

In Defense

By Natasha Marie Llorens

Oraib Toukan's *White Elephant* is a white cube taken apart and reconstructed askew. Toukan wanted to "to tip [the fair's] construction material to transform a trade stand into an object," or to mark the artificiality of Art Dubai's standard spatial form.¹ Its walls are made of the standard booth partitions issued to each gallery participating in the 2011 art fair. The space is also turned inside out: molding marking the gallery wall's independence from floor and ceiling stand like useless decorative sentries along the room's outer walls. There is no door—the white cube here becomes mythical space, a perfect space. Its function is to mask the exclusion of everything but pure art, and therefore it has no need of a threshold. Instead, it has a gap, a crevice, "and only if you are thin enough you can go through."²

The white cube, itself a spatial abstraction, is entirely complicit in the creation of this market of abstractions so perfectly suited to the needs of global capital—the international art fair. *White Elephant's* madness, however, recasts the white cube as a space of resistance without denying its interdependence with the art fair, and all of the social and political forces the latter embodies. Fairs are constructed like model villages, planned according to a grid in order to facilitate easy circulation and consumption. *White Elephant* upsets the "logic and flow of the fair by placing...four white walls at an angle that is off the grid the contractors thoughtfully made."³ This white cube insists on its autonomy from everything, sitting at cross-purposes even to the logic that governs the art fair—while being inextricably linked to it.

I am interested in this madness, in *White Elephant's* refusal to parse clear and unequivocal spaces of resistance from coherent spaces of consumption, and its insistence instead on metaphors of disavowal and hallucination. Madness allows for the simultaneity of these two modes: resistance and complicity. The project works within the fair's own semiological system in order to undo it, temporarily. I would like to dwell on this operation in order to rearticulate a critical role for the white cube today; one that does not deny either its historical problems—well defined in Brian O'Doherty's seminal essay from 1976—or its current role in sanctioning objects for the global art market, its capacity to both bolster and legitimize conservative ideologies about art and society.⁴

In *White Elephant*, the white cube provides a formal language with which to speak according to the logic of the art fair, and therefore a means with which to critique it. What if this formal language is essential to the existence of radical artistic practice? What if the art world needs the white cube's ability to signify art-ness in order to support other art practices? What if there is no pure space outside the institution, and what if, instead, the one space allows for the possibility of the other? According to political philosopher Hannah Arendt, objects produced by work *build a world* in which the political is possible.⁵ I propose that in the Arendtian sense the white cube helps *build a world* for art without ever ceasing to be violent and to contribute to inequity.

Arendt divides human activity into three categories: labor, work, and action. One *labors* out of necessity, as a means to sustain life at some basic level. To *work*, on the other hand, is to make objects in the world, objects that are not strictly necessary to life. Human beings and their political communities require an environment of objects that last longer than they themselves do in order to anchor the fact of their contingency. Arendt calls this environment, one that objects make stable, "the human artifice." Its purpose is to "house the unstable and mortal creature which is man."⁶

For Arendt, a measure of instrumentality is essential to tools because it justifies the violence involved in making them. Work makes objects that are not *used up* but are, rather, *put to use* as tools. To make even the most inconsequential tool, materials must be wrenched from the earth, pounded into shape, and subjected to extraordinary pressures.⁷ In order to make a world for human beings, there must be

stable objects to anchor it; the making of such things necessitates violence; and to justify this violence, they must serve some end, must be instrumental. There is, therefore, nothing durable that is free of complicity. All objects in the world must serve an end, or they fail to justify their founding violence, even if that end is also violent.

The white cube is a tool, in Arendt's sense, because it frames objects and allows them to enter the discourse of art. It initiates objects into the realm of global capital, a space that safeguards traditional values in art: the sovereignty of vision, materiality, and the commodity form. In this sense, the white cube is useful, as it organizes and produces objects for an end. That end is an economy of art—be it financial or discursive economy.

And yet, Arendt asks: What is the use of usefulness? How can useful objects ever *mean* enough to justify the "violent exertion of strength" they are born of?⁸ Arendt's question illustrates a (necessary) contradiction: while all things made by man are organized and produced by their own usefulness, "[u]tility established as meaning generates meaninglessness."⁹ Arendt allows a gap to open between the way something is *used* and what it can be *made to mean* as a home for human speech and action (her terms for political activity). This gap between the *usefulness* of objects in the world, and their *meaning* indicates that while all objects in the world are necessarily instrumental, this instrumentality need not totally prescribe their meaning.

This distinction is crucial for any discussion of the critical potential of the gallery space today. It allows for the white cube's complicity with a violent ideological system without totalling determining how it can, nevertheless, produce resistance to that system. Just as *White Elephant* operates completely within the art fair's logic while fliriting productively with resistance, the white cube can both be *useful* as an ideological gatekeeper for art's various and intersecting economies, and yet *mean* something potentially transformative. It is not exhausted by its use and can, therefore, *build a world*.

This proposition also rests on the very particular role Arendt delineates for art. Because art works are not *used*, they cannot be worn out—either as objects or as thought-things. Even if they are fragments of a whole artwork (unfinished novels, broken statues, unrealized project proposals), these objects can still operate as artworks. Their art-ness cannot be consumed, even when they are bought and sold as objects on the market. The fact that art cannot be used up results in the art object's special permanence, which in turn means that art objects are able to represent the human artifice. *Art makes the world of objects appear*. This world is, again, what houses human subjectivity and makes speech and politics possible through its enduring stability. Arendt writes:

*Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though world stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read.*¹⁰

Otherwise stated: humans make objects in order to make a space for themselves that lasts long enough to allow for politics. Art makes this space appear the most clearly, in Arendt's view, because it is even more stable and durable than the objects and tools with which the world is built.¹¹ Arendt is writing in the 1950s, and her examples of artwork in the text are musical scores, poetry, and painting — it is safe to assume that she is not writing about relational aesthetics, or process-based conceptual art. It seems to me, however, that even practices that insist on their ephemerality enter the white cube as objects at some point, whether as a museum talk, in a book produced by cultural institutions, etc. The white cube's purpose is to sanction objects as art. In some senses, therefore, it produces the art-object that in turn produces the world of art. It is this world of objects that allows for the more radical practices to happen outside the white cube.

Arendt's model draws a very clear line between "speech" and "action"—her terminology for activities that inaugurate the political—and art. Art is work, it is not action. This distinction between art objects and action, however, does not account for what is taking place in contemporary art.¹² Much radical artistic practice since the 1960s has tried to elude reification, or intends to be ephemeral, dematerialized, and socially constituted. In order to suspend Arendt's strict categorization of art as work, however, the white cube must exist so that reified traces of practices outside of it may appear inside it and be seen as art.

The indeterminate, plural, and contingent nature of action, for Arendt, depends on the existence of a world produced through work that results in objects.¹³ The same is true for art: social practice (an umbrella term for artwork that is, essentially, a relationship between subjects) depends on the existence of a thing-world: the realm of the white cube and its many objects. It is because the white cube can recuperate anything—because it is unassailably stable as a spatial and discursive frame for art—that art can exist as unstable social relations outside of it. The space of resistance that the white cube opens up depends on its oblivious insistence on its own indisputable autonomy.

I might appear to take an indefensible position in defending the white cube today, in the context of international struggles over public space. The white cube seems to be as publicly private as the lobby at 60 Wall Street in which working groups were held in New York City throughout the fall, and just as glaring problematic.¹⁴ What we learned from Occupy Wall Street's use of these spaces is precisely what I have argued above, however: an object like "privately owned public space" can be made to mean something quite different from the use it was designed for. A space can be complicit with injustice beyond any doubt and yet still provide a means for us to appear to one another in political community.

1. Email intervention (printed matter) between the curator and the artist dated 2/16/11.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Reprinted in: Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 136.

6. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 136.

7. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 140.

8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 154.

9. Ibid.

10. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

11. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168 - 169.

12. Just as her very strict division between the public and the private sphere leaves out much—as Judith Butler has lately pointed out in her writing on Occupy Wall Street and the public sphere.

<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> (last accessed 1/31/12).

13. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

14. I refer to the interior "public" space inside the corporate headquarters of Deutsche Bank at 60 Wall Street. For more information:

http://www.businessweek.com/finance/occupy-wall-street/archives/2011/10/60_wall_street_the_real_headquarters_of_ows.html (last accessed 1/31/12). For more information on the concept "privately owned public space, see: <http://www.thenation.com/article/164002/after-zuccotti-park-seven-privately-owned-public-spaces-occupy-next> (last accessed 1/31/12).