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## The Secret Life of the Gallery Wall

When do you enter a museum? At the front door? The lobby? The ticket counter? On passing security or when moving up the stair, ramp, escalator, or elevator? Or upon reaching the circulation system of corridors and landings with exhibition brochure in hand? Or is it when finally reaching the gallery itself, or even only in the moment of entering the space of an art work – with the whole processional sequence leading up to it just a drawn-out choreography of entry that is more about leaving the world behind than arriving?

To enter a museum is never straightforward. The journey from street to gallery is always a long one. All the congestion and complexity of urban sounds, colors, shadows, glare, textures, reflections, weather, vibrations, dirt, and smells give way to a hushed and hygienic space. The vibrant multiplicity of different forms and rhythms of movement in the city is reduced to a single path. A whole set of filters strip away the streets and guide the visitor towards the artworks. A museum is not an object in the world but a mechanism to keep the world out, an elaborate filtration system. The visitors, like the air and the light, finally arrive in the gallery cleaned and moving in the right direction.

Even the evidence of filtration has to be filtered out. In the gallery itself, there are no visible wires, ducts, vents, or even light switches, just the works on smooth unmarked white walls. Other than discretely installed lighting systems, the only fixtures allowed in the room are the subtle blinking pinpoint eyes of cameras, motion sensors, and smoke detectors in the ceiling and the unsubtle unblinking eyes of the security guards on the floor. There is no tolerance for variation in temperature, humidity, or attitude. To move too closely to a work or raise your voice is to receive instant retraining. The gallery space is also guarded by bookstores, information stands, brochures, wall texts, labels, audio tours, and docents that rehearse and guide the mobile viewers to adopt momentary frozen poses of suitable concentration before the works, like temporary sculptures.

This highly theatrical encounter is primarily horizontal. The artwork is typically hung at a standard height, waiting for the eyes of a hypothetically average standing viewer, rather than those of a child, an old person, someone in a wheelchair or lying down. It's all about a certain zone of the wall, with everything else made peripheral. The floor is much darker than the wall and of a single material that is usually the same as that of the circulation system leading to the gallery. Its only role is to bring bodies into the room but carry no trace of its presence. The ceiling is treated as a technical system that simply lights the works, or more precisely lights the encounter between visitor and work. There are no shadows in the space. Ceiling and floor must completely give way to the viewer, work, and wall. The wall has to be disconnected from floor

and ceiling, relieved of any technical responsibility. Gone are the traditional moldings that hide any gap between wall and ceiling or floor. The gap is now essential to isolate the wall from the world. A small recess is cut into the base and top of the wall to disconnect it from floor and ceiling. The wall now floats between floor and ceiling, and the work floats on the wall. Or more accurately, the ceiling and floor float away from the wall. The wall must be seen to always be there. The museum is just a highly filtered encounter with a wall that is so permanent, so familiar, that paradoxically it can disappear in favor of the work.

The work is suspended in front of the wall, attached ever so lightly by the most minimal technology in the room, an unseen metal hook. This lightness of connection is crucial because the drama being played out is that both viewer and work are visitors to the museum. It was the new mobility of art, its literal separation from the architecture in which it was traditionally embedded (as mural, relief or sculpture) that gave birth to the museum with its rituals of collecting, lending, and display, along with the extended worlds of the art market, scholarship, criticism, publications, conservation, provenance, etc. The sense of the museum as something very solid and static, a heavy temple, is directly related to the mobility of the objects it exhibits. Both viewer and work arrive in a supposedly neutral space, which is precisely not a "white cube." It is not even space in the sense of a three-dimensional volume. Rather, it is the space produced when a hyper-controlled physical, social, conceptual, and legal atmosphere is attached to the middle of a wall. A section of white wall is encased by the bubble of a highly-regulated atmosphere. Visitor and work enter this bubble rather than the room whose only role is to support the bubble.

This unique atmosphere nurtured by the hyper-insulated gallery actually reaches out beyond the gallery and museum deep into the world they so systematically filter out. In the end, the gallery wall is itself an artwork, a painting whose unique reception is guided by a vast infrastructure of catalogs, monographs, interviews, websites, videos, graphic designers, publicists, cleaners, lawyers, and insurers operating as a cohesive system of education that prepares the approaching visitors from even before they leave home right up to moment of leaning forward to read the tiny label nearest a work. This comprehensive system aims to bridge the last but vast gap between that little label and the work, the gap marked by the hardly noticed flash of white wall that surrounds and subtly frames each work. It is a system that never addresses this wall directly but endlessly works to preserve it.

The architecture of the museum is that of a painted wall that tries to say nothing other than that it is trying to say nothing to a group of people who have been trained to think that a white wall is not a statement but the undefined condition that precedes and exposes any statement. The white wall is not supposed to be something you see but that which allows you to see. The modern museum depends on the sense that this wall is always already there, more permanent than anything placed in front of it. The museum is even a permanent collection of such walls, a collection on such permanent display that it doesn't appear to be on display, being as vital and as invisible as water is to a fish.

This supposedly blank wall and the rituals that surround it is the default setting of the gallery, a default that is routinely challenged by artists and curators when art hangs from above, spreads across the floor, is seen in the dark, transform the space itself, or turns the visual experience into one of sound, smell, touch, taste, performance, social encounter, publication, broadcast, academic event, or legal and financial transaction. Artists can ignore, subvert or focus on the wall by exposing, monitoring, cutting, assaulting, and interrogating it. Architects can try to abandon it altogether, as in Lina Bo Bardi's remarkable 1947 museum without walls in São Paulo where the artworks are suspended in glass frames throughout the open space. Or exhibitions can move out of the gallery into the circulation systems, archives, and offices of museums, or into the streets, commercial and domestic spaces, broadcast media, the web and social media. Regardless of all these critical moves by artists, curators, and architects, the rituals of the white wall are also challenged by a world whose technological and institutional structures have been so radically transformed in recent decades that the very condition of the body, the social, and the visual has been revolutionized. To encounter a single image hung on a white wall is so profoundly different for a generation of visitors who encounter, modify, and produce thousands of images every day, a world in which everyone is an expert curator, constantly navigating through multiple overlapping spaces with hyper-connected mobile devices.

Yet the white wall remains the default setting. Despite all the challenges to its authority, it remains as the stubborn reference point, seemingly reinforced by every assault on it. It is not by chance that the amount of white display wall grows exponentially every year as the number of spaces for art accelerates globally. It is as if it is all one wall, a single idealized surface that has multiplied endlessly and spread across the planet like a virus, with each of its countless sections encased in the protective controlled atmosphere of a museum, gallery, corporate lobby, or domestic space, and with all these progeny of the hyper-expanded wall somehow interconnected by globalized rituals of viewing. It is not so much an exploding world of spaces filled with white walls as an exploding wall with spaces and rituals attached to it like barnacles. The dimension of any part of the wall is irrelevant. Indeed, the wall is so strong that it doesn't require any work directly in front of it. All works of art are ultimately hung on the white wall. So engrained is the image of the wall that the very use of the word "artwork" ties an object or computer program or event back to the wall just as securely as any picture hook. The crucial artwork is finally the wall itself. Visibly disconnected from the floor and ceiling, the display wall is in the end not a wall as such but the image of a wall, a monochrome painting installed millions of times and continuously maintained, or even the largest painting ever, an unfinished work that keeps expanding.

This vast unlabeled and uncelebrated white painting that coats the internal architecture of the gallery literally draws a subtle but strong prophylactic line between architecture and art. If the architecture of the gallery holds the world at bay and nurtures a unique atmosphere for the encounter with art, the thin

layer of white paint holds architecture at bay. This line between architecture and art is even internal to art itself in as much as our concept of art has become inseparable from the white surface. Our appreciation of art already has a distancing from architecture built into it. The experience of art both requires an architecture supporting a hyper-controlled space of encounter, but also a detachment from that architecture, a detachment that is an integral part of the experience. Strangely, a key responsibility of the building is to make it seem as if the experience could have happened somewhere else.

This subtle but structural line between art and architecture is uniquely complicated or redrawn by art that explicitly engages with architecture. Take *Arena*, the 1997 work by Rita McBride that became a long-term loan of the MACBA Collection in 2009 and was exhibited then as part of a show of recent additions to the museum's collection. The work subverted the gallery it appeared in without addressing the gallery directly or even touching it. It simply introduces some seating. The nine ascending levels of bleachers are like a large piece of furniture, a gallery bench that has simply multiplied itself and grown to the size of the gallery, interfering with the usual flow through the room and encouraging exactly the kind of behavior that is normally prohibited. The detached individual horizontal encounter with work on the walls is replaced by engaged bodily and social action. The visitor occupies the work, climbing on and up, initiating movements, interactions, noise, and diverse forms of unchoreographed performance. The visitor is taken high up above the usual standing view to imagine touching the ceiling and the floor in front now becomes a stage inviting action. To simply enter the gallery is already to become a performer. The visitor is placed on exhibition.

More importantly, the work also places the room itself on exhibition. Its curved form is the only thing in the gallery and it sits roughly equidistant from all the white walls, filling the space. It is usually approached from behind, forcing the visitor to pass around it through a narrow gap between work and wall. It faces the empty white walls of the gallery that are carefully differentiated from the dark floor and the light ceiling with the usual negative details. A thin horizontal slot cut into the top of the closest wall forms a clear black line distinguishing the surface below from what then appears above to be another of the series of beams holding up the ceiling and a very fine dark gap likewise separates it from the floor. The layers of seating facing the wall multiply, exaggerate, and complicate the usual singular horizontal point of view. There is no longer an artwork between viewer and wall. Without ever being mentioned or marked, the wall itself becomes scrutinized in its emptiness, abruptly pulled from background to foreground.

*Arena* was first assembled and installed at the Witte de With museum in Rotterdam in November 1997, where it occupied the whole first floor of the museum. Visitors coming up the stairs from the ground floor would find themselves at the center of a complete oval of seating climbing from floor to ceiling, blocking any path through the galleries to the outer walls of the museum and engulfing exhibition walls, offices, and rooms. The division, sequence, and

hierarchy between gallery, circulation, storage rooms, offices, and bathrooms were removed. The functional spaces that serve the galleries literally become the centerpiece. It is as if the museum, like the visitor, is suspended within the artwork rather than the other way around. The visiting work treats the host as a guest and interrogates the surprised space. The museum itself is put on exhibition with visitors and staff turned into collaborative performers.

The work was designed as a lightweight modular kitset and has since traveled around the world, appearing in museums, kunsthalle, sculpture centers, art fairs, and biennales. At each stop, it is reassembled in a way that rejects any separation between visitor and work, celebrating its own status as a nomadic visitor to expose the spaces of the art world that it temporarily occupies. It reframes each location and becomes a platform for unplanned performances by visitors and planned performances by other artists. Yet, in the end, it is the static architecture of display that is scrutinized rather than the events staged within them. The magic coat of white paint can no longer hold architecture at bay. On the contrary, the buildings that display art, along with all the rituals associated with them, are pulled into the center of the view, placed on a pedestal for critical inspection.

This quietly subversive ability depends on the sense that the mobile work comes from the outside, that it enters and exposes a pre-existing space of display. Yet the blank wall at MACBA that *Arena* exposed in 2009 is in fact one of the only internal walls in the museum that can always be seen by visitors to the building. It covers a single massive mechanical shaft that rises up through the building filled with all the vast infrastructure of air conditioning, electricity, and electronics that maintains the all-important hyper-filtered and regulated atmosphere. The thin horizontal slot cut into the top of the wall and relieving the surface of any apparent structural role actually admits the purified air thundering up the shaft behind it into the gallery. This dark slot and the matching recess at floor level make the wall seem as if it could move. In reverse, the opposite empty wall, that not coincidentally has the same height as the slot, appears as if it is always there but actually was built specifically for the exhibition. The other two walls were not part of the original building. One was added and hides a substantial part of the building but always remains there and the other partial wall through which the visitors enter is almost always reconfigured for each exhibition. *Arena* has not been placed in a gallery. Rather, a gallery has been built to house the work. The gallery arrives as part of the work it is dimensioned to yet pretends to have always been there, allowing the work to scrutinize and subvert it.

This is the case with almost every exhibition in every museum. Somewhere between the street and the gallery, the visitor encounters walls that were not there before the exhibition. They are part of the exhibit and yet are not exhibited as such. On the contrary, they pretend to always have been there, part of the permanent mechanism of display, seamlessly grafted into the space. The display is reorganized every time by a set of walls designed to imitate the dimension and effect of the permanent walls. The way the wall meets the

floor and the ceiling is highly controlled. The wall has to lack any distinguishing features. Not being able to distinguish between permanent and temporary surfaces is crucial to the performance of the gallery wall. The mobility of art is inseparable from the hidden mobility of walls. White walls reproduced themselves and migrated within museums long before they started traveling around the world. They too have entered the space as visitors but stand so very still and simulate the other walls they meet. They cannot show that they entered with the work of art, are part of the art, and part of what allows the art to stand there. This need for temporary walls to pretend that they were always there parallels the reverse need for permanent walls to pretend that they could leave. The permanent walls detach themselves from the building to merge with the walls that just arrived and vice versa. Indistinguishable, they merge and hover there while the building carries out its core task to simply deliver sets of eyes to them at the right height and rhythm.

Perhaps more than any other museum, MACBA – designed by Richard Meier and completed in 1995 – is defined by its exhibition of the white wall. The spatial system guiding visitors toward the gallery walls is itself built out of such walls. The architect rejected the idea of a building as a box, a set of walls enclosing a space, and the museum as a box within a box, instead taking the mobile logic of the white gallery wall to define the whole building. Every wall was treated as an independent plane, and the planes rarely intersect. The building relishes any chance to show the end of a floating white plane. MACBA literally tries to be a building with no corners, let alone rooms, as if returning to the original meaning of the word “gallery” as a transitional passageway or suspended balcony.

From a distance, the building appears to be defined by two massive vertical white planes, with a big hole cut into them exposing the inner workings of the building to the city, as if a new artwork encased in a huge glass vitrine. The point of entry is marked by a smaller white plane floating out further from the main planes, acting as a kind of billboard for the building’s central concept of undoing the traditional role of walls. It too has a large hole cut out of it and yet another smaller white plane floats forward, marking the point of entry below. On passing under this suspended plane and through the circular lobby, the visitor turns into a vast white slot of space defined by the two massive planes from which it is now the city that appears behind the glass as a newly encased artwork when ascending the monumental white ramps. The radicality of the original design was that the three levels of gallery were not closed rooms off this vast, open, ramped circulation space. A series of intermittent three-quarter-height walls provided only the most minimal filter between the extremely bright circulation space and the exhibition spaces beyond them.

The ground floor gallery was even open to the street on all sides through glass walls, and open to the floor above it, which in turn is open to the one above that, which has a ceiling of continuous skylights. Light streamed into the galleries from the sides and from above. Even the landings at the threshold between circulation space and galleries had a continuous glass block floor and these glass floors were repeated symmetrically on the other side of

the gallery and acted as balconies to the floors below where the light poured down the full height of the building from the skylights above. The idea of the museum as a box within a box is replaced by the suspension of three dark stone floors in very bright light that is only partially filtered by a squadron of hovering white planes. And these display floors are not simply inside the museum. The stone of the lowest gallery level seamlessly extends across the circulation space and outside the building to form a large plinth ending in the steps and ramp that eventually meet the plaza and likewise extends out the rear of the building. Visitors can pass right through the building on this stone plane without entering. In a sense, the building tries to be a museum without interior, or a half-defined space you have already entered simply by arriving at the plaza.

Since there were literally almost no walls to put the art on, other than those covering the concentrated technical infrastructure (the main air conditioning shaft at one end and the elevators and bathrooms at the other), a system of temporary walls was immediately designed to precisely simulate the few such permanent ones. The modules making up the temporary walls were even stored in the basement alongside the artworks they framed and were brought up when needed to form an ever changing pattern of galleries that would each time appear to have always been there. A specialized architectural team was formed, and still operates today, to work closely with the curators of each exhibition to produce the effect that the new walls are those of the original architect – with paper stretched across the wooden frames to provide a smooth surface for the all-important seamless coat of white paint. Gradually some of these temporary walls became permanent and all the openings to the outside were closed off one by one. The glass walls, glass floors, and skylights were successively covered over, and the balconies allowing each of the gallery levels to overlook the ones below it were walled off. A more static set of three stacked boxes emerged as the stable frame within which the continuous rearrangement of temporary walls would continue. MACBA went from a museum without walls to a museum like any other, in which walls have a very active mobile yet secret life.

*Arena* now returns to be exhibited in the very same part of the MACBA building that it occupied in 2009, but the artist has temporarily removed the covering of the skylights and the wall dividing the gallery from the circulation. The work turns around from staring at its own closed-off space to now face the whole building, expanding with more modules to fill the huge gallery without walls and looking across the circulation space towards the city from which the visitors have come. Instead of interrogating the assumptions of seemingly permanent walls that were discretely added in 2009 to temporarily house the work, the work now puts on display the original space of the building that was so systematically inhospitable to the display of art. The critical labor of exhibiting the assumptions of the art world by using architecture to expose architecture continues.

Yet this removal of walls is just as discrete as the earlier additions. One white layer is peeled off only to reveal another. The secret life of the gallery

wall continues. It is even intensified by the attempt at exposure. It's not just the hidden wood, metal, plastic, plaster, paper, glue, brackets, screws, linings, and wires inside even the simplest such wall, or the restless mobility hidden by its apparent stillness, but the strange sense in which this white wall is just as much in our collective heads as it is in front of us. Or to be more precise, the white wall can no longer be simply in front of us. Slowly emerging from the supposedly neutral beige cloth lining the first small MoMA galleries in 1932, the universal thin layer of white paint has now spread so far and fast that it can no longer be seen as such. The limbo it was meant to produce, the sense of detachment from the world, has been globalized, turned into a basic property of the world. The white wall is now what embeds the museum deeply into the world. The gallery no longer knows limits. Entering a museum starts at home or in a plane or in a tweet. The logic of the white wall flourishes in the cloud. The ever-strange life of the floating surface continues. Yet this massive prophylactic white painting is always quietly leaking, liberating intensely productive confusions as its secret life momentarily surfaces.