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NOT ONLY WHITE CUBE
AND BLACK BOX.
MUSEUM, ARCHITECTURE,
TECHNOLOGY

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I TECHNOLOGIA

Abstract

The last hundred years have brought enormous changes in museum architecture, and the last half-century has brought an almost ubiquitous influence of technology on the presentation of art in museums. Artists are increasingly using digital technologies that allow viewers to have an interactive experience. At the same time, there is an escape from these technologies and attempts are being made to return to nature. The considerations are accompanied by reflection on the space dominated by the White Cube and its other form, the Black Box.

Keywords: architecture, art, art museum, digital technologies

Streszczenie

Ostatnie sto lat przyniosło ogromne zmiany w architekturze muzealnej, a ostatnie pół wieku niemal wszechobecny wpływ technologii na prezentację sztuki w muzeach. Artyści coraz częściej wykorzystują technologie cyfrowe, które umożliwiają widzom interaktywne doświadczenie. Równocześnie następuje ucieczka od tych technologii i czynione są próby powrotu do natury. Rozważaniom towarzyszy refleksja nad przestrzenią, którą zdominował *White Cube* i jego inna forma w postaci *Black Box*.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, sztuka, muzeum sztuki, technologie cyfrowe

*If you are stupid, you will remain stupid,
with or without a computer.¹*

Renzo Piano

1. INTRODUCTION

*Museums can help us think about the power of
togetherness. They allow us to have the desire – and
the pleasure, actually – of following life. You need
that desire. You need that pleasure. They help us
see that we have gone through a lot, and in return
realize how we can transform our present into a bet-
ter future.²*

Lina Ghotmeh

The whole world is based on change, although this does not necessarily always mean development. In the case of construction and architecture, this changeability is often linked to development. To a large extent, to the development of technology, which shapes its image and encourages the search for new solutions. Man has always transformed his surroundings, and changes in technology also translated into changes in aesthetics. Medieval cathedrals show the scale of the influence of technology on the aesthetics of the time in which they were built. The industrial revolution led to the next great breakthrough in construction. And then, too, technology contributed to the shaping of a new aesthetic. Modernism completely revolutionized the approach to architecture, and its creators were masters in the use of new materials and technology. It brought completely new exhibition interiors: white, neutral and devoid of any details. Half a century later, in 1974, Brian O’Doherty during a lecture given at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Inside the White Cube, 1974) described it as the White Cube. Brian O’Doherty convinces us that “The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it.”³ The white cube, which despite many critical opinions has become a commonly used model of exhibition space, functions to this day. In parallel with many other ideas for a place to present art. Another great revolution, this time digital, has already changed our entire world in a way never seen before. Also museums. Architects, although they use technology, pay attention to completely different aspects of museums. Technology is not there to attract attention, but to support in many areas of our activity. Virtual reality and digital technologies will not replace the reality in which everyone would like to feel comfortable. Outside the museum, we do not want to be squeezed into a black box. Unless in a cinema hall.

¹ R. Piano, *La Désobéissance de l’Architecte. Conversation avec Renzo Cassigoli*, Édition Arléa, Paris 2009, p. 34.

² L. Ghotmeh, *A place of freedom [in:] A. Szántó, Imaging the Future Museum. 21 Dialogues with Architects*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Berlin 2022, p. 116.

³ B. O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, Santa Monica 1986, p. 14.

The internet gave us a false hope that it would enable an open exchange. But it has turned into a manipulative algorithm ghetto, as we know. We need a truly civic space, and we need to define that space. The museum has potential to present a polyphony of ideas and allow people to learn from one another. Architecture can create specific and powerful experiences for that to happen, using space, sound, taste, and nonverbal communication – experiences that are not downloadable.⁴

2. FROM TRADITIONAL TO VIRTUAL MUSEUM

*Technology is evolving fast, but architecture cannot move so quickly. You have to allow free space and flexibility to incorporate constant changes in technology.*⁵

Huang Wenjing

Since the establishment of the public museum, there have been constant discussions on its architecture, the shaping of exhibition spaces, lighting methods, and the arrangement of exhibitions. Recent decades have definitely expanded these areas to include technological issues. The latest technologies have joined the control of environmental conditions in museums, which allow for new forms of presentation, but at the same time often change the way an exhibition is perceived. The development of technology has also changed the expectations of museum visitors, who use modern technologies to varying degrees on a daily basis. Digital technologies, interactive installations, and augmented reality have changed the world of museums. And not only because of the use of these technologies by museum designers and curators, but also by artists who use the achievements of the digital revolution in their creative process. Digital art fills museum spaces. In 1995, participants experienced real surprise when they were almost immersed in the interactive installation *Osmose* by Canadian artist Charlotte Davies. Today, current technological possibilities no longer cause such shock in museum spaces, but they still support artists in their work in various ways. It also happens that virtual violence results in limiting access to the exhibition only to adults, as was the case during the *Real Violence* installation by Jordan Wolfson, 2017. The most outstanding artists are using virtual possibilities. Jeff Koons uses the Snapchat mobile application to share his works with its users. They can be viewed from any corner of the world. In turn, the *AcuteArt* application allows artists to use the latest technologies, and users to access the works of many artists and look into their studios (including Olafur Eliasson, Jeff Koons, Anish Kapoor). Daniel Birnbaum, the manager of *AcuteArt*, believes that “the beauty of augmented reality means that rather than extending the site-specific show by popular demand, we can respond to interest and the new lockdown measures by bringing the exhibition to you.”⁶ In 2019, a mural by Austrian street artist Nychos was first animated using *Artivive*, an augmented reality app that allows artists to combine analog and digital art. The app animates artworks by modifying them as they are viewed on a phone or tablet. András Szántó pointed out that “Classical

⁴ M. Cho, *The Museum as a playground for all* [in:] A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁵ H. Wenjing, L. Hu, *Our secret weapon is nature* [in:] A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁶ T. Zhang, *Artwork by Kaws, Olafur Eliasson Are Coming to Your Home* [in:] *Women's Wear Daily*, 12.01.2021, <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/unreal-city-augmented-reality-art-show-coming-inside-your-home-1234693316/> (access: 24.05.2024).

museums were machines to display classical mediums: painting, sculpture, drawings, and so on. New media fit uncomfortably in this envelope. So-called immersive experiences have emerged largely outside of museums.”⁷ Immersive experiences transport participants to another reality by changing their perception through sensory stimuli. Recently, the Melt Museum was established in Warsaw, which is not a real museum, but only an exhibition space, in which the technique used to prepare multimedia installations blurs the boundaries between reality and the virtual world. The virtual world in these experiences evokes a variety of feelings. Most often, we are overwhelmed by the effects, lost in the vibrating world, lost in space. Is this really what we want? Is our brave new world supposed to be based on this apparent reality? And although digital technologies are also building a completely new world of galleries and museums, they do not compete with traditional ones. There is even a Museum of Other Realities, which creates a digital world of art exhibited in virtual spaces. On its website we can also find a comment that appeared in Forbes:

The MOR is an experience, not a game or a demo. It is designed like a real-world art museum, giving some of the best VR artists in the world a venue to show off all the amazing VR art they have been making for the last two years. /.../ Everyone and anyone curious about VR needs to try this thing out.⁸

You can try it, and you should. But

as human beings we can never deny our biological sensitivities – our senses, our feelings. This won’t change too much. Technologies will change. We will have better ways of communicating. But how we scale a space, how we perceive light, how we feel texture – those things won’t change too dramatically.⁹

Virtual exhibitions and museums do not provide the experience of a real environment. “Therefore, it is important to connect the two worlds of real and virtual, so that the virtual one does not dominate and does not exclude a person from the possibility of participating in a real event.”¹⁰ And as Liu Hu put it, otherwise we will only be like in a cinema, locked in a black box, and only a return to nature can free us from technology.

3. ESCAPE TO NATURE

*To me, as an architect, exhibiting art does not necessitate white cubes. For example, an exhibition could be in a forest. [...] Something between nature and architecture could be an interesting space for art.*¹¹

Sou Fujimoto

The 1960s brought a new direction in art, land art, which is not only realized in studios and exhibited in museums, but due to its scale and the connection of creative thought with the

⁷ A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁸ *Museum of Other Realities* [in:] Steam, https://store.steampowered.com/app/613900/Museum_of_Other_Realities/ (access: 15.06.2024).

⁹ H. Wenjing, L. Hu, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

¹⁰ H. Wenjing, L. Hu, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

¹¹ S. Fujimoto, *An open field of acceptance* [in:] A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

natural environment, it is most often created far from built-up areas. Artists, transforming the landscape and intervening in it, do not treat this process only in artistic categories, but give them meaning that carries a specific message. Compositions that use the local natural environment combined with the material planned by the artist often remain in the field for longer after implementation, changing in accordance with the changes occurring in nature. And although this often leads to their destruction, artists most often prefer to be able to observe these changes than to subject them to on-site conservation work. Undoubtedly, the most famous realization of the land art trend is Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty from 1970, realized on the Great Salt Lake in Utah and conceived to show constant changes under the influence of the natural environment and human activities. Due to the rising level of the lake, it was invisible for many years, until it emerged above the lake again in 2002. Some see this work as a reminiscence of architecture, they see in it the Tower of Babel that has been flattened and exists only in two dimensions. In this way, art and architecture interpenetrate with nature in a completely different dimension. German artist Katharina Grosse "Not only effectively takes over the environment, she torpedoes, one by one, the assumed limits of painting."¹² By creating works of art intended for a specific location, she joins the site-specific trend. In her work, she blurs the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture, creating works that also cannot be transferred to a museum. She goes beyond the area of the painting with her work. By painting, she creates installations that change the existing area and transform it into a work of art. Using painting, she connects architecture and its surroundings. Sometimes, architecture's escape from technology takes on a different format and the boundaries between architecture and nature are blurred in a different way. Eduardo Neira Sterkel, an entrepreneur and architecture lover, built an unusual museum SFER IK Museion on the Yucatan Peninsula in the Mayan jungle in 2019, or rather a space to which he invites artists so that they can work and exhibit their works in contact with nature. This unusual cultural center refers in its name to the original meaning of the word museum, which comes from the Greek *museion* meaning the temple of the muses. It is a place of inspiration, creation, and establishing contacts. Simultaneously,

architecture must be harmonious with our organic bodies and an extension of our physical and psychological states. Architecture must generate a respectful dialogue with the environment in which it is based. As beings that participate in nature, our creations are an extension of this ecosystem. [...] We believe that all art forms are equally important and multidisciplinary is the best way to translate our time.¹³

The building was created without plans, by trial and error. Its basic structure is made of growing trees and local wood. It is strongly connected with the surrounding area and nature. The separated spaces do not have rectangular forms, they are the complete opposite of the white cube and the black box, because "When you work in a box, your mind becomes like a box, /.../ When you go into the jungle, everything is new and renewed. You harmonize with nature and go back to your origin. You reconnect with what you are. With life."¹⁴ This museum has yet another important feature: it is fully democratic, it cuts itself off from the

¹² S. Sherwin, *Katharina Grosse: This drove my mother up the wall* [in:] South London Gallery, <https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/katharina-grosse/> (access: 21.06.2024).

¹³ ManifEthos [in:] SFER IK Museion, <https://www.sferik.art/manifethos> (access: 21.06.2024).

¹⁴ S. Lubell, *Outside Tulum SFER IK Shakes up the Familiar Museum Model* [in:] Metropolis Magazine, 24.02.2022, <https://metropolismag.com/projects/sfer-ik-jungle-museum/> (access: 21.06.2024).

influences that politics and the art market have on museums, and it is open to artists representing different trends in art.

4. DOES A VIRTUAL MUSEUM THREAT THE TRADITIONAL ONE?

Because of Covid-19, we have seen the limits of virtuality. Digital space makes the incidental so much more difficult. That's where physical space becomes so important.¹⁵

Kerstin Thompson

In the introduction to the catalogue of the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art organized by the Artists' Club in Kraków, Mieczysław Porębski drew attention to several important aspects related to the leading theme of the conference:

For a modern artist, art is a method of assimilating the world through imagination. That is why the horizons of modern art, science and technology are common. The photograms placed in the entrance hall show a world that is to the same extent the world of the artist as the world of the scientist-researcher or practitioner-technician. [...] The way these works are presented differs from the festiveness of official salons. After all, it is about living art, emerging from a search, not from the sealed achievements.¹⁶

Mieczysław Porębski drew attention to the artist's method of interpreting reality in the creative process and placed strong emphasis on the relationships between art and technology. Although none of the works exhibited at the time were based on direct experiences related to science and technology, some spatial models revealed experiments with space, relationships between planes and forms, and referred to matter and movement. Next to the models made by Tadeusz Kantor, one could see the works of Marian Bogusz. An artist who treated the process of creating a work in the studio almost like the creative process in a scientist's studio. Art and technology are connected by the process of creativity. What moves us every day in technology is art, which gives meaning to tools. The simplicity with which the artists' works were presented did not result only from limited funds for organizing the exhibition. It was also a conscious reference to the uncomplicated space in which the artist creates. This exhibition can be treated as a form of opposition to the museum. And it is not because the politically uninvolved modern Polish art of that time could not find its place within the walls of these institutions. One of the exhibition rooms was like a warehouse of forms – it became a form of a studio, which is undoubtedly a unique place. The artist's studio is a frame in which his works are created, reveals his personality and conveys the emotions that accompany him. András Szántó draws attention to how much of the atmosphere of the artists' studio is missing in museum spaces, which have been deprived of the atmosphere of creation and all the staffage surrounding the artist.¹⁷ For Daniel Buren "The work is thus totally foreign to the world into which it is welcomed

¹⁵ K. Thompson, *Where does the museum Begin and end?* [in:] A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁶ M. Porębski, *Wstęp* [in:] *Wystawa sztuki nowoczesnej zorganizowana przez Klub Artystów w Krakowie*, Wojskowy Instytut Geograficzny, Warszawa 1948, p. 24.

¹⁷ A. Szántó, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

(museum, gallery, collection). [...] Analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in terms of the studio as the unique space of production and the museum as the unique space of exposition.”¹⁸ When discussing the relationship between the museum, architecture and the influence of technology on this institution, we cannot ignore the position of the artist whose works are exhibited there. And regardless of the media used by the artist, the studio is most often the place where they were born. Some artists like simple, uncomplicated spaces, sometimes even laboratory-like, while others look for places where their works will enter into a dialogue with them. Their voice in the discussion on the museum space is incredibly important, because it is their works that will be presented there. An exceptional example of this is the Fondation Maeght facility in St. Paul-de-Vence, in the south of France, which was modelled on Joan Miró’s studio in Majorca. Both were designed by Josep Lluís Sert. In line with the expectations of the founder, Aimé Maeght, for whom the museum space is primarily a simple space but well-lit by daylight, the architect designed a system of low pavilions with skylights in the roof, linked together around an internal patio. There, as in Miró’s home and studio, he used a lighting system in the form of quarter-circle-shaped chandeliers. In 1977, George Baselitz proposed his own vision of a museum facility for the exhibition of works of art Bilderbude, shown at Documenta 6 in Kassel. The basis for the idea for shaping the exhibition spaces was the idea of a lack of hierarchy, thanks to which all rooms would have the same access from the communication spaces and size. He proposed covering the whole with a glass roof. This solution was to become a spatial reference to the artist’s studio. George Baselitz believed that museums should be completely independent of their surroundings, because they constitute an autonomous whole. All he required from the exhibition rooms was a simple space and appropriate light. Therefore, he checked the technical issues for proper lighting. In 2000, the German artist Christian Jankowski presented video films in a built copy of Bilderbude in the Berlin museum Hamburger Bahnhof, which differed from its original in the lack of daylight. In this way, rooms were created that resembled the interior of a camera obscura and were a museum version of a photographic darkroom. And practically a new version of the white cube – a black box. White cube and black box, although seemingly distant, constitute the same line of development of exhibition spaces. The term black box in the context of museum exhibitions comes from post-industrial and warehouse spaces painted black, in which artists created at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century. Thus, defined by the lack of color, the dark space had many advantages, it was inexpensive to maintain, did not distract artists from the works they were working on, and daylight or artificial light was focused on the workplace. Black box is also closely related to another artistic activity, it refers to theatrical or performance space, which was used by avant-garde theater actors at the beginning of the 20th century. Both white and black spaces provided a kind of neutrality. Their spatial structure was extremely simple, hence the terms cube and box. The model of exhibition space characterized by a simple interior, white walls and overhead lighting introduced modernism. In both types of space, the viewer’s attention is directed only to what the artist wants to convey. If we compare the black box spaces with Brian O’Doherty’s description of the white cube, even though they are so clearly different, they have the same goal – to focus attention on the work of art:

The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. The ceiling becomes the surface of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted

¹⁸ D. Buren, *The Function of the Studio*, “October” 1979, vol. 10, pp. 51–58, https://www.kim-cohen.com/Assets/CourseAssets/Texts/Buren_Function%20of%20the%20Studio.pdf (access: 11.06.2024).

so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have the wall. The art is free, as the saying goes 'to take on its own life'. [...] Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics.¹⁹

Recently, the Black Box and White Cube have been joined in museums by the Grey Zone, intended for the art of dance that combines different types of art. The Grey Zone is a term for a space that is much more closely linked to technology, most often mobile, where the use of mobile and network technologies is encouraged during the performance. So, completely different than in traditional museum spaces. On the other hand, Renzo Piano, whose first major architectural work is one of the most famous high-tech objects, warns:

Technology must be used with caution, it cannot be flaunted. Our profession requires a balance between art and technology. If you separate them, it will fall on one side or the other. A balance must be maintained. [...] We cannot believe that art and technology belong to two separate worlds.²⁰

5. CONCLUSIONS

*Museum architecture needs to foster and reinforce that experimental connection between you and what you are going to see in one room and how it connects to the next – your connection to other people, to the city and art.*²¹

Liu Hu

Andrzej Kadłuczka and Beata Skalska-Cimer recently asked an almost rhetorical question: *Virtual Museum. Museum of the Future?*²², which does not lead to a clear answer. As usual, in questions about the future, one can only assume different scenarios. However, one thing is for sure, museums as we know them will continue to function, because artifacts created in artists' studios must find an appropriate exhibition space for themselves. The idea of creating a virtual museum is not an idea from recent years. As early as 1947, André Malraux proposed a new vision of the museum in his book *Le Musée Imaginaire*. His idea for a museum, sometimes called a museum without walls, resulted from a new perspective on art, expressed through comparing styles, and not through interpreting the content and message of works of art. The artifacts were to be excellent quality photographs of works of art. Thanks to this, the museum would be available to a wider audience and could be implemented in every corner of the world. However, no other form of communication can replace direct contact with a work of art. Photography, which was to be a medium in the museum of imagination, did not do this, and modern technology will not change that. And although throughout the existence of the public museum, artists themselves have criticized this institution and called for its liquidation, sometimes in an extreme way, they need not only

¹⁹ B. O'Doherty, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁰ R. Piano, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²¹ H. Wenjing, L. Hu, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

²² B. Skalska-Cimer, A. Kadłuczka, *Virtual Museum. Museum of the Future?*, "Technical Transactions" 2022, no. 119(1), pp. 1–6. DOI: 10.37705/TechTrans/e2022004.

galleries, but also museums. Both of these institutions are strongly linked to the art market, and artists have to make a living somehow. And museums will still be visited, regardless of the amount of latest technologies implemented in them. It is worth recalling here the words of Renzo Piano, with whose expressive thought I began this text: “In fact, we can safely say that technology has minimal impact on the essence of our thinking.”²³

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²³ R. Piano, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

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