

The space of a gallery

Whenever I start working on an exhibition, I first ask for plans of the gallery space. Being an architect's daughter, I am mostly not happy with how precise they are and many galleries I have exhibited in, got very thoroughly made plans after my show. I also want photographs of the space, as many as possible, which I hang around my computer in order to look at it while planning the show. Sometimes I plan to build a construction for the exhibition in the gallery so I really have to have precise measures of the space, but even if that is not the case, I find understanding the space very important. Where would the visitors walk in? Which direction do they look as they walk in? Can I change their behavior in the space with my installation and do I want to? This, almost obsessive, preoccupation with space is not only something that I have learned at home. The traditional art academy I studied sculpture at based everything we have learned on the modernist postulates of balance of forms and colors. Things have changed in the arts in the meantime and it's been a long time since artists busied themselves with these problems while doing whatever we call art nowadays. However, it seems some remains are still there. After one of the openings in Judit's gallery in Munich, Martin (Schmidl) and I spoke about how one hangs an exhibition. I claimed it was the last resort of the modernist visual balance in art. He politely nodded. I'm not sure if he really agreed, but in his work too, there comes a point when the already finished piece has to be exhibited and a different phase begins when things become much more visual in the very sense that I was taught in my school. One discusses the height a work should be hung at and one actually looks at how well it looks according to other elements in the space. There is a fine tuning of a position of a work, which every artist, curator and gallerist knows, when two people hold a work and others look at it and say: "a bit more to the left... a bit more... no, that's too much...". That is something there don't seem to be that many theories about. It seems to be a gut feeling, where professionals will usually agree upon, agree in the sense that they will find the same spot satisfactory for a given work. How high is the ceiling, or, as we all know in the case of the Traversée gallery in Theresienstr, is it leaning? There was always a discussion about the ceiling in the space. It was a result of a sloping roof and the question was: should one ignore it, simply use the level and hang works horizontally. I of course, always nagged and insisted on hanging visually, which in this case meant the left side should be a bit higher than the right to give it a visual sense of being horizontal even if it in fact was not.

If one thinks about why different people will usually agree on the place for a work in a given space, I tend to think it has to do with the visual culture we were brought up with. It is, of course, partly decided by practical factors such as not putting something on a place where people will bump into it, on a height that will not allow the work to be comfortably seen etc. However, why we agree a photograph looks better five centimeters more to the left than it was before is an aesthetic decision. This new position will usually bring the work in line with something else that is already there in the space, or it will organize the whole space of the wall into a balanced whole. And that would then mean that we didn't quite give up on the old modernist visual balance. It would bring us back to the old question: should art lie to make things pretty, or insist on the facts (like what is measurably horizontal) and not worry about the visuals? The same question pushed a bit further becomes: should art be visually appealing or speak out a truth, whatever we decide to call "truth"? I am certainly not the only one who doesn't plan a work around its appearance, and still, when it comes to installing an exhibition, I will use the background I was brought up with, to determine what looks good and what doesn't. Are aesthetics actually more important in visual arts than we are ready to admit?

The other modernist remnant we still use in setting up exhibitions is the idea of the white cube. There have been a lot of discussions about how the notion of the white cube is outdated, and there were also attempts to make different exhibition spaces. We even introduced the black box, but it is, after all, the same thing: a space that is provided to see an artwork in complete isolation from the outside world. The white cube works well with artworks that need light, the black box with those that use light as their medium. In both cases it still carries the modernist idea of how one should look at art. It is a neutral space that blocks off possible distractions from the outside world and allows the viewer (the implicit white, European, heterosexual male) to enter the realms of his privileged interests. There were, and still are, many attempts to take art into the public sphere, but a gallery is still the prevalent space to exhibit art and the gallery has to have some "look". There is no absolute neutrality and the ideal of the white cube is still something one will have in mind when organizing a future exhibition space. This ideal space is white, because white is not even a color and then supposedly doesn't interfere with the exhibited art. But as things go with ideals and real life, the actual gallery can never completely make up to the standards of what it should be. It has all its imperfections: lighting, plugs, maybe a window, heating and certainly a door to

walk in through. What is even worse, a typical gallery will have some information about the work exhibited, a book, a magazine a guide to other galleries. We are used to have all this distractions and simply pretend they are not there. An experienced gallery visitor knows right away what is art and what are just the necessary imperfection in the space that should be ignored. These little things lying around are perhaps parts of the experience of a gallery visit, but they are not part of art. One doesn't really look at sockets in a gallery and we (the artists) usually prefer not to have to look at the space itself. There is more than one example of a gallery space designed by overambitious architects where artists complain about people having to cope with the space and not the art. They claim it is distracting the visitors from the artworks but are often also unhappy to have to adapt to an unusual situation. Maybe it is just a battle for attention but it seems the artist will prefer a space that is closer to the white cube than a more open exhibition space.

Even if the gallery space is made with a white cube in mind and doesn't include someone passing by, or certainly not a riot on the street, no matter how many references to this riot there might be in the exhibited artwork, it is never the ideal white cube and we still pretend it is. I was always a bit irritated by this and two installations I did in the gallery Traversée were ways of dealing with this situation. The first time, as the gallery was still in Türkenstr, I made a projection on the gallery window that showed a cleaning woman inside doing her work off hours. I always find it interesting when art shows things that are there, that we take for granted, but are not always aware of them. The situation offered itself for such a work. The gallery had a window to the street and one could peep inside at night. Any space we walk into is being cleaned at some point by a person we usually don't see. Of course we know this people are there, but we ignore this work and try to organize it at hours when we don't have to see it. I simply brought this everyday situation out into the public space. The second installation I did at the gallery Traversée was in the new space in Theresienstr. This time, one could say, I brought the outside daily life into the neutral gallery space. I thought about what the gallery space looked like. Would it work as a living space? As it is a gallery, the walls are white, the floor grey, the lighting even, but there are still all these things around that we usually do not look at. So I decided to include everything that was in the space into my work. The result was an installation that turned the space into possible living quarters and Verena (Strehle), who worked at the gallery at the time, and I had a long discussion about what we should do with the information

brochures. Verena tidied them up and I kept organizing them in a mess as I thought they would be at home, my home at least. Judit was reclining on the bed that was already set up and observed our discussion smiling and not interfering. We agreed somehow. I also had the position of more power at the moment so I could decide, but the whole situation was quite amusing in the end.

This brings us to what I think a gallery space really is. We have all seen on the example of the gallery Traversée that the gallery can move from one space to another, and to a space that looks quite different but some things don't change. One still saw familiar faces and met friends. Our discussions continued uninterrupted by the relocation. Space is not necessarily only an architectural term but also a social one and this is being created through discourse, through people communicating. The idea of an antic agora or a renaissance piazza where people meet to discuss remained a notion today even if people do not necessarily meet in a square to discuss current problems. The space is often understood only virtually, but meeting in person is something that can still not be substituted. We usually don't meet in public squares to discuss art. It is rather a gallery space that is the most obvious place to meet for such a conversation. Some people will claim they do not like exhibition openings because they are not about art but about social mingling. They have a point, but this small talk sets a context of people who belong to a certain circle and who create the context for a discourse that belongs to this one particular space and it is a truism to claim that different galleries with their different programs attract very different groups of people.

Those are perhaps simply projections of my own continuing interests: how does a space work and how do people communicate. I like gallery openings because they offer the pleasure of observing people. It is interesting to see which crowd will show up, who will want to talk to whom, who will not dare talk to someone else, artists giggling among themselves, important people not mingling with just anybody and smokers talking to each other in a separate space that seems to defy other social divisions. The apparent superficiality of an exhibition opening is in fact just a tip of a huge body of social relations that make up a gallery and that, after all, has much more to do with the art exhibited there than just the small talk at the opening. Conversations during the installations and the daily discussions form a social context that can move from one architectural space to another and not change. The rooms can influence the conversation, no doubt, but it is the people that make up a gallery.

I spoke mostly German at the gallery Traversée, but often the conversation would switch to English and sometimes to Croatian. We still talked about similar things, whether we were in the show, in front of the door or in a nearby bar and I am sure we will continue. I just wonder where we will meet next.

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