

# The Politics of Space: The Class War in Our Galleries

By Katherine (Kat) Outten  
OUT14420445  
MA Fine Art Digital

## ABSTRACT

The White Cube; What is it about the modern art gallery format that has made it so popular, so pervasive, in the art world? Why did the absence of colour, and the presence of emptiness become the model for all art galleries, across the world? Interestingly art that predates the 20<sup>th</sup> century is rarely displayed on white walls and appears far more cluttered in its display, with many paintings on the same wall. “modern” art on the other hand is usually displayed against white walls with minimal amounts of work on display. Why is this? How has this shift in the display of art work been influenced by the upper classes, and how does this classism affect the art world? Examining the roots of this by taking into consideration written works such *Ornament and Crime* and primarily focussing on the text *The White Cube: Ideology of The Gallery Space* to discuss these questions, as well as drawing primary research from various galleries in London, and other cities in Europe, I hope to delve into this topic.

## CHAPTER I

### The Evolution of Modernism and the White Cube Through the Lens of Adolf Loos’ *Ornament and Crime*

The art world has evolved over the last century, influenced and affected by two world wars, the rise and fall of governments, and the booms and recessions of society. Where the Victorian age and the transitional period that followed praised decadence and ornament, the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals that evolved directly opposed this. Where Art Nouveau celebrated heavily decorated objects, the development of Modernism and its precursors eschewed it. What academics like to neatly forget though is that decoration was always a luxury of the rich- what working class man or woman could afford a piece of Art Nouveau furniture or other such items? Until the industrial revolution and mass production made it possible for even the everyday man or woman to afford patterned plates, decorated clothes and other items previously seen as a “luxury” these things were signifiers of wealth. Interestingly, the development of the “modern” aesthetic followed this.

*“One of the consequences of the industrial revolution was an unprecedented increase in the demand for ornamented goods. Ornament, which had always been associated with luxury and laboriousness, enhanced status and with the rise in the general level of prerogative of the very rich.”* (Pg 11) Durant.S. 1986 Here the author is talking about the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the rise in accessibility and affordability of ornamented objects, as for the first time, a middle class began to emerge. It is worth noting that when “ornament” is mentioned it means decoration on an object that isn’t necessary to its function.

*“The twentieth-century man can satisfy his needs with a far lower capital outlay and hence can save money... Ornamented plates are very expensive, whereas the white crockery from which the modern man likes to eat is cheap... Even greater is the damage done by ornament to the nation that produces it. Since ornament is no longer a natural product of our*

culture, so that it is a phenomenon either of backwardness or degeneration". (Pg 21-22)  
Conrads. U. 1971

This excerpt is taken from Adolf Loos' 1908 lecture Ornament and Crime, found in Ulrich Conrads Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture, and seems to oppose the quote from Stuart Durant, which was written much later. In this piece he describes ornament as "backward" and "degenerate". This lecture was considered a turning point towards modernism, despite it being written before the First World War, long before Modernism really took off. He then mentions that the work of the ornamentor "*is no longer adequately remunerated*" (pg 22) -that a worker who ornaments the object they are making will ask for the same price for his object as the worker who has made an object with no ornament and will thus lose money. It could be seen as a very capitalistic way to look at craft and production of goods, and he decries anyone who would choose the ornamented object over the plain one as being stuck in the past.

"They [Austrian Ornamentalists] say: *'We prefer a consumer who has a set of furniture that becomes intolerable to him after 10 years, and who is consequently forced to refurnish every ten years, to one who only buys an object when the old one is worn out'*". (pg 23) Already, in 1908, consumerism was happening, although we tend to think of it as a much more modern invention. It is also interesting that this was written in an age where decorated goods were becoming more widely affordable and accessible. The connotations of this could be that wealthier academics and architects, such as Loos, were turning against ornament due to the rise in accessibility and affordability. By decrying it as something that only "backwards" people, i.e. the lower classes, aspire to own he is implying that the "modern" man is above the lower classes who still own ornamented objects. If "*The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects*" (pg 20) then those who still own ornamented objects are unevolved, in his mind. He goes on to say:

*"the urge to ornament one's face and everything within reach is the start of plastic art. It is the baby talk of painting...But the man of our day who, in response to an inner urge, smears the walls with erotic symbols is a criminal or a degenerate... what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneracy in the modern adult."* (pg 19-20)

To give context, at the beginning of the piece he talks about the tribes of Papua New Guinea- comparing them to criminals and children in the way they tattoo their bodies and decorate their objects. Yet again we see the inherent classism present throughout Ornament and Crime; those who succumb to ornament are likened to children, criminals, and the uneducated tribes of Papua New Guinea. Clearly in his mind the well-to-do who are abandoning ornament are wealthier, white, and educated.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **White: Religious Connotations and the Modern Gallery Space**

White: "Adjective: Of the colour of milk or fresh snow, due to the reflection of all visible rays of light; the opposite of black." (Oxford Dictionary Definition) In the Western world white has long held symbolic meaning:

*"White is at the opposite end of the spectrum from black, but like black, it can work well with just about any other color. White is often associated with purity, cleanliness, and virtue. In the West, white is commonly worn by brides on their wedding day. It's also associated with the healthcare industry, especially with doctors, nurses and dentists. White is associated with goodness, and angels are often depicted in white... In design, white is generally considered a neutral backdrop that lets other colors in a design have a larger voice. It can*

*help to convey cleanliness and simplicity, though, and is popular in minimalist designs.*"  
Chapman. C. 2010

Whilst it makes sense that white is heavily used in medical settings, to better show blood and other bodily fluids that need to be cleaned up, why has it become so common in the art gallery? The quote above connotes that the purpose of white in the gallery space is to provide a neutral backdrop to the art works on display. However the moralistic and religious connotations of white here in the West could also be at play:

*"The styles of the past would have no place in the sane and healthy world of the future. The case against ornament seemed unanswerable in the 1920s and 1930s. Its loss seemed a trifling price to pay for a progress which extended beyond aesthetics- or technology itself- and which, it was claimed by its apostles, had an ethical and moral basis."* (pg 263) Durant. S. 1986 Here Durant mentions the "ethical and moral basis" of Modernism, and this ties in directly with what Loos goes on to say, in Ornament and Crime-

*"Every age had its style, is our age alone to be refused a style? By style, people meant ornament... We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the streets of the city will glisten like white walls. Like Zion, the holy city, the capital of heaven."* (Pg 20) We can see the religious ideas of white creeping in here- he speaks of "fulfilment", and the "white walls of Zion", and this is echoed in *The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, written much later.

*"In searching for significance of this mode of exhibition one must look to the other classes of chambers that have been constructed on similar principles. The roots of this chamber of eternal display are to be found not in the history of art so much as the history of religion, where they are in fact even more ancient than the medieval church. Egyptian tomb chambers, for example, provide an astonishingly close parallel. They too were designed to eliminate awareness of the outside world. They too were chambers where an illusion of eternal presence was to be protected from the flow of time. They too held paintings and sculptures that were regarded as magically contiguous with eternity and thus able to provide access to it or contact with it... Such ritual spaces are symbolic reestablishments of the ancient umbilicus which, in myths worldwide, once connected heaven and earth. The connection is renewed symbolically for the purpose of the tribe, or more specifically, of that caste or party in the tribe whose special interests are ritually represented."* (pg 8) McEvelley. T. 1999

The above excerpt is from the introduction to *White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, written by Thomas McEvelley. It is interesting that he compares the gallery space to an Egyptian tomb- historically the inner most part of the tomb was not meant to be seen by any living people other than the architects and artists who worked on the tomb, and the priests and servants who would inter the Pharaoh upon his death.

*"Over the course of three thousand years the architecture of the tombs changed... but two main elements remained the same: the sarcophagus and the concealed, subterranean chamber in which it was hidden. In front of this there was a room, a place of worship, accessible from outside, with a stone tablet, a stele on which the name and possibly a picture of the dead person was recorded, and the offering table... Their children had to supply them regularly with these things [offerings]. Often the deceased had also established a foundation "for eternity" while they were still alive, In this case mortuary priests were responsible for its provision"* (pg 162) Rainer Hagen. R. and R. 2005

As we can see from the above quote, from *EGYPT: People, Gods, Pharaohs*, the only part that was accessible to the living was the place of worship, meant for priests and family members. Yes, the tombs were symbolic, full of art and craftsmanship of the highest calibre, meant to be eternal. But they were made for the dead- the dead Pharaoh would be laid to rest with everything he needed for the afterlife, and only the spirits of the dead were intended

to see the tomb and its contents. So whilst you could draw the comparison between Egyptian tombs and the modern art gallery in terms of them being “chambers of eternal presence” “protected from the flow of time” that is where the similarities end, as the notion of an art gallery is for the public to view the artworks on display, not to seal them off forever to all but the spirits of the dead and few privileged family members and priests. Surely art galleries should be for the masses? Although here in the UK major museums and galleries have only been free entry since 2001 according to an article in the Independent Online, and the edition of *White Cube* that this introduction is from was published in 1999, two years prior. However once again, the connection to heaven is made, much like in *Ornament and Crime*.

He goes on to say:

*“Since this is a space where access to higher metaphysical realms is made to seem available, it must be sheltered from the appearance of change and time. This specially segregated space is a kind of non-space, ultra-space, or ideal space where the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled.”* (pg 8) McEvelley.T.

The use of the word “segregated” (Oxford Dictionary Definition- “*Segregate: to set apart from the rest or from each other; isolate or divide*”) is particularly notable- Who, or what, are they segregating the gallery space from? Presumably the working class, as he then says:

*“Behind these two purposes may be glimpsed the political interests of a class or ruling group attempting to consolidate its grip on power by seeking ratification from eternity.”* (Pg 8) To suggest that the gallery space is only in the political interests of the few is something to be fought against, not accepted as the norm. The author continues:

*“By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility. As a ritual place of meeting for members of that caste or group, it censors out the world of social variation, promoting a sense of the sole reality of its own point of view and, consequently, its endurance or eternal rightness. Seen thus, the endurance of a certain power structure is the end for which the sympathetic magic of the white cube is devised.”* (pg 9) McEvelley. T.

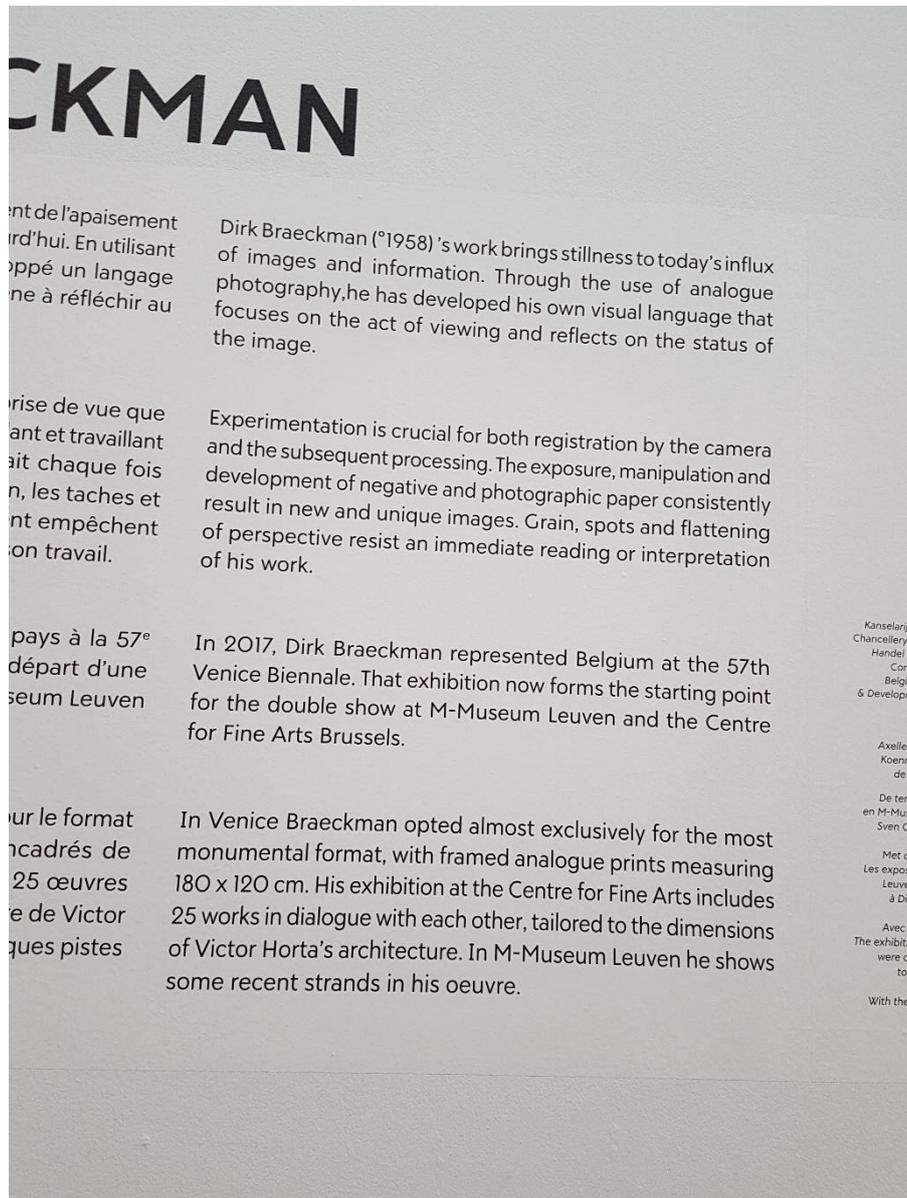
McEvelley seems to be confirming this idea of the white cube style gallery space being an echo chamber for the privileged few, reinforcing the power structure at play in every gallery that fits this mould, across the world. This power structure manifests in many ways within the gallery walls; the idea of the gallery space as a ritual meeting place for certain members of society, as art galleries consistently attract these certain groups of people at every event, every private view, every day that any exhibition exists within that space. Even O’Doherty himself echoes this in *White Cube*:

*“Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics”* (pg 14) O’Doherty. B. 1999 Again the comparison to religious spaces is repeated, with this idea of the art gallery being a “sanctity”, but for whom?

*“A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes a source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly”* (pg 15) O’Doherty. B. 1999 This hallowed, church-like, and yet still clinical space is what the modern gallery has become, exclusive to its members, like members of the church. The members being primarily white, middle class, educated members of society.

### **CHAPTER 3- Classist Languages in the Gallery Space**

For many art galleries the only context given for the exhibitions, and the artworks contained within, is the piece of text at the beginning of the show. This piece of text often reeks of classism- the language used is academic and unforgiving to those who lack the vocabulary or knowledge of art. This is inherently classist as viewers are expected to already have a baseline knowledge and understanding of art before they even enter the gallery space. If art is truly for everyone, as it should be, these descriptions need to be written in a more user-friendly way. By user-friendly I mean in language that anyone could understand, regardless of their education level, or the text being in their first language.



*Photo of description from the Dirk Braeckman exhibition at the Bozar Gallery in Brussels, Belgium, 1<sup>st</sup> February – 29<sup>th</sup> April 2018. Taken by Katherine Outten 04/04/18*

This exhibition description is a little bit more simplified than you might usually find, given that it had to be translated into multiple languages, as many languages are spoken in Belgium. It does however mention technical photography terms and the reader would need at least a basic understanding of the medium to understand what this description is describing- for example “registration by the camera” and “The exposure, manipulation and development of

negative". It also doesn't give much detail about the artist or his work- this is left to the pamphlet given out in the exhibition.



*From the Bridget Riley room at Tate Modern, until 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2018, photo taken by Katherine Outten, 18/04/18*

This description, from a collection in the Tate Modern, you would assume would be slightly more accessible than your average art gallery synopsis- given that it is in a free, open to the public, gallery that is touted as family and tourist friendly. Regardless it is still filled with jargon, words that those who are academic or who have studied art would be more likely to understand. This could prove that art galleries, even the supposedly "accessible", expect a certain level of education from their visitors, which is incredibly classist.

Not only are the synopsis' at the start of each exhibition steeped in classist language, but the visual language is too. This classist visual language seems to have existed at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

*"What perceptual law could justify (to our eyes) such a barbarity? One and one only: each*

*picture was seen as a self contained entity, totally isolated from it's slum-close neighbour by a heavy frame around and a complete perspective system within.*" (Pg 16) O'Doherty, B. 1999

Here the author of *The White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty, is discussing how prior to the white cube style gallery paintings were hung in every available space, filling it up completely. *"The nineteenth century mind was taxonomic, and the nineteenth century eye recognised hierarchies of genre and the authority of the frame."* (Pg 16) O'Doherty, B. 1999 Even then, in the nineteenth century, the viewer was already expected to have prior knowledge of art- which pieces held more importance based on genre and should therefore be viewed first, and that the frame was the boundary of each piece of work. This classist visual language has evolved into the modern day. "We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first." (pg 14) O'Doherty, B. 1999 Instead of the heavy frames denoting the beginning and ending of a piece of art, the viewer is confronted by the white space surrounding the artworks- *"An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art"* (pg 14) O'Doherty, B. 1999



In this screenshot, taken by Katherine Outten (07/10/18) from the Tate Britain video walkthrough of the 1840–1890 section of the Tate Britain collections, we can see how multiple paintings are hung on the same wall, close enough to be almost touching as they would have been displayed in the Victorian era. Here we can see the frames and placements indicating the hierarchies- hierarchies that are still unknown to most. In comparison here are two photographs taken 18/04/18 by Katherine Outten at the Tate Modern, from their twentieth century collections:





Here the vast white expanses that are now commonplace in modern art galleries are on full display. *“The ideal gallery subtracts from the artworks all cues that interfere with the fact that it is “art” “* (pg 14) and this is evident in the above photographs. It could be argued though, that the space becomes the focal point, as opposed to the works contained within, that the artworks become lost in the white vacuum. As O’Doherty asks, *“how much space should a work of art have (as the phrase went) to “breathe”?”* . (Pg 27)

He goes on to say about the white walls of the gallery space- *“Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies... Once the wall became an esthetic force, it modified anything shown on it.”* (Pg 29). If the white wall morphs any work placed on it, then why do we cling to it? It could be argued that it is just how things are done now, and as previously discussed many would say that it is because the white doesn’t distract from, or clash with, the works placed upon it. However it could also be said that this vacuum, this lack of information or context to the work, is yet another classist tool designed to keep those who have not had an arts education or background out of the members only club that is the modern art gallery. Why? If the only clues you have about an artwork or exhibition exist within the description at the beginning of the exhibition, and that is written in an academic language that not everyone can interpret, how is anyone meant to understand the work? If you cannot read this, and you have not studied art and therefore do not know that a piece references an older art movement or another artists’ work, then it renders the work almost impossible to read.

You might argue that you do not have to “understand” a piece to enjoy or appreciate it. Whilst this is correct, to a degree, many people who have not had a higher education do not see it this way. They see an unfathomable object or painting surrounded by an intimidating empty white space, filled with people who, in their eyes, do understand the work, and who are thereby more intelligent than themselves. I speak from experience, both my own, and that of friends and family who have not studied art when I say this. The white cube style

modern gallery is full of barriers, preventing lower classes from visiting. From the locations being inaccessible and in predominantly more affluent areas, to the academic language used in gallery spaces, the modern gallery space is as classist as ever. We may have free galleries and museums in this country, but cost is only one barrier to accessing these spaces and feeling welcome within their walls. Perhaps art galleries would feel more welcoming if the artists' processes, experiments, failures, and everything leading up to the finished pieces were displayed alongside them? This would give viewers much needed context for the work, without the needlessly wordy and unfriendly descriptions at the start. Or perhaps these descriptions could be written in a more user-friendly style? These could be steps in the right direction for a gallery committed to being more accessible to all, regardless of class, education level, abilities, or race. More galleries need to be proactive in their communities- committing to running free activities and workshops for working class children and families, providing transport if necessary, to promote engagement at all levels of society, not just amongst the middle class and wealthy. Art should be available and accessible to all, as it can enrich lives, improve mental health, and give people an outlet they might not otherwise have.

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