies of Late American Modernism

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REFERENCES

O'Doherty, Brian. *White Cube : l'espace de la galerie et son idéologie*, Zurich : JRP/Ringier, 2008, (Lectures Maison rouge)

- 1 That many-faceted character Brian O'Doherty (critic, artist, arts administrator, writer, media person) is the author of a book that has been worked on and developed over three decades. The collection published in French, under the supervision of Patricia Falguières: *White Cube, l'espace de la galerie et son idéologie*, brings together five essays all gravitating around one and the same object, seen under quite different lights. Only three of the five ("Notes sur l'espace de la galerie", "L'Œil et le spectateur" and "Le contexte comme contenu") have been previously published, as a compilation in 1986 after initially appearing in *Artforum* between March and November 1976. The other two, "La galerie comme geste" and "L'atelier et le cube", date from 1981 and 2003-2007 respectively. Such chronological exactness is probably redundant, for these five essays all respond to the same question about a form of reification of the crisis of late modernism seen by an observer who is at once fascinated and nostalgic: the exhibition space of galleries, its form and its uses, as typified by the happy and most successful term "*The White Cube*".
- 2 O'Doherty is not a historian, because, even if his different writings can also be read as a record, they are informed by a way of looking at things and a state of mind whose moorings date to around the early 1960s, at a precise moment when Clement Greenberg's thinking was coming across as the point of reference around which all issues and all works then seemed to have to be defined.
- 3 O'Doherty is not a historian because his itinerary in the history of the gallery space encompasses heterogeneous elements which have more to do with the occupation of spaces that can be more or less likened to the gallery than with the specific and exclusive

history of a particular type of space. The white space is already there, historically speaking (Wiener Secession, Sonderbund, De Stijl exhibitions, particularly at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam) and O'Doherty concerns himself less with this than with more heroic examples like the *Merzbau* which was never a truly public object before it was destroyed. Yet this passage is one of the book's strong points.

- 4 In novel ways, O'Doherty incorporates highlights in the history of the art gallery, the studio, and their occupants. He acts rather like a storyteller and, rather than deconstructing an ideology, he is a fabulist thereof. There is actually a real celebration in his way of re-perusing the history of modernism since Gustave Courbet with his new lighting (Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Cubism), even pointing a finger at the extreme techniques of picture sliding on the gallery wall, in the case of Frank Stella and William Anastasi. There is also a real pleasure in contrasting the eye (reification of the proper observation of works according to Clement Greenberg) and the viewer, as in this passage: "The art on which the Eye is invited to be cast is almost exclusively the art which has kept the pictorial plan—the predominant tendency of modernism. The Eye is the caretaker of the seamless space of the gallery, and its flat walls covered with ticking. All the rest, everything that is impure, for example collage, prefers the Viewer. The Viewer stands in the dislocated pace of the collage, the second major force to have transformed the gallery space. When this Viewer is Kurt Schwitters, we are taken into a space that we can occupy by way of the reports of eye witnesses, casting our gaze over photographs which make up a true punishment of Tantalus (they prompt experience, they are not there to conform it)."
- 5 Here the text ties up the major contradiction with which we are confronted by the uses of art venues by events (happenings, gestures, specific occupations), a contradiction conceived by O'Doherty in the context of modernist autonomy.
- 6 These tensions represent the strength and interest of a book that develops a real dramaturgy. They allow the reader to forget about quick assimilations which, by referring to context as content, void this context of the whole relation of otherness that it might have with art. Likewise, the chapter devoted to the gallery as gesture tends to relate this gesture implicitly to the indeterminate and enigmatic status of the empty gallery, more than to institutional criticism that has been so amply commented upon since then in a plentiful literature.
- 7 O'Doherty, in his verve, is taken well beyond the *White Cube* and its drama of late modernism, gauging debates and works in Europe but without reinstating their full richness and complexity (he nevertheless pays special attention to the work of Jan van der Marck at the Museum of Contemporary art in Chicago); he has felt a need to rediscover his bearings within his original cultural space by reincorporating the studio from the early 19th century on. So he strives to reintroduce the teleology which the earlier writings seemed to want to shatter, by re-mythologizing studio and white cube as stages in one and same history.
- 8 Now that many historians have written the history of exhibited art as well as its events and its venues, O'Doherty's book comes across like a timeless fable to be deconstructed in the eyes of the history of late modernism in New York, to rediscover the host of writings, works, disputes, and commercial and institutional policies which overlap therein, including in this reading intended to be attentive to Europe, but has trouble giving it back the seniority and specificity of its inputs.

- 9 Its strength lies, nevertheless, in questions left open, especially about this issue of the viewer and his eye forever confronted with their absence in front of the work once the white cube has become the screen of a temporary projection, less fleeting than with the promise of the experience of its distance in time.