

# ARCHITECTURES OF SPACE AND SPIRIT: EXPANDING THE SPATIAL CONTRACT WITHIN THE WHITE CUBE



For the artist or curator, the *white cube* can be both a supposedly neutral space where architecture is invoked in service of art, or a frustrating example of an enduring and problematic mechanism of twentieth-century museum and gallery display strategies. Entering an austere and usually windowless white-walled gallery, one is enveloped in an intellectual and aesthetic landscape that focuses attention on the visual and conceptual resonance of the object of art. The modern gallery foregrounds Western ideas of space as an intellectual and conceptual project, which often excludes other cultural and intra-phenomenological experiences.

In the twenty-first century, the white cube presents another set of problematics with regard to our current social, cultural, and political landscapes. As Brian O'Doherty has argued, the modernist gallery, like a library or church, is intended not to disturb the private, individual experience of the spectator or the sanctity of art.<sup>1</sup> While this social and spatial contract prevails, we are seeing other examples in what the *white cube* can hold.

Models for museum tours, curatorial interventions, and commentary initiated much earlier by artists like Andrea Fraser have given way to novel acts of delivering artist talks that continue to dismantle the fourth wall between art and audience. Theaster Gates, for instance, regularly sings in a Gospel/Blues idiom to introduce himself and/or includes his musical group The Black Monks in his lectures, bringing other cultural representations and sound healing practices into the gallery.

Interdisciplinary engagements have continued to make their way into visual art spaces through dance and performance, as in Brendan Fernandes' dance-based installation *A Call and Response* in the MCA Chicago's Commons space, which invited *othered* bodies "[t]o use language, architecture and gesture... to collaborate and generate new forms of physical language."<sup>2</sup> Anna Martine Whitehead's project *Force*, presented at the Graham Foundation in Chicago, invited queer, trans, and gender non-conforming black, brown, and indigenous bodies to "take up space" in the foundation's gallery during a rehearsal for her dance opera created from observations and interactions between queer and trans women who meet in prison waiting rooms while visiting incarcerated loved ones."<sup>3</sup>

In my summer 2019 exhibition *Dark Matter: Celestial Objects as Messengers of Love in These Troubled Times*, I decided to refute the power of the white cube by painting the gallery *all black!* The space

was transformed into a celestial landscape with black, glitter-covered walls, two-dozen blue and black ceramic orbs hanging from the ceiling, and a NASA video of the sun and moon looping in the gallery's catwalk above, with soundscapes by Joelle Mercedes.<sup>4</sup> The multisensory installation included a large, abstract, spaceship-like sculpture inspired by the vernacular architecture of a shotgun house. Together, these elements suggested an Afrofuturistic, transplanetary Middle Passage and migration through deep space. *Dark Matter* welcomed a respite from a culture troubled by unfortunate manifestations of fear, hate, greed, and a selfish disregard for others. Designer Tesh Silver's first-person review notes "... [the exhibition] invoked the theme of home, the place where we as humans belong. Home is a house, but it is also Earth, but is also the Universe."<sup>5</sup>

The exhibition created a safe space for intimate personal reflection, with meditation sessions and sound baths offered regularly. Perhaps there is room for an expanded spatial contract within the white cube that not only satisfies our intellectual and conceptual privileges, but also brings other cultural and spiritual practices into the mainstream.

- 1 Brian O'Doherty and Thomas McEvilley, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 10. O'Doherty first published essays in the book in *Artforum* 14, no. 7 (March 1976). For references to the "spirit," see page 83.
- 2 Brendan Fernandes, *A Call and Response*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, June 1–October 13, 2019.
- 3 Anna Martine Whitehead, with Seth Parker Woods and shawné michaelain holloway, *Force* (Open Rehearsal/Jam Session), Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, Illinois, December 14, 2019.
- 4 *Dark Matter: Celestial Objects as Messengers of Love* was exhibited at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, Illinois, March 31–July 14, 2019. A limited edition LP exhibition catalogue will be published and distributed in early 2020 by Candor Arts, a Chicago-based publisher for the design and production of artists' books.
- 5 Teshika Silver, "Space is a Place: Fodayemi Wilson at the Hyde Park Art Center," *Sixty Inches From Center*, November 14, 2019, <http://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/space-is-a-place-fodayemi-wilson-at-the-hyde-park-art-center/>.

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*Dark Matter: Celestial Objects as Messengers of Love*, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, 2019.