

Introducing the White Cube

Introductions, where are people in the crowd situated? Are they artists? Are they friends/family/loved ones of artists? How can that change the discussion? Why do they want to be there? Have you ever experienced “art-shyness”?

I wanted to teach this class today because as an artist, an arts administrator, an art teacher and a patron of the arts, I've encountered people from all walks of life who are just dipping their toes into the art world for the first time, and that can be a daunting thing. Most of my first hand experience has been around emerging artist spaces, although I have been lucky enough to visit some of the most impressive big name galleries all over the world, like the Tate Modern in London, MOMA New York and the Pompidou in Paris amongst others. What surprised me a little, is often when you're a bit of an eve's dropper like me, you hear the same conversations going on in all these different places. *What is that? My three-year-old could do better*, and of course, *that's not art*, are all fairly common topics. I have a feeling that if you're here today there's a good chance you're looking to move beyond these lines of questioning, and on that note I'd like to invite everyone to treat this like the two-way dialogue that this class is and rudely interrupt me at any point if you have a question.

To begin with I'd like to throw out a list of disclaimers, so no one's too disappointed at the end. I'm not here to talk to you today about art history, although that will obviously be an explanatory feature of some of the topics we cover. I'm not here to teach you how to “bluff” your way through a gallery setting, you won't need too if you feel comfortable engaging properly. I'm here to help you think about what it is to walk into a gallery and happily get involved in your surroundings.

THE ART WORLD

Why are we here?

Why do artists do what they do? It's expensive, its time consuming and there are absolutely no guarantees that you'll reach any kind of commercial success, even if you're really good at it, whatever 'it' is. So much of what makes a 'successful' artist has no bearing on the work they make. But rather the connections they are able to forge in the art world, the timing – the when and where of the work they make, and of course, the way they market themselves. The last point is a very interesting one as many people not directly situated in the art world have a very romantic notion as to what it is an artist does. It's easy to conjure the mental image of an artist, tortured, toiling

away in their studio day and night making work after work, burning the midnight oil as they gracefully dab the last perfect piece of pigment on their canvas. As Poe wrote in *The Oval Portrait*:

“And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved: -- She was dead!”

This quote, if you're not familiar with this work, is the final line in a short story about an artist so impassioned by his work, a portrait of his wife, that he doesn't noticed she's died while modeling for him. This kind of melodramatic scene may be true of some artists, this is certainly not the whole story. For most contemporary artists these days the process has become a lot more business-like, there are a lot more why's. Why am I making this work? Why would someone respond positively to this work? Why would a funding body fund this? Why would someone buy this? Why would other people want to become involved in my project? The way most contemporary artists work, in a practical sense, looks like this:

1. The idea – what am I making?
2. The research – who has tackled these subjects before? Am I saying something new?
3. The studio experimentation – how can I best express my unique idea, now that I have researched the history of it's expression, how can I best situate it? What mediums would be best to use?
4. The written expression – how can I write about this idea in an interesting and succinct way so that other people are inspired to invest in it/viewing it?
5. The funding – who will fund the creation of this work? Will it be self-funded? If so, will I have extended the possible timeline of this work to factor in other paid work? Or can I simply rely on the sale of older work to fund the new work? Will a government body fund it? If so, will it be local, state or federal? Because each tier of government has their own preferences about the kinds of work they will fund. If I'm going for a government grant will I have to water down my concept to involve less controversial subject matters? What are the submission requirements, on paper or online? Will I need to send in physical examples of my work or will photographic documentation be enough? Will it be privately funded through grants like the Freedman Foundation Traveling Scholarship? If so, what does that private body value? If I accept funding from a government or private body, will they want to plaster their logo all over my work? How much of a say do they have in what is created?
6. The creation of the work in the studio.

7. The exhibiting of the work – which gallery will host my body of work? What space is appropriate – large white walls and dramatic lighting, or smaller, intimate venues? Indoor or outdoors? Is this work for sale? If so, how much? How much commission does this gallery take, do they charge rent and how will they promote my work?
8. The promotion – who will come to my exhibition? How will I promote it via print media like postcards and posters? How will I promote it online via social media? How will I write a media release so a critic will be interested enough to visit and review it?
9. Follow-up – If I've received a grant, what kind of expense report do I need to write? Will they need a detailed analysis and receipts to prove how I spent the grant money, or will a basic report do? How do I follow up on the new connections I've made during this exhibition? How will I document this work for archival purposes? How much information should I put on my website and social media without flooding those avenues?

ACTIVITY: the five-minute work of art – draw up a plan to make and exhibit a piece of art based on the above steps. **Hand out paper and pens**

As you can see, there are only a few points in this process that are working in the studio, these days like most businesses, artists spend the majority of their time sitting in front of their computer. Which may lead you to ask...

What's the point?

While I have made a number of comparisons to artists and business, you may recall my saying earlier that there are no guarantees in the art world. As much as you can toil, if it is ill-timed it won't work – for example, if you made a hilarious and insightful work about the Abbot government 5 years after they've moved out of office, it's lost all its potency. Equally so if you make a powerful work about the nature of war and fail to invite anyone else related to that field, it becomes like the tree falling in the woods parable. So what's the point? In a nutshell, that naively optimistic hope that one day you are going to hit the nail on the head, make the statement that defines a generation place or time. And let's say you do, as I mentioned before, almost more important than making the artwork itself, is getting people to pay attention to it, and that's where marketing comes in.

Indeed, marketing is so important in the art world, yet it is wrought with strife. The art world is in a way like a courtship, it needs to be wide reaching, but humble. Inviting, but not demanding. In this way you can't over promote with excessive flyers

and posters, as it starts to look like a blockbuster movie, cheapening the intention of the work. In addition, you can't over-reach on what the work is about, or it becomes a let down when the work is actually viewed. It needs to be cleverly target-marketed in a way that simultaneously blends in, yet stands out enough to be noticed within the art climate. In this way, language becomes pivotal in the production and promotion of art.

The Jargon

The way we talk about art is so important, and yet sometimes when we read artist statements or descriptions of work they only make the matter more confusing, not less so. It's at the point when you're reading about a work that you either get that 'Uh-huh' feeling, or you start to feel like you're on the wrong side of an art world in-joke.

What's in a name? In the 1980's there was a strong trend to stop naming artworks – the belief being that they should be able to speak for themselves as works of visual art without further explanation, and for the most part, they did. On the one hand this arguably lead to audiences being able to 'bring their own meaning' to a work of art, without having the meaning prescribed by the artists intention. On the other hand, it also leads to a fair amount of confusion when trying to describe the work. Most often these works ended up having an unofficial title as well, like Cindy Sherman's Untitled no. 224 (Bacchus). In the 1990's this trend began to reverse, with works of art that didn't resemble what would traditionally be considered a work of art at all, with titles that attempted to explain away their obscurity. This trend has by and large survived up until now, with even the most experienced gallery patron often left in the dark without a catalogue or room sheet to guide them through an exhibition. And once you get to the room sheet, the way the explanation is phrased can often leave you needing a dictionary as well.

Some common Jargon explained

- At the Intersection of x and y – for example “My work can be located at the intersection of fleshy notions of intimacy and the increasing co-dependency we foster with technology. Translated, this means I am interested in two ideas, and I feel they are related. This work should hopefully meld them sufficiently.
- The Nexus – for example “My work is situated within the nexus of contemporary food manufacturing and the disposable nature of modern life.” Translated, this is related to the previous entry, with the difference being, instead of two ideas, I am interested in many different ideas, and I believe they are related.

- Juxtaposed – while this is fairly overused these days, it essentially means I have paired two or more things that on their own would seem to be unrelated, however through their pairing I feel I am making a statement of some sort.
- Circumventing – this is an easy way to make your work sound clever, as it assumes that while the artist is fully aware of a situation or concept, and they have chosen to speak about it in an outsider or left-field kind of way. Essentially, it can allow an artist to speak on a topic with authority without having to bother proving that they know what they're talking about by engaging with a subject head-on.
- Appropriate – an artwork that is based on another work, but changed enough to give it a subversive twist that changes the original meaning.

Can you think of any more?

THE GALLERY

What to do with your eyes

When you first walk into an art gallery it can be a very daunting experience, particularly if it's a small gallery and you're the only one in it. Sometimes it can feel like all eyes are on you, and not the artwork. While it's rarely admitted, it's my opinion that people often feel as though there is some kind of unwritten code of conduct that needs to be followed while in an art space, when in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth. Some common fears are:

- The artist/gallery assistant will judge me by how I look at stuff and walk around the space – If that is your fear I would urge you to take a good look at that person behind the desk before you even look at the work in the space. What are they doing? Most of the time they're looking at stuff on the computer. Usually they're aware of the shy gallery viewer, so they might say hello and direct you to the room sheet/catalogue, or they might just sit in silence and allow you to look around at your own pace. If you have any questions feel free to ask them, otherwise feel free to totally ignore them.
- There is an expectation that you'll buy something – once again, this couldn't be further from the truth, I would say that the vast majority of people who view artworks would never buy anything, that is the assumption. So much so that if you do decide to buy something you'll get to see the gallery artist or gallery assistant light up in surprise as you are now the exception to the rule.
- There may be some kind of follow-up questioning that will expose my ignorance about this place/subject – if anyone in a gallery does ask you about

yourself or the work, you can rest assured that this is mostly just them either chatting nervously and/or trying to figure out if they should be doing something more for you in the space. After all, while we may read about a lot of fancy Art world bigwigs, most of us couldn't place their face. You can feel free to come clean and say "I saw this from the street and it looked interesting" or totally bluff about this amazing underground space you run in Berlin.

Can you think of any more?

What to do with your hands and body

Part of using your eyes is reading about what should be done with a work of art, while it is most often the case that you're not allowed to touch artworks, interactive art is becoming more and more common, allowing you to literally engage with the work. Again, it's important to read the information provided about the artwork, or ask a gallery person, to establish if this is the case. However, some common clues are:

- Gloves near that book on the plinth – why not put them on and leaf through the book?
- An otherwise unassuming box with a hole in it – yes this is definitely a worry, but you should put your hand in the box and experience it anyway.
- A pair of headphones connected to a music player or video artwork – video and sound works are some of the most exciting forms of art to gain popularity in the last few decades. They're generally very time consuming and intricate, so don't be afraid, put the headphones on for at least a minute.
- Mysterious curtains obscuring a space – this may require you to take off your shoes and crawl into something strange, again, don't be afraid! Getting inside an artwork and feeling immersed can be some of the most powerful works you'll ever experience.
- That large thing with scuff marks on it that people are already attempting to climb – if the scuff marks are still there and the gallery assistant is watching and smiling politely, get on and have a great time!

While it's great to have fun with the artworks at an opening, one of the worst things to do with your hands is leaving your empty beer bottles or wine glasses on a plinth with the artwork. Not only is it massively disrespectful to the artist, there's now also the risk of the glass falling and damaging the artwork or gallery when another body collides with it on their way past.

What to say with your mouth

Talking about artwork can be one of the trickiest steps to master when developing an appreciation for art. Most people will dodge this by making a self-depreciating joke using overly dramatic art-speak, but you don't have to. Again this comes down to using your eyes – having a look and having a read.

Great things to say:

- I really like the way the artist has used this colour/texture/lighting, it reminds me of a place I've visited or a memory I have.
- When I looked closer at the work I realised how interesting/important this subject matter is, even though we usually overlook it in our everyday lives.
- It was clever the way the artist has used this material/technique, it's made me think about this subject in a different way.

Big no-nos

- I don't get it – this is only a bad thing to say because it's usually a knee-jerk reaction said by someone who's just strolled in and forgotten to use their eyes to read any more information about a work that might be unusual.
- My/a child could have done this work – besides being hugely offensive off the bat, what you're essentially doing is dismissing all the research and experimentation we talked about earlier in one sweep. It's ok to not like the artwork, but it's probably unfair to compare the thought behind it to the random drawings of a child. Also, it exposes your ignorance of the art world in a big way.
- I can't really see it in my house/above my mantle piece – this one is a bit silly because it shows the speaker doesn't understand the reasoning behind art-making at all. Unlike design, many artworks are made purely to express an idea, and they may have been made to be displayed primarily in a gallery or street-art context. That is, your house and mantle piece weren't considered at all in the making of some works, so there's no reason to point out the obvious. When a speaker asserts this old chestnut they're confusing art with craft, many artists make work with no intention of commercially profiting from the work, if they did, it would exclude any work being made that wasn't family friendly or aesthetically attractive. And that would make for some boring art indeed.
- Ewww it's gross/weird/makes me feel uncomfortable – the primary reasoning behind art making is expressing an idea in a new way so as to hopefully, learn something new about a subject. So if art's intention is to do this, the subjects cannot all be safe and fluffy

What do you usually say at an art exhibition? Are there subject matters that make you feel uncomfortable?

THE ARTWORK

What is art? That old question has really had its boundaries pushed in the last few decades of post-modern art making. In essence, anything that someone has considered and placed in a thoughtful manner can reasonably be considered art in this day and age. However, not all artwork is made equal, and it is up to you, the viewer, to establish where how you feel about an artwork. While it is certainly very helpful to consider the opinions of critics and scholars while making up your mind about how you feel about a work, in the end, sometimes it's time to call a spade a spade.

Ideally a great artwork will have you thinking about it long after you've viewed it. These are rare and precious beasts, and usually come about through the skilful marriage of concept and craftsmanship. It's for this reason that contemporary Chinese art has really taken off in the past decade, with galleries like White Rabbit, in Chippendale, which is devoted entirely to Chinese art made after the year 2000 exploding in popularity.

When you look at an artwork it is important to consider not only its Aesthetic properties, but also the way the work has been placed or installed. What does it mean to put something on a plinth, or place a spotlight on a hung work, rather than have it placed on the floor? Is it a grandiose gesture? Can it help elevate an object that might ordinarily be considered 'every-day'? And conversely, what does it mean to place an art object on the ground, or prop it up with something else? And what does it mean when an artist from one culture, uses the techniques or symbols of another? Globalisation or cultural appropriation? Context is key when viewing contemporary art, as nothing exists within a vacuum.