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## CONTAINERS OF ELECTRONIC ART: DISPLAYING ELECTRONIC ART IN 'WHITE CUBE' AND EXPERIMENTAL SPACES

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CONTAINERS OF ELECTRONIC ART:  
DISPLAYING ELECTRONIC ART IN  
'WHITE CUBE' AND EXPERIMENTAL SPACES

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by

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

2

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements of the degree of  
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London, Ontario

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

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**Containers of Electronic Art: Displaying Electronic Art in the 'White  
Cube' and Experimental Spaces**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

## Abstract

*Containers of Electronic Art* investigates the presence of material electronic artworks in different art institutional display environments by contemplating two questions. First, how does material electronic art function within different types of art institutional spaces? Second, what does this reveal about the space? In order to answer these questions, this thesis researches electronic artworks found in three case studies: the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and the Koffler Gallery, presented together to illustrate the traditional white cube; ZKM Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum, an experimental space solely dedicated to exhibiting interactive and electronic art; and InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, which employs both of the above exhibition styles. Through these case studies, this thesis concludes that it is difficult to adequately show electronic art in a white cube space. I recommend that material electronic artworks then be presented in an experimental space that is designed specifically for each artwork, encourages visitor interactivity, and works with or enhances the message of the techno-oriented artwork.

**Keywords:** material electronic art, new media art, the white cube, the experimental space, exhibition techniques, museum-curatorship, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC), the Koffler Arts Centre, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, ZKM Media Museum, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre.

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## Preface

It is just a cube. A half-meter high aluminum cube located in the middle of a mundane and sterile gallery space – a square with high white walls and concrete floors. The visitor entering this space might expect very little from this aluminum cube and probably hardly notices the expansive exhibition area. Pondering the cube, the visitor likely comes to the conclusion that it references minimalism. Then, one step, two steps, three steps too close, too late, and the cube begins to shake.

Danish artist Jeppe Hein displayed *Shaking White Cube* in the 2009 exhibition “Please Please Please” at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver.<sup>1</sup> The concept for Hein’s solo show was to get down to the basic aspects of the exhibition experience, stripping away almost all but the viewer and the gallery space.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was made up of three installations: *Please Do Not Touch The Artwork*, *Invisible Cube*, and *Shaking White Cube*. *Shaking White Cube*, the work described above, consisted of an aluminum cube situated in a sparse ‘white cube’ exhibition space. Until the viewer enters the space and comes into close proximity with the object, s/he remains unaware that the aluminum cube is outfitted with motion sensors, which trigger an electrical motor that causes the artwork to vibrate across the dull cement floor. Reporter Kevin Griffin notes:

It's not often that art literally makes me jump.... As I entered the exhibition room on my right, I was looking forward to seeing some art. I barely noticed an object just outside my peripheral vision on my right.... Too late. It started vibrating and making what I can only describe as a racket. My body's reaction was immediate: I flinched.... After it stopped again, I stood perfectly still about three metres away. I moved my head. It remained motionless. I lifted my right foot off the ground. Its motion sensor picked up on my movement and it started vibrating again.... While I'm doing this, I'm thinking how

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Art Gallery, *Home Page*, 2009. <http://www.contemporaryartgallery.ca/>.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Albers, posting to *A Lazy Girls Guide to Success*, March 30, 2009, “Jeppe Hein at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.” <http://www.lindsayjoyhamilton.com/blog/?p=566>.

irreverent this cube is. It's art that refuses to keep quiet or stay put. It may be odd to say but I felt that we had developed some kind of relationship.<sup>3</sup>

In Griffin's account, he admits that his interaction with the artwork led him to develop a relationship with it, and presumably with the space that encased both him and the cube. The combination of Griffin's description and Hein's artistic objectives led me to wonder about how material electronic art, such as *Shaking White Cube*, interacts with traditional 'white cube' gallery space. The square structure and the white painted walls of the Contemporary Art Gallery are not the only thing that makes this space a 'white cube.' In addition, the 'white cube' ideology also empties itself of all distractions from the outside world by withholding from windows. The 'white cube' also has a ceiling that becomes a sole light source similar to the sun, which in turn can offer the viewer (the person enclosed by the space and in front of the artwork) a dream-like experience where the artworks float before her/him in her/his visual field, and her/his body is forgot. Hein's artworks turn the gallery itself into a work of art, and in so doing, he exposes the ideology of the 'white cube' – the rules of display that have been internalized by many viewers and in traditional curatorial practice. In addition, Hein specifically plays with the relationship between the artwork, the space, and the viewer. In turn, this begs the question, how does material electronic art, generally speaking, alter the viewer's perception of traditional 'white cube' spaces? And, can electronic art act as a kind of institutional critique? Furthermore, what would happen to the perception of such artworks if they were removed from a 'white cube' space and placed in an experimental space built specifically for the purpose of viewing electronic and other new media art?

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Griffin, "Jeppe Hen wants you to touch the art: The Vancouver Sun's pick form the Cultural Olympiad." *The Vancouver Sun*. March 13, 2009, <http://www.vancouversun.com/Travel/Jeppe+Hein+wants+touch/1384550/story.html>.

I use the term 'experimental spaces' following Michelle Henning, who argues, in her essay "Legibility and Affect: Museums as New Media," that experimental spaces are flexible exhibition spaces.<sup>4</sup> For example, such experimental spaces found in Media Museum of the ZKM Centre for Art and Media (Chapter 3) have display areas that are redesigned for each new exhibition. Since experimental spaces are flexible in construction, it is common for new media art, including electronic art, to be displayed in such spaces so as to allow the artwork to find cohesion with its surrounding area. This is also something that InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre (Chapter 4) tries to pursue. Experimental spaces create exhibition environments that allow the artworks to go beyond the expected aesthetic guidelines defined by traditional curatorial practice.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis is thus concerned with experimental forms of gallery organization and display, as well as with how such spaces differ from the idealized 'white cube' paradigm, as exemplified by the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre and the Koffler Gallery (Chapter 2). However, in order to grasp the differences between these styles of spaces, I have chosen to use electronic art<sup>6</sup> as an art variable. By incorporating electronic art into this thesis, I

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<sup>4</sup> Michelle Henning, "Legibility and Affect: Museums as New Media," in *Exhibition Experiments*, eds. Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald, "Introduction: Experiments in Exhibition, Ethnography, Art and Science," *Exhibition Experiments*, eds. Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Though the term 'electronic art' is more of a dated term from the 1960's, it still falls under the umbrella of the term 'new media art,' which has evolved more recently as the dominant medium classification of techno-oriented artworks. However, the term 'electronic art' is useful here, since more specific categories under the new media art umbrella are limiting. For example net art and interactive art are specific types of new media art, but it is arguable that some artworks can fall into both categories. By using the term 'electronic art,' and specifically 'material electronic art,' I limit the range of artworks discussed in this thesis by physical construction, and acknowledge the possibility that some artworks use several categories of new media art. Furthermore, as Christiane Paul notes in the "Introduction" to *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, electronic art and new media art are still changing terms. Therefore the term 'new media art' may still be in flux. See Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 3, 9; and John Canaday, "Art: The Electronics-Kinetics Trend. Paik's TV sets on View at Galleria Bonino," in *Nam June Paik eine DATA base*. (Italy: La Biennale di Venezia, 1993), 31.

account for an art genre whose relationship within the 'white cube' paradigm and the experimental spaces has been little explored in art literature. In particular, I focus on material electronic art, which uses techno-oriented components to allow artworks to be mobile physical structures that are often immersive and visually stimulating for the viewer-participant.<sup>7</sup>

The focal questions of *Containers of Electronic Art* then become: How does electronic art function within different types of art institutional spaces? And what does this reveal about the space? In order to answer these questions, I will continue to lay out the aims of this thesis in an *Introduction* section of Chapter 1 before exploring academic and curatorial theories on exhibiting electronic art in a second section, which is entitled *Foundations*. A third section, entitled *Transformations*, will introduce the four art institutions that operate as case studies and will be used to clarify electronic art's ability to challenge the modernist ideology known as the 'white cube.' In these case studies, I also highlight the benefits of exhibiting electronic art in experimental spaces, as well as the drawbacks of showing it in 'white cube' galleries. The case studies are used to illustrate how firstly, electronic art is both similar to, and different from, other contemporary media; and secondly, how it leads to alternative methods of exhibiting art.

By considering how electronic artworks are presented within both traditional 'white cube' and experimental spaces, it becomes clear that electronic art affects each environment differently, and consequently, that 'white cube' spaces are unable to create a cohesive exhibition space for this specific art form. As a part of each case study, the viewer's perception and interaction are considered, which then assists in revealing how

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<sup>7</sup> Luigi Pagliarin and Henrik Hautop Lund, "Art, Robots and Evolution as Tool for Creativity," in *Creative Evolution Systems*, eds., Peter J. Bently and David W. Corne (San Diego, CA, USA: Academic Press, 2002), 372.

electronic art affects each exhibition space. It is clear from the case studies that the walls in the traditional 'white cube' paradigms are unmovable barriers, whereas the adaptable boundaries of experimental spaces are considered essential to each electronic artwork.

## Chapter I

### Introduction: Foundations and Transformations

*Museums almost everywhere sanction the idea that works of art should, above all, be viewed one-by-one in an apparently ahistorical environment.*<sup>8</sup>

– Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach  
Universal Survey Museum, 1980

Written as a critical observation of museums by art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, the above statement can be easily mistaken for part of an exhibition directive belonging to almost any of today's art institutions. What the above excerpt from Duncan and Wallach's essay on "universal survey museums" implies are the guidelines and parameters for a twentieth-century curatorial practice that privileges structured and formulaic space. The contemplative space they describe is far removed from the universal survey museum's predecessor, the cluttered rooms of the eighteenth century salon. During the eighteenth century, salons became a popular forum for exhibiting artworks belonging to artists and collectors alike. Filled from floor to ceiling with paintings, these spaces were often located in government buildings or princely estates; evolving over the years, these elite spaces became a place for the public masses of the eighteenth century to socialize.<sup>9</sup>

Due to changes in aesthetic judgment, social norms, and curatorial practices, the salon exhibitions gradually transformed into institutions that presented art in a linear narrative, that is, the universal survey museum described by Duncan and Wallach. In turn, the universal survey museum exhibition spaces transformed into what the twentieth

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<sup>8</sup> Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum" *Art History*, vol. 3 (December 1980): 451.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Balle, "Democratization and Institutional Change: a challenge for Modern Museums," *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy and Globalization*, eds. Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima, and Ken'ichi Kawasaki (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 133. Also see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, and Politics* (London and New York: 1995), 27.

century modernists<sup>10</sup> termed the 'white cube'. Thus, museum exhibition spaces transitioned from stuffy estates lined with paintings, to the linear and chronological organization of large collections, before finally finding a temporary resting place in environments where artworks are arranged over lengthy white walls and are separated with the appropriate amount of white space to detach the viewer from the outside world.<sup>11</sup>

This transformation of exhibition space is exemplified in the spatial-history of the Louvre in Paris, France. The Louvre began exhibiting art in the salon style in the seventeenth century and from then, slowly transitioned to the linear fashion of the universal survey museum.<sup>12</sup> More recently, another element has been introduced: some current displays at the Louvre are displayed within modernist 'white cube' galleries, where slick clean walls reference nothing beyond the physical structure of the Museum. The 'white cube' space absorbs all sounds, there are no windows, and the space may be considered empty of all distractions, forcing the viewer to focus on the artworks.<sup>13</sup> In a similar case study, Christoph Grunenberg describes the 'white cube' space of the

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Childs suggests that the terms modernism, modernist, and modernity change with time and can be associated with a particular era, rather than having a universal definition (Childs, 14). The definition of the terms modernism, modernity, and modernist, are highly flexible and often interchangeable terms; it is common that most authors neglect to define these terms. Both authors Peter Childs and Peter Gay support this thought in their books on modernism. (Childs 2, and Gay 1) Peter Gay even states as his first sentence, "Modernism is far easier to exemplify than to define." For the purpose of this thesis, the term 'modernism' is exemplified through the 'white cube,' which is in turn explained through the work of several theorists. The term itself is used to describe something that deconstructs the old, and in place erects something new, in this case the deconstruction of the salon exhibition and the erecting of the 'white cube' ideology, which is also used only in pieces and has not been completely destroyed. The term modernity is used to reflect the quality of being of modernism, or a modern thing. 'Modernist' is used to refer to a person or a group of like-minded people who believe in the newly erected thing. For further reading on the debates of defining modernism and its affiliated terms see Peter Childs, *Modernism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-36, 114-126; and Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy, From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 251.

<sup>13</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

Museum of Modern Art (New York), implicitly suggesting some of the reasons why such spaces might have been popular with modernist curators. He writes:

In the Museum of Modern Art the paintings are hung at spacious intervals and in a single, though irregular row. Instead of having wainscoting and cornices..., the walls are completely undecorated. Nothing distracts attention from the works of art, implying a much more immediate, concentrated viewing experience than previously. A parallel can also be discerned between the light walls, right angles and overall austerity of the space and the abstract-geometric paintings... suggesting that the display was conceived with this type of painting in mind.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, although the universal survey museum practice is still evidently popular in many famous art galleries and museums, as new forms of art emerged, the ideal of arranging artworks in a linear ahistorical manner was, in turn, replaced by an alternative exhibition practice known as the 'white cube', a new traditional space. The 'white cube' is now in direct competition with the newest model of museum space organization, one that is central to this thesis, the flexible and versatile 'experimental space'.

The experimental space differs from the white cube in the way in which it utilizes the exhibition space for displaying artworks. Art critic Brian O'Doherty describes the white cube as clinically white in colour, with carpeted floors to reduce any sound, and lights hung from the ceiling to create the illusion of one sole light source, similar to the sun.<sup>15</sup> In addition, no visible windows should be present, as the aim of the white cube is to empty itself of all distractions in order to allow only the artworks to be prominent. Through these physical constructions, the modernists intended to stimulate (physically and metaphysically) a dream-like state in the viewer, allowing the viewer to believe that the artworks were floating before her/him. In order for this to occur, the white cube and

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<sup>14</sup> Christoph Grunenbert, "The Modern Art Museum," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 28.

<sup>15</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 15.



the architecture of the art institution must remain unnoticed, or retreat into the background.<sup>16</sup> Because the architecture lacks windows and any connection with the real world, the art institution becomes a “non-space”—it lacks context.<sup>17</sup> Because it lacks context, the white cube theoretically becomes an ideal place for exhibiting traditional art forms: the viewer sees only the artwork as an object, rather than the object in relation to the structure and the world around it.

Art critic O’Doherty suggests that the qualities associated with the white cube have evolved out of curatorial ‘habit.’ He writes: “The esthetics of hanging [art] evolves according to its own habits, which become conventions, which become laws.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the white cube has become a dominant exhibition ideology because museum administrations have applied the formulaic ideology so many times that it is hard to break away from it. This is similar to the rise of the linear narrative style of the universal survey museum earlier described by Duncan and Wallach. Through habit, curatorial practices solidified the “proper” way to display art, at least for a time, and currently the habit is to employ the white cube. Any deviation from this formula can be considered controversial or even radical. Thus, the curatorial ‘habit’ of the white cube ideology quickly became a standard practice of the twentieth century in most prestigious art institutions, along with international biennials and other temporary art festivals.<sup>19</sup> As promising as this newly found practice for exhibiting art was, the white cube became just as quickly contested by

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<sup>16</sup> Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinder and Elena Filipovic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 69.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas McEvelley, “Introduction,” in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition*, ed. Thomas McEvelley (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinder and Elena Filipovic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 63. Further Reading: Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennial 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (Greenwich, Conn. New York Graphic Society, 1968)

artists, curators, and art historians alike, who developed a strong legacy of “institutional critique” that had, as one of its results, the exploration of other curatorial practices, such as the experimental space.

Throughout the text *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O’Doherty observes and analyzes criticism of the white cube ideology. In this document, O’Doherty describes groups of artists, curators, and art historians making communal gestures to constructively criticize the traditional curatorial practice. “Whole-gallery gestures came in a rush at the end of the [19]60s and continued sporadically through the [19]70s”, he notes.<sup>20</sup> I describe such projects in further detail below, but briefly, such artists as Yves Klein and Armand P. Arman utilized a typical white cube as the material for their artworks, turning the white cube ideology on its head by presenting the gallery as the artwork, and thereby not allowing the space to fade into the background. Being aware of these gestures, it then becomes significant to consider what happens to the white cube when a newer medium brings with it different demands on the exhibition space. Such an occurrence has, and is currently, taking place with the advent of new media art.<sup>21</sup>

The development and permanent residency of new media art in an assortment of art institutions is credited to twentieth century artists whose curiosities were stirred by techno-oriented media. As early as the 1960s, new media art, which encompasses such sub-categories as electronic art (the focus of this study), video art, virtual reality art, interactive art, net art, network art, and real time computing art, has gained increasing prominence within the art world, placing it in competition with other, more traditional

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<sup>20</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 100.

<sup>21</sup> Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 2.

media displayed in art institutions. Since new media artworks have been incorporated into the art world, they have developed into a popular genre to exhibit, mainly due to their spectacular characteristics. These characteristics, which include mobility, reliance on interactivity, and evolutionary systems (an artwork that continues to change with each new visitor's input), tend to draw large audiences.

New media art exhibitions have become part of most art institutions' exhibition schedules, including Ontario's three largest art institutions\*: the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Hamilton Art Gallery.<sup>22</sup> Knowing this, it becomes imperative to consider this popular art genre's relationship with its surroundings. The relationship between new media art, specifically electronic art, and different types of art institutional spaces forms the primary concern of *Containers of Electronic Art*. Throughout this thesis, I critically observe and document the ways in which institutional spaces, both traditional and experimental, accommodate electronic art, in a manner similar to what O'Doherty and other critics have done with the white cube space and traditional media.

*Containers of Electronic Art* explores the way that the entrance of new media art into a traditional white cube can and has created a number of complications. Christiane Paul, Curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, describes one of many difficulties associated with displaying new media art in a traditional space: "As a process-oriented art form that is inherently collaborative, participatory, networked, and variable, new media practice tends to challenge the structures and logic of museums and

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\* In terms of exhibition space.

<sup>22</sup> Ontario Association of Art Galleries, *Directory*, 2009, <http://www.aaag.org/directory/index.html>.

art galleries and reorients the concept and arena of the exhibition.”<sup>23</sup> Paul continues, suggesting that new media art can extend beyond the museum walls via networks.<sup>24</sup> In addition, she argues that new media art has the ability to undermine the very logic of the museum, particularly a traditionally idealized museum, by the very *virtue*<sup>25</sup> embodied in the artworks’ form and conceptual being.<sup>26</sup> Since new media art can undermine the traditional museum structure, it can also drive the art community to construct a growing number of experimental institutional spaces. These institutions can then help create cohesion between the space and the work displayed within.

The intentions of constructing an experimental space are often centred on providing new media art with an environment that uses display methods that work with the medium, in contrast to the white cube, where new media art works against the space’s constraints.<sup>27</sup> By investigating new media art, particularly electronic art, in relation to both the white cube and the experimental spaces, it becomes clear that the art form either works with, or challenges, the spatial structure of the various types of galleries. A beneficial way to examine the strengths and limitations of each type of institution that exhibits electronic art is to understand the methodology of the different types of curatorial practice to ascertain how electronic art functions within each space.

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<sup>23</sup> Christiane Paul, “New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 191.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> What is meant by the word ‘virtue’ is that the very quality and/or being of new media artworks challenges the structural integrity of the idealized philosophy of the ‘white cube;’ new media’s very *essence* of the object contests the space without intentionally doing so. See Christiane Paul, “New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> Elena Filipovic is actually paraphrasing Christiane Paul. Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinder and Elena Filipovic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 68.

Instead of contemplating the entire range of new media art in relation to various art institutions, this study limits its focus to electronic art. More specifically, this thesis discusses material electronic art, or what Canadian artist Norman White describes as “physical computing”.<sup>28</sup> Material electronic art, or physical computing, can be defined as a type of new media art that uses technology, electronic components, and rarely makes use of a screen. The physical structure of the art object is the primary focus. One example of this is Hein’s *Shaking Cube*, described in the *Preface*. A second example, which will be further explored in the white cube case study (Chapter 2), is Norman White’s *The Helpless Robot* (Fig. 7). *The Helpless Robot* is a pyramid-like vessel made out of scrap metals and electronics that swivel on a stationary base. Through its sensors, *The Helpless Robot* detects the viewer and calls out to her/him to move it around by using two handles welded to its frame. White’s artwork provokes interaction without the use of a screen or a computer as a tool.<sup>29</sup>

A second form of electronic art that lies outside the scope of this thesis is immaterial electronic art,<sup>30</sup> which has not been included in this study for two reasons. First, immaterial electronic art brings up alternative questions regarding how a traditional curatorial practice interacts with the artwork since it is commonly dependent upon the computer screen as a tool for exhibition display. Second, immaterial electronic art is exhibited differently from material electronic art since it uses intangible components,

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<sup>28</sup> Norman White, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Durham, Ontario, August 8, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Immaterial Electronic Art: The artwork is constructed out of algorithms or a language that produces a visual representation when inputted into a tool console such as a computer or projector. Immaterial electronic art is further explored by Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008) 7.

such as free flying network frequencies.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for the purpose of this thesis, the term 'electronic art' will refer to artworks that use techno-oriented media to construct a physical and material-based art object.

Because both material and immaterial electronic art have emerged as sub-categories of new media art, they tend to share similar artistic components that occur in different combinations. To some degree, both types of electronic artworks often display such artistic components as sound, image projection, interactivity, evolutionary systems, immersive environments, and mobility. These components work together to blur the line between new media art sub-categories. The question then becomes, how do some of these components contribute to the ways that material electronic art functions within a museum space? Moreover, how does electronic art, as a medium, challenge the modernist ideals of the white cube and embrace the experimental spaces? It is these closely intertwined questions that will be explored in the following chapters. To that end, this thesis examines four distinct art institutional spaces, which jointly form three case studies. The case studies assess the chosen galleries and museums' responses to exhibiting material electronic art and the physical construction of their institutions in order to host techno-oriented media.

In order to understand the four art institutions, several useful theories and terms must first be explained. This thesis examines and evaluates the work of theorists such as Andre Malraux, Brian O'Doherty, Elena Filipovic, and Christiane Paul, who developed

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<sup>31</sup> The distinction between material and immaterial art is not to say that immaterial electronic art does not challenge the 'white cube' paradigm, but rather, that it does so in a different manner. See Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008). Author Joasia Krysa describes immateriality as forms of social relations, communication networks and information systems, however this is not what this thesis is concerned with. I am more interested in the physical structure of a visual object, which has presence. Joasia Krysa, "Curating Immateriality: The Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems," in *Data Browser 03: Curating Immateriality*, ed. Joasia Krysa (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2006), 9.

and challenged the ideas and thoughts around the neutral museum space and traditional curatorial practice. Through the writings of these and other scholars, this thesis examines such questions as: What is an institution? Why has the institution been contested by artists and art academics? and, What is the relevance of the phrase 'museums without walls'? Beyond this, the thesis also provides an in-depth clarification of what constitutes both the white cube and electronic art. Each of these definitions will be outlined in order to assist in understanding the significance of each case study. The explanation of these concepts makes up the introductory section and provides the theoretical underpinning for the three case studies.

The case studies presented have been carefully chosen to represent three distinct types of an art institution, each of which has contributed to an emerging canon of electronic art either through its collections and/or exhibitions. The three case studies are: the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) and the Koffler Gallery, presented here together to represent the traditional white cube (Chapter 2); ZKM Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum, an experimental environment solely dedicated to exhibiting interactive and electronic art (Chapter 3); and InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Canada's own dedicated electronic art centre and user of both exhibition styles (Chapter 4).

*Containers of Electronic Art* is organized in order to provide a direct comparison of these institutions and to illustrate the ways that the display of electronic art affects three very different types of spaces: the traditional white cube, the specialized institution, and a third space which exemplifies characteristics of both. By applying museum studies theories to each of these case studies, the previously proposed questions—in short, how

does electronic art function within different types of museum spaces and how does it challenge or embrace the modernist ideals of the white cube and the experimental spaces? —are unpacked, rendering clear the idea that electronic art affects the function of the space and the viewer within the gallery. In taking this approach, this thesis intends to expand the critique of traditional exhibition spaces to include experimental spaces and electronic art and make concrete comments on how electronic art can be successfully displayed.

Artists and art academics have recommended a need for curatorial change in exhibiting new media art and curatorial change has been put into practice, but results have yet to be recorded or even analyzed. In her essay “From Inside the Museum: Some Thoughts on the Issue of Institutional Critic,” curator Lynn Zelevansky traces the historical progression of artists’ and academics’ methods of critiquing the art institution. She believes that artists and academics have become part of the institution and are forgetting to critique it. As a concluding thought, she writes: “The time is ripe for an expanded Institutional Critique, a thoughtful, nuanced, and thoroughly researched discourse that is theoretically sophisticated, but also capable of generating practical applications.”<sup>32</sup> Zelevansky calls for a discussion about how art institutions operate and how they affect the exhibition of artworks. I suggest that the challenges offered to museums and galleries by new media art form one area that can contribute extensively to the history of institutional critique sought out by Zelevansky.

In contrast to Zelevansky, Sarah Cook, the curator and co-founder of Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss (CRUMB), points to curatorial action taking place in

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<sup>32</sup> Lynn Zelevansky, “From Inside the Museum: Some Thoughts on the Issue of Institutional Critique,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 178.



experimental galleries. In her essay, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art", Cook compares various art institutions including ZKM and InterAccess.<sup>33</sup> However, her focus is on examining the existence of these types of art institutions, rather than how these and other types of galleries exhibit electronic artworks. Her work lacks an analysis of the physical space that encases the new media art.<sup>34</sup> As a result, this thesis seeks to provide an analysis of the physical spaces that currently display electronic art, with the goal of bridging the literature gap between curating new media art—specifically material electronic art—and the medium's relationship with different types of art institutional models.<sup>35</sup>

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections: *Foundations* and *Transformation*. The purpose behind the division of this chapter is to clearly distinguish the general information about art institutions from the information that focuses on the origins of art institutions found in the following case studies. The first section, *Foundations*, continues to expand and develop the history of the art institution started in the *Introduction*. Its role is to discuss important concepts, terminology, and theories that are necessary for understanding each case study. The second section, *Transformations*, is titled for the art institution's ability to be a transforming chamber in which the space shapes the experience of the viewer and alters her/his perception of art.<sup>36</sup> This section introduces each case study and its primary objectives are to answer the focal questions of

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<sup>33</sup> Regine, posting to We Make Money Not Art blog, May 30, 2007. "Interview with Sarah Cook," <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2007/05/interview-with-17.php>.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 169-182.

<sup>35</sup> Those who have discussed curating electronic art, but not its relationship with the exhibition space—(Cook, 2003); (Diamond, 2003); (Bennett, T. 1995); (Bijvoet, 1990); (Fraser, 2005); (Filipovic, 2006); (Paul, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 45; and Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum" *Art History*, vol. 3 (December 1980): 455.

this study. *Transformations* also illustrates a rationale for the selection of each case study, and underlines the challenges that electronic art may bring to each of the selected institutions.

### Foundations

#### The Institution

To understand the relationship between the various types of art institutions and electronic art, it is necessary to explore the general definitions of the term *institution* commonly found in art literature. This term arises in two prevailing and overlapping ways that are of central importance to my argument in the rest of *Containers of Electronic Art*.<sup>37</sup>

I look first to the institution as an invisible system of authority and, second, to the definition of institution as a physical structure. The former is best illustrated by German art critic Isabelle Graw's term "cultural confinement".<sup>38</sup> In an argument similar to that found in the writings of John R. Searle and Michel Foucault, both of whom describe the institution as a layered set of intersecting systems of authority, Graw re-associates the invisible authority of the *institution* with the idea of "cultural confinement".<sup>39</sup> In this case, the term reflects the system of guidelines and parameters set up by society, and the way in which such parameters influence individuals who encounter this system of

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<sup>37</sup> For further reading on the institution see (Anderson 2004), (Alexander 2000), (Balle 2002), (Barker 1999), (Basu & Macdonald 2007), (Bennett 1995), (Duncan & Wallach 1980), (Foucault 1979), (Fraser 2005) (Graw 2006), (Harris 2004), (Hoffman 2006), (Karp, Kratz, Szwaja, and Ybarra-Frausto, ed. 2006), (McClellan 2008), (Newhouse 1998, 2005), (O'Doherty 1986, 2007), (Paul 2006), (Pollock & Zemans eds. 2007), (Preziosi & Farago eds. 2004), (Searle 2006), (Stallabrass 2004), and (Welchman 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Isabelle Graw, "Beyond Institutional Critique," in *Institutional Critique and After*. ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 137.

<sup>39</sup> John R. Searle, "What is an Institution?" in *Institutional Critique and After*. ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

authority.<sup>40</sup> This could be evident, for example, in the way a person chooses to dress when visiting a museum or gallery. The visitor chooses to wear clothing that is appropriate and inoffensive, as s/he obeys the established rules belonging to the invisible system of authority known as an institution. With regards to art galleries and museums, Graw's definition of the institution is visible through smaller sub-systems of authority, such as the hierarchy of employees, the bylaws, and the committees of the museum; all of these smaller systems encourage specific behaviours on the part of museum visitors. Thus, Graw's re-labeling of the term *institution* as "cultural confinement" emphasizes the individual's submission to immaterial systems of institutionalization.

Conversely, the second definition of the term *institution* is more closely related to the physical appearance of the building. When the term *institution* arises in art literature, the writers are most often referring to art galleries and museums. The physical infrastructures of these buildings become what Jonathan Harris describes as the "literal image" of the term *institution*.<sup>41</sup> In other words, art galleries and museums are seen as a physical representation and a symbol of authority of the term *institution*. Museums and galleries, as symbols of authority, underpin this study's suggestion that art institutions can be seen as equivalent to places that are sacred or temple-like.<sup>42</sup> More often than not, the distinction between this definition and Graw's is hazy because the term *institution* and its meaning are used interchangeably, often without signaling a difference to the

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<sup>40</sup> John R. Searle, "What is an Institution?" in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 45.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Harris, ed, *Art, Money, Parties: New Institutions in the Political Economy of Contemporary Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>42</sup> (Anderson 2004), (Barker 2004), (Bennett 1995), (Duncan & Wallach 1980), (Honour & Fleming 2002) (Newhouse 1998, 2005), (O'Doherty 1986), (Paul 2008), (Pollock & Zemans 2007), and (Preziosi, & Farago, 2004), among others.

reader. It is the two definitions of the single term *institution* that artists and art academics have come to criticize, contest, and, at times, accept.

Both immaterial and physical aspects of an institution can alter and change the way a viewer interprets and interacts with an artwork. I have highlighted two ways to interpret the term *institution* to emphasize the following concept: when it comes to displaying art, the physicality of an art institution is equally as influential on its viewer as is a museum's authoritative system exemplified by employees, visitors' rules, and didactics. This thesis considers the physical structure of an institution to be highly influential to the function of material electronic art, since it often suggests to the viewer how to interact with an artwork. Thus, the separation of the term is useful for this thesis in creating clarity and in sidestepping some of the assumptions that come with defining the art institution.

#### Contesting Space

Dada has generally been seen as the first art movement that targeted the power and authority of art institutions, both as physical structures and as organizational systems. This early twentieth century movement brought together intellectuals from a number of backgrounds, ranging from visual arts, to literature, to theater, who "mocked all established values, [and] all traditional notions of good taste in art and literature."<sup>43</sup> It is generally accepted that one of the most recognized Dada contributors to the art world is Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is well known for his artwork *Fountain* from 1917, which is often thought of as one of the most influential artworks criticizing institutional

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<sup>43</sup> Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 2002), 810.

structures.<sup>44</sup> *Fountain*, a ready-made urinal brought into the gallery by Duchamp, ridicules the handmade nature of much artwork, in turn critiquing the art system that privileged such work. Duchamp further mocks classic media by signing the artwork 'R. Mutt'. The application of a signature other than Duchamp's own exploits the institutional need to place value on an artwork that has traceable provenance, authorship, and craftsmanship. It is here, through the false signature, the placement of a urinal in an institutional space, and the implication that a ready-made is an artistic medium, that the Dadaist critiques the authority and power associated with art institutions. Dada illustrates that art institutions attribute to the value of an artwork by way of its traceable provenance, authorship, and position in a museum and gallery, rather than the concepts and ideas in the artwork itself.

Regardless of the significant contributions of the Dada movement, there is still controversy over when exactly artists began contesting the physical space of art institutions in any concerted way. To illustrate, the Dadaists were questioning institutional systems in the early twentieth century, but two scholars identify different timelines for the arrival of institutional critique. Dominique Poulot argues that since the establishment of museums, artists, curators, and art historians have always contested art institutions.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Christiane Paul identifies the 1960s and 1970s as the time when artistic critique of the institution came to the fore.<sup>46</sup> Despite the uncertainty of the

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<sup>44</sup> Christiane Paul, "New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 192.

<sup>45</sup> Balle quotes Dominique Poulot (1983). Catherine Balle, "Democratization and Institutional Change: A Challenge for Modern Museums," *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy and Globalization*, ed. Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima, and Ken'ichi Kawasaki (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 133.

<sup>46</sup> Christiane Paul, "New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 192.

timeline, it is still possible to further explore the reasons behind first, whether and second, why institutional critique has emerged.

The formal element of the white cube is one of the primary reasons that artists and art academics began to reject traditional gallery spaces. The perimeters set by the white cube ideology cause gallery spaces to take on the aura of a theater stage rather than an interactive environment that allows the viewer to discover artworks, framed by a cohesive context. The white walls are mere backdrops intended to be forgotten by the traditional curatorial practice, in order to allow the viewer to focus only on the artworks.

Artists such as Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum critiqued the idea of idealized institutional space by suggesting that museums and galleries can be seen as a “backdrop or stage—incorporating stage lights and painted pedestals...”<sup>47</sup> By critiquing the purpose of museums and galleries, it becomes clear that believers in the traditional curatorial practice see a museum space as a stage, rather than a spatial context for an artwork. It is here that ideas regarding why museums and galleries even exist begin to emerge. The white cube ideology restricts the viewer’s discovery by disguising the natural structure of the institution—this limits both the viewer’s experience and the display potential of the artworks themselves. It is the formality and unification of exhibition spaces that has caused artists, curators, critics, and art historians to contest the museum space, and especially, the spaces that implement white cube strategies.

Following in the footsteps of the Dadaists, artists who contested art institutionalization and the white cube paradigm became known as the “usual suspects”:  
Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Yves Klein, Armand P.

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<sup>47</sup> Martha Buskirk, “Interview with Sherrie Levine, Louis Lawler, and Fred Wilson,” in *The Duchamp Effect. Essays, Interviews, Roundtable*, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge: MIT Press, an October Book, 1994), 184.

Arman, James Lee Byars, and Iris Clert.<sup>48</sup> These artists were given the title the “usual suspects” for their artworks that often focused on critiques of the white cube.<sup>49</sup> Art historian Amy Pederson notes that the “usual suspects” artists

devised projects that took the museum as their material and site in order to interrogate the architectural and political structures that propped up the supposedly disinterested façade of the institution—which they revealed as a physical disguise and ideological filter of sanctioned authority.<sup>50</sup>

The “usual suspects” undertook such projects to challenge the authoritative structure of the institution, which, leading up to the 1960s, dictated what was art, and particularly, what was *good* art. In exploring these political views, the “usual suspects” also revealed to the viewer the physicality of the art institutions as a container. Essentially, the artworks of the “usual suspects” make use of both definitions of the term *institution*.

Take, for example Yves Klein’s infamous 1958 work, *Le Vide (The Void)*.<sup>51</sup> Klein exhibited an empty white cube gallery space as his own artwork. *Le Vide* illustrates the intentional action of displaying the white walls, wooden floors, and ceilings of the gallery space, which is what the white cube ideology intends to hide from its viewer. According to the white cube ideology, the obvious presence of the gallery structure is seen as too pervasive, since it disrupts the traditional curatorial practice’s dream-like effect it has on the viewer who interacts with the artwork. As a result, the viewer becomes aware of her/his surroundings and even the outside world, which is contrary to the ideology’s aims of minimizing distractions.

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<sup>48</sup> The phrase the “usual suspects” is used by such authors as (Fraser, 2005); (O’Doherty, 1986); (McEvelley, 1986); (Graw, 2006); and (Pederson, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Amy Pederson, “Relational Aesthetics and Institutional Critique,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 268-269.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Roberta Smith, “Art Review; Where Seeing Is Not Only Believing but Also Creating,” *The New York Times*, (November 22, 2002), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst.fullpage.html?res=9802E1DE1539F931A15752C1A9649C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>.

The artistic response to *Le Vide* is *Le Plein (The Full)* by artist Armand P. Arman, completed in the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> A reaction to Klein's ideas, Arman's artwork incorporates the same type of white cube gallery space, but the space is completely full of waste and garbage to highlight the edges and boundaries of the room.<sup>53</sup> Both artists' gestures work against the principals and guidelines of exhibition design demanded by the modernist's ideals of the white cube, since they bring forward the space as an essential component of the work, rather than a forgotten stage.

More recently, artists, curators, and critics such as Brian O'Doherty, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser have drawn upon the institutional critique of the 1960s to apply it to their own contexts and to continue the critique of art institutions. Brian O'Doherty noted as early as 1976, "With postmodernism the gallery space is no longer neutral...";<sup>54</sup> referring in part to the kind of argument made by Graw above, but also to agitation due to the lack of accurate representation of non-mainstream cultures, ideas, and societies.<sup>55</sup> In the years since O'Doherty wrote this, much institutional critique has focused on issues of representation, which will be illustrated below through the work of Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser.

To begin, African-American artist and curator Fred Wilson uses his "outsider-moving-inside" identity as a way to comment on how art institutions have portrayed

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<sup>52</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Roberta Smith, "Art Review; Where Seeing Is Not Only Believing but Also Creating," *The New York Times*, (November 22, 2002). [http://query.nytimes.com/gst.fullpage.html?res=9802E1DE1539F931A15752C1A9649C8B63&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=print.](http://query.nytimes.com/gst.fullpage.html?res=9802E1DE1539F931A15752C1A9649C8B63&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=print;); and Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition*. (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 90.

<sup>54</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 79.

<sup>55</sup> For further reading see (Buskirk 1994), (Clifford 1991), (Luke 2002), (Phillips 2000, 2005), (Whitelaw 1995, 2006), (Tator, Henry, & Mattis 1998), and (Zolberg.1996).



slavery.<sup>56</sup> Wilson is best known for his site-specific installation, *Mining the Museum*, at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. In this curatorial artwork, Wilson “mined” the museum’s collection for artifacts and then arranged them in the museum exhibition area to comment on how African American history is presented within the historical institutions through the use of objects. Thus, he demonstrated how specific arrangements of various artifacts could create a perspective of history that is different from what a museum’s curator might generate using these same artifacts.

Wilson’s most documented and controversial arrangement included only four artifacts: three delicate parlor chairs, which stood facing a whipping post (a bench like structure that slaves were folded over and whipped).<sup>57</sup> This specific arrangement of artifacts refused the erasure of slavery, and the exhibition itself emphasized that meaning is created by context.<sup>58</sup> Wilson believes that it is important for a curator to understand how a particular medium can interrogate the museum’s authority.<sup>59</sup> He notes that an exhibition can argue against the accepted universal truth or knowledge by way of contesting the institution, meaning that history is not neat and tidy, as institutions want their viewers to believe.<sup>60</sup>

Like Wilson, art critic Andrea Fraser is well known for her explorations of institutional critique, and specifically for her work entitled, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique”. Fraser focuses on the types of art that contest

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<sup>56</sup> Holland Cotter, “Art Review: Pumping Air into the Museum, So It’s as Big as the World Outside,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/30/arts/art-review-pumping-air-into-the-museum-so-it-s-as-big-as-the-world-outside.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> PBS, “Fred Wilson,” *Art: 21*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson/index.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Martha Buskirk, “Interview with Sherrie Levine, Louis Lawler, and Fred Wilson,” in *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Roundtable*, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge: MIT Press, an October Book, 1994), 187.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

exhibition space and outlines how these pieces are to be considered art. She writes, "Art is not art because it is signed by an artist or shown in a museum or any other 'institutional' site. Art is art when it exists for discourses and practices that recognize[s] it as art... whether as object, gesture, representation, or only an idea."<sup>61</sup> Here, Fraser's analysis echoes that of Isabelle Graw, particularly in terms of Graw's description of the role of the immaterial aspects of the institution. By stating that the institution does not define what constitutes an artwork, Fraser implies that art is a discourse, and that institutions should embrace the subject of institutional critique. As such, it becomes clear that Wilson, O'Doherty and Fraser are all, in one way or another, concerned with encouraging discussion about art's context, which includes the physical space surrounding artworks. It is the work of artists, curators, and critics who subscribe to this ideology that allow visual arts to continue to break free from uniformity of the traditional curatorial practice, just as the "usual suspects" have done through their artworks.

*Theorizing the White Cube and Material Electronic Art*

While Fraser, Wilson and others point to the importance of considering the politics of the institution, I want to additionally point out that in the case of electronic art, the experience of the viewer/participant is also significant. As early as 1967, Andre Malraux made this point within his text *The Museum Without Walls*. The term "museum without walls" refers to the reproduction of artworks in large quantities, to allow for someone in a location distant from the original artwork to study it.<sup>62</sup> For instance, an art book can be considered a "museum without walls", since it contains numerous artworks in the form of photographic reproductions at a quality almost equivalent to the artwork

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<sup>61</sup> Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institutional Critique," *Art Forum*, September 2005, 281.

<sup>62</sup> Andre Malraux, "Introduction to Museum without Walls," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 371.

itself.<sup>63</sup> Malraux argues that though reproductions are beneficial to people who have great distance from the artwork, he also acknowledges that sculptures and architecture suffers when captured in a two-dimensional representation. He writes:

The angle from which a work of sculpture is photographed, the manner in which it is framed and centered, and, above all, a *carefully studied* lighting—the lighting of some famous works is beginning to share a degree of attention that once was granted only to film stars—may strongly accentuate something that previously had been only suggested.<sup>64</sup>

Static photographic documentation used to allow for distant study of an object cannot adequately reproduce images of architecture or, more importantly to this study, sculptures. It is through static documentation that small details of an artwork are made more prominent to the viewer under specific lighting. This is in contrast to personal observation, where the same detail might be considered to have minor significance or relevance to the conceptual formation of a piece. Thus, I argue that material electronic art also suffers the same fate as sculptures, which makes it essential for the viewer/participant to experience techno-oriented artworks in person. Moreover, a photograph of an electronic artwork may make the viewer believe that an artwork is static when, in fact, it is not; or that it is a silent piece rather than a source of obnoxious sound. In other words, personal viewing of an electronic artwork is key. Having the viewer, a person who has come into the same environment as the artwork, personally witness the artwork in its space is essential in any viewer's understanding electronic artworks, such as found in this study; if the viewer can understand the artwork through experience, s/he also may come to recognize that the electronic artwork critiques its encompassing space. For this reason, Malraux's theory is useful.

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<sup>63</sup> Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans, eds. *Museum after Modernism: Strategies to Engagement* (Oxford and Edinburgh, 2007), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Andre Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), 82.

Malraux's theory assists in understanding why it is essential that material electronic artworks be viewed in a supportive environment, such as an experimental space. The relationship between the type of gallery and the electronic artwork must work well together so that the structure, mobility and even the sound of the artwork do not contest the space, as is often the case within the white cube. If electronic art is shown properly, it should easily incorporate the space as an essential part of the artwork, as it will become evident with *Tempo Liquido* in Chapter 3.

*Tempo Liquido* (Fig. 17) is a large, steel waterwheel that uses digital images to simulate falling water while having water flow through a basin. Exhibited within ZKM's Media Museum, an experimental space, *Tempo Liquido* needs the structure of the multi-level space for the viewer to completely interact with the artwork. It likewise requires the open skylights for the viewer to connect the artwork to the world beyond the Museum's walls. When electronic art is shown in a white cube paradigm, the viewer, a person in close contact with the artwork in its space, becomes aware of the tangibility of the space and the viewer can critically view the artwork in a manner similar to seeing an artwork in a book; the artwork is viewed as only an object and not an interactive piece. Electronic art is dependent upon its space. It is this dependency that is further explored in the proceeding case studies, leading to the conclusion that there is a need for experimental art institutions to exhibit techno-orientated art. Otherwise, new media art, such as electronic art, can become marginalized.<sup>65</sup>

Art Critic Elena Filipovic explores the question of how the archetype of the white cube, which demands an illusion of space and a loss of context, ever came to dominate art

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<sup>65</sup> Christiane Paul, "Challenges for a Ubiquitous Museum," in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, ed. Christiane Paul (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 53, 57.

institutions. Filipovic argues that globalization and the desire of countries to communicate in a unified way through visual arts are the reasons for the survival of the white cube.<sup>66</sup> The white cube signifies, and is an example of, a unified language that can allow a viewer to comprehend any artwork in the same way within any art space. In her essay, "The Global White Cube", Filipovic explains that international biennial and art festivals implemented the white cube paradigm and became the vehicle by which to distribute this sterile exhibition practice.<sup>67</sup> The white cube ideology thus became known as an "international-style".<sup>68</sup>

Ironically, it was never the intention of international art exhibitions to embrace the strict white cube model, because, in many cases, the exhibitions were supposed to present experimental art and, therefore, experimental art spaces.<sup>69</sup> As international art exhibitions were organized to showcase new and innovative ideas, such as art that worked against the 'non-place' parameters of the white cube, the stage was set for the development of experimental spaces. Such changes were not, however, inevitable.

To thoroughly understand how electronic art functions within a gallery space and to further explore why artists began to produce electronic artworks, it is best to revisit the definition of *material electronic art* found in the introductory section of this chapter. Material electronic art is a type of new media art that uses technology, electronic components, and rarely uses a screen to form a visually aesthetic art object. It is also closely linked to kinetic art, but has evolved by including the viewer as an essential component of the artwork. Electronic art is also open to digital components, rather than

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<sup>66</sup> Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinder and Elena Filipovic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 69.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 67.

just mechanical. Dependent upon the structure of the building that encase them, these types of electronic artworks often project sound patterns, call upon the viewer to interact with the object, move through the space and other surrounding art objects, and, most commonly, contain evolutionary systems that constantly transform the artwork. These characteristics are exemplified in such artworks as *Frantic* by Doug Back (Fig. 5), *Menage* by Norman White (Fig. 19), and *Tempo Liquido (Liquid Time)* by Fabrizio Plessi (Fig. 14), found in each of this thesis' case studies.

This particular form of new media art is also concerned with how to create a physical and tangible object that uses technological components. In other words, the artwork is more than just a tool to exhibit an immaterial software or program; rather, its physical components play a significant roll in how the viewer perceives the artwork. This clarification of the term *material electronic art* leads to another question. Before exploring how electronic art functions within a gallery space, it must be first understood how this type of new media art evolved as a medium.

Material electronic art has evolved progressively as most art media and movements do. Art historian Donald Preziosi comments on the sequential nature of art history, which, although he does not specifically discuss it, has led inexorably towards electronic art and the emergence of new media art. In his essay, "Seeing Through Art History" Preziosi states, "Changes in artistic forms signal or document changes in individual or collective mentality."<sup>70</sup> In terms of electronic art, artists, as much the society and the global economy, were collectively affected by the rapid evolution of technology at the beginning of the 1960s. Since technology has affected nearly every part

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<sup>70</sup> Donald Preziosi, "Seeing Through Art History," in *Knowledges: Histories and Critical Studies in Disciplinarity*, eds. Ellen Messer-Davidow, David Shumway and David Sylvan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 218.

of daily life in affluent societies, it is only expected that artistic media was also influenced by technology. This echoing of the outside world in an artist's work as well as in art institutions is not new; in fact, a belief in the influence of the exterior world is actually a very old concept. This is most evident through the development of the white cube.

The white cube is a product of the socially constructed norms, which dominated during the time in which it developed, similar to eighteenth century salons. When the exhibition of art became popular during the eighteenth century, no curatorial structure existed, so the organizers of the salons decided to hang the artworks from floor to ceiling. As time progressed, curatorial practice grew from the salons, to the universal survey museum, and then to the white cube paradigm. This same type of progression has occurred within art, thus incorporating technology into artworks. The socially constructed norms of the 1960s and onward provided the ideal time for techno-oriented artwork to evolve.

Through understanding that electronic art is a product of its environment and is linked to the practice of artists working in other formats, another question is raised: why is it so problematic for electronic art to be presented in different art institutions, especially the white cube? In wondering about new media art's role and how it might extend institutional critique, Christiane Paul states that it is the digital technology medium that creates the challenge between new media art and the art institutional space. She writes: "Clearly, digital technologies have supported a new form of visual culture

that finds itself, in various ways, at odds with institutional structures.”<sup>71</sup> Although Paul’s statement does not clearly answer the question, it does give indication that electronic art, a stream of new media art, challenges the art institution and, therefore, hints at the medium’s function within institutional spaces. Through the information found in this introductory chapter and further explored in the case studies to follow, this observation is considered. Each case study presents an example of how electronic art functions within current art institutional spaces and, further how technology-oriented media challenges and/or benefits from the white cube paradigm by making it tangible to the viewer.

### **Transformation**

The exhibition theories and terms described in Foundations are included to create an understanding for the analysis of material electronic art’s presence in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC), the Koffler Gallery, ZKM Centre for Art and Media’s Media Museum, and InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre case studies. Each case study analyzes different types of spaces in which electronic art has been exhibited, to illustrate how curatorial practice is challenged by electronic art’s aesthetic components and, most importantly, to examine to what degree the white cube remains a dominant paradigm or is altered by the presence of techno-oriented media. Essentially, these case studies explore the focal questions of *Containers of Electronic Art*: First, how does electronic art function within different types of museum spaces, and second, how does electronic art challenge the modernist ideals of the white cube or embrace the experimental spaces?

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<sup>71</sup> Christiane Paul, “New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 207.



In order to answer these questions, in each chapter, I focus on a particular institution and exhibition that displays a diverse and historical collection of material electronic art. In the following paragraphs, detailed explanations of each case study's role and purpose are identified so as to illustrate why the case study has been chosen. Prior to introducing each study, it is important to understand the reasons for the geographical locations of the art institutions in order to justify my selection.

Two of the case studies presented are located in Ontario, Canada while the third is situated in Karlsruhe, Germany. As a scholar with a Canadian background, it is important to me to first consider the local community and then branch out in geographical space. It is for this reason that the AEAC and the Koffler Centre have been chosen as examples of the white cube, while InterAccess has been chosen to illustrate an institution focused on new media art. However, it is also vital to consider those who specialize in the presentation of new media art, and particularly electronic art, to create a strong comparison. It is through a strong comparison that, according to museums scholar Tony Bennett, different types of art institutions can best be understood.<sup>72</sup> Thus, I have chosen to incorporate the renowned German media art centre, ZKM Centre for Art and Media, specifically its Media Museum, as a case study, since the institution specializes in exhibiting new media art and in developing experimental spaces.

*The Agnes Etherington (AE) Gallery and The Koffler Gallery*

The first case study showcases two exhibitions of electronic art displayed in two typically white cube spaces in Canada: the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre in Kingston, Ontario, and the Koffler Gallery in North York, Ontario. Hosted in conjunction with both galleries in 2004, "Machine Life" and "Norm's Robots" are two exhibitions that include

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<sup>72</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, and Politics* (London and New York: 1995), 38.

Canadian artist Norman White's electronic robotic sculptures and pieces by his past colleagues and students, now working as artists themselves. These particular exhibitions are also chosen because robotic arts, a branch of electronic art, are significant in the evolution of new media art. Robotic arts have contributed significantly to electronic art's permanence in the collections and exhibitions of world-renowned art institutions.

The way that the artworks in the exhibitions interact with the space is further contemplated in Chapter 2, since each white cube space exhibits different structural characteristics: the AEAC gallery has hard-edged walls mimicking a cube shape, whereas the Koffler Gallery's structural design has curved walls, which minimize corners and straight walls in the Gallery. By comparing the two types of white cube spaces and their different relationships with the same type of artworks exhibited in "Machine Life" and "Norm's Robots", I will demonstrate that electronic art has the ability to challenge the white cube paradigm.

Comments on how the electronic art critiques white cube spaces are further emphasized by the media's ability to break down the decontextualized quality of the exhibition area. The galleries are no longer "non-spaces"; rather, their boundaries are identified and, at times, transformed into new imaginary spaces. This suggestion, which will be further explored, is supported by curator Jan Allen's statement in the exhibition catalogue that emphasizes electronic art's ability to create the "aura of [a] laboratory" in a gallery setting.<sup>73</sup> This statement inspires the notion that electronic art can transform the traditional white cube into an alternative type of imaginary space, such as ZKM does with its physical structure. By examining "Machine Life and "Norm's Robots", I argue

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<sup>73</sup> Jan Allen, ed., *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 52.

that electronic art interrogates the traditional white cube by forcing the viewer to confront not only the artwork, but that which was thought hidden – namely, the structure of the space.

ZKM's Media Museum

The second case study will explore ZKM Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum in Germany. ZKM is the largest institution dedicated to exhibiting new media art, which includes electronic art. Within the Centre, there are several museums; however, Media Museum will be the central focus of Chapter 3. This smaller part of ZKM (although to say that Media Museum is small is an understatement) is one of the leading exhibitors of electronic techno-orientated media. Media Museum prides itself on being "the world's first and only museum for interactive art."<sup>74</sup> Through belief in its strengths and competitive edge, ZKM's collection has grown substantially since its public opening in 1997, which has allowed its collection to be characterized as a veritable history of electronic art. Many of the Museum's most significant pieces are commonly found in literature documenting the history of new media art, and many of these works were showcased in "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM", an exhibition that was shown between 2004 and 2006.<sup>75</sup>

"Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM" offered a wide variety of electronic artworks ranging from historical icons to recent conceptual spectacles. This broad range of new media art also presented a clear demonstration of how electronic art has evolved over time. Moreover, the exhibition was exemplary in its display of leading electronic artists' works in gallery spaces specifically designed for such purposes, unlike the

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<sup>74</sup> ZKM Centre for Art and Media, *Media Museum*, <http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/e/institute/medienmuseum>.

<sup>75</sup> ZKM Centre for Art and Media, *Past Exhibitions: Masterpieces of Media Art from the ZKM Collection*, [http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader\\$4188](http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader$4188).

aforementioned Canadian institutions. Moving far from the white cube, Media Museum offers large open galleries to exhibit artworks, and labyrinth-like corridors. Chapter 3 focuses on ZKM's Media Museum to illustrate an alternative way to exhibit electronic art, which breaks free from the limitations of the white cube, and allows for an in-depth comparison with the Canadian art institutions.

#### InterAccess

The final case study and a hybrid of traditional and experimental space is InterAccess Electronic Media Art Centre, which is Canada's only facility devoted exclusively to exhibiting electronic art. The InterAccess case study directs attention to the degree to which its curatorial practices use and challenge the white cube concept when exhibiting electronic art. To address InterAccess' unique existence as an artist-run centre and in order to exemplify its curatorial practices, I focus on "IA25: Mapping a Practice of New Media Art", an exhibition which opened in January 2008.<sup>76</sup> This exhibition illustrates both the history of InterAccess as well as that of electronic art by displaying InterAccess' founding members' artworks and the progression of electronic art in Toronto. The exhibition provides the viewer with a visual lineage of the atypical existence of InterAccess, which is attributed to the fact that it is an artist-run centre.

Dissimilar to the AEAC, the Koffler Gallery and ZKM's Media Museum, local artists established InterAccess as an artist-run centre to collaboratively explore technology as an artistic medium. This particular characteristic of InterAccess, exemplified in "IA25", demonstrates an alternative way to exhibit art; artists exhibiting their own works suggest a major curatorial difference in the curating of electronic art.

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<sup>76</sup> InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, *Exhibitions: IA25: Mapping a Practice of New Media Art*, <http://www.interaccess.org/exhibitions/index.php?id=65>.

Through further discussion of the space's characteristics, which includes structural obstacles, several white walls, and floor-to-ceiling windows, InterAccess demonstrates minimal dependency on the white cube methodology and, in fact, strives to break free from it by embracing aspects found in experimental spaces. Both sides of the curatorial spectrum relative to the display of electronic art come into play in InterAccess' gallery space.

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By means of these case studies and the consequent understandings of the white cube and electronic art, the title of this study, *Containers of Electronic Art*, is appropriate: the space in which electronic art is exhibited, I argue, is an essential part of a techno-oriented artwork which forms a container that creates contexts and cohesion. In a sense, the title summarizes the aim of this study: *Containers of Electronic Art* brings forth the idea that electronic art is exhibited within different types of spaces, but the combination of space and electronic artwork creates different effects. These effects can alter goals of the white cube and change the viewer's perception of the artwork. Depending on the electronic artwork's relation with the space, the viewer may even become aware that s/he is encased by a structure; something that the white cube ideology rebukes.

Elena Filipovic suggests that the white cube intends to "operate under the pretense that its seeming invisibility allows the artwork best to speak; the architecture seems blank, innocent, unspecific, and insignificant."<sup>77</sup> This thesis makes evident that which seems blank and innocent while determining that electronic art functions differently within various types of art institutions, including the AEAC, the Koffler Gallery, InterAccess, and ZKM's Media Museum. It will show that inclusion of electronic art

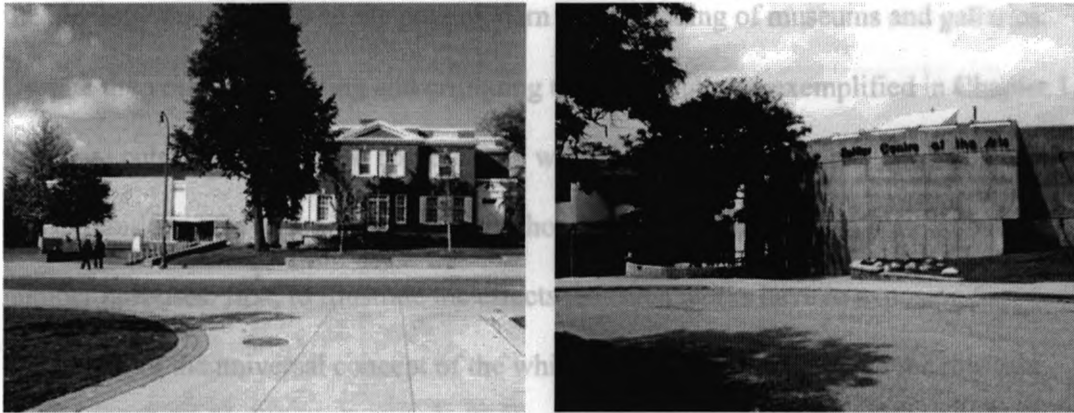
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<sup>77</sup> Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade*, eds. Barbara Vanderlinder and Elena Filipovic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 69.

makes it clear that the white cube is actually a space that causes the viewer to be aware of her/his own presence and the institution, rather than being entranced in an uncanny dream-like state. Inevitably, *Containers of Electronic Art* demonstrates that electronic art indeed challenges the modernist white cube concept by developing alternative methods to exhibit art, requiring a cohesive environment, and activating the viewer's awareness of physical institutional space around her/him.

## Chapter II

### The 'White Cube' and Electronic Art



**Figure 1:** (Left) The exterior of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre with the original house belonging to art patron Agnes Etherington, which is attached to the Centre.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

**Figure 2:** (Right) The exterior of the Koffler Centre of the Arts. The Koffler Gallery's walls are on the other side of the curved cement façade.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

*Einstein's theories of relativity did not prove Newton's laws wrong. It showed them to be of limited applicability: accurate, but only at a certain scale of things .... Right or wrong is not the issue. The issue is to demarcate their sphere of applicability—when the 'ground' upon which they operate is continuously moving. This 'limitation' does not belittle the approaches in question. In fact, it brings wonder back into them.<sup>78</sup>*

Although the white cube is a modernist concept that has been repeatedly critiqued, complicated, and undermined, it remains a favoured paradigm for display today. In terms of electronic art, the white cube is, like Newton's laws, of limited applicability, and in this chapter, I consider and analyze the relationship between new media art, specifically electronic art, and two white cube spaces—the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) (Fig. 1) and the Koffler Gallery (Fig. 2)—to determine what limitations occur when electronic art is presented in these sterile paradigm containers.

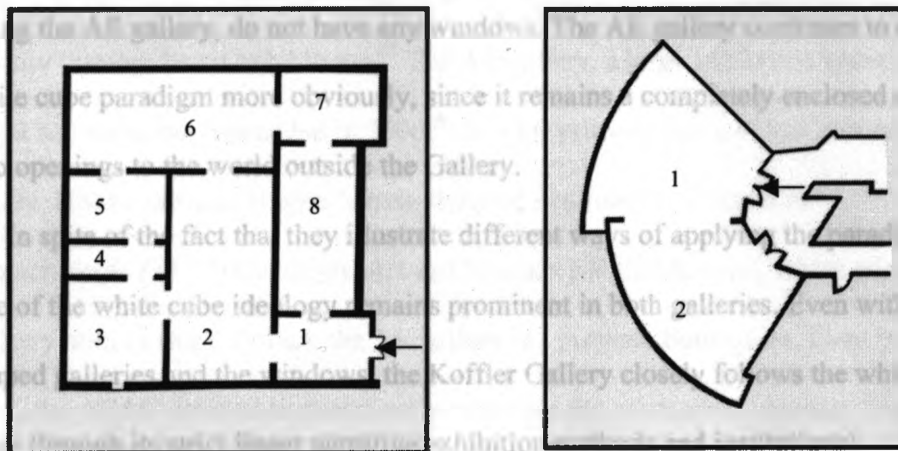
<sup>78</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

In exploring limitations such as the lack of context and revealing the white cube's spatial boundaries, I intend to critique the white cube and thus, instill wonder back into the ideology that has framed the post-modern understanding of museums and galleries. Despite the years of accepting and critiquing the white cube, as exemplified in Chapter 1, the white cube continues to be contested by way of electronic art. In this chapter, I turn to two exhibitions of electronic art that were shown in white cube spaces. This is done for a number purposes: first, to illustrate the effects that such works have in exposing the limitations of the universal concept of the white cube; second, to examine the role that this might play in changing the viewers' perceptions of the gallery space. Finally, I use the two exhibitions to explore how the above effects might inadvertently limit the possibilities of the electronic artwork itself, thereby creating a demand for experimental spaces more attuned to the needs of the art.

New media art, specifically electronic art, shatters the universal concept of the white cube in several ways: it exposes the very boundaries of the white cube space; it reveals its spatial limitations; it highlights the stereotypical aspects of the space; and it vividly acknowledges the need for context. Not surprisingly, these are all effects that the white cube ideology rebukes. Using two 2004 exhibitions, "Machine Life" and "Norm's Robots", shown at the AEAC and the Koffler Gallery respectively, I demonstrate some of the many challenges electronic art poses for white cube spaces. These galleries, along with their exhibitions, will assist in answering the focal questions of this study: first, how does electronic art function within white cube spaces; and second, what does this reveal about the space? Through an examination of both galleries' exhibitions, I explore the manner in which the exhibition of electronic art works can expose and dismantle the



traditional curatorial practice. It is the very essence or virtue of electronic art that destroys the dream-like environment generated by the supposedly universal white cube ideology.



**Figure 3:** (Left) The Agnes Etherington gallery Diagram.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

**Figure 4:** (Right) The Koffler Gallery Diagram.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

The Agnes Etherington (AE) gallery and the Koffler Gallery display electronic art in a way similar to one another, but they each have a different structural layout that can affect the viewer's reception of the artworks. When compared, the galleries have two major differences in their structural layout, as is evident in the positioning of the walls and the presence of windows. The AE gallery (Fig. 3) is a four-sided cube that is subdivided into several smaller rooms. It is aligned closely with the physical stipulations of the white cube ideology, as described by Brian O'Doherty.<sup>79</sup> Unlike the AE gallery, the Koffler Gallery's (Fig. 4) layout forms two pie pieces. The Koffler Gallery's pie-piece layout creates two curved walls that make it difficult for the curator to install

<sup>79</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition.* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

artworks, especially large paintings.<sup>80</sup> To add to this challenge, the Koffler Gallery also has two skylights, one in each room, and one recessed window in the second room. Changing natural light is difficult to work with, which is why many white cube galleries, including the AE gallery, do not have any windows. The AE gallery continues to emulate the white cube paradigm more obviously, since it remains a completely enclosed space with no openings to the world outside the Gallery.

In spite of the fact that they illustrate different ways of applying the paradigm, the essence of the white cube ideology remains prominent in both galleries. Even with the pie-shaped galleries and the windows, the Koffler Gallery closely follows the white cube ideology through its strict linear narrative exhibition methods and institutional expectations applied to the artists, the artworks, and the Gallery's visitors. Nevertheless, the differences and similarities in the structural layout of the galleries are useful to keep in mind throughout this analysis, in order to understand the effects electronic artworks have on traditional white cube spaces. Further, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that both exhibition spaces were constructed for the purpose of displaying art. Neither gallery has adapted or renovated an older space to fit the needs of exhibiting art. They are purpose-built galleries, specifically designed to reflect the ideology of the white cube, with its aim of using the construction of the spaces to heighten how the viewer perceives the artwork.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mona Filip, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Koffler Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, on August 11, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 65

*The Agnes Etherington Arts Centre (AEAC)*

The AEAC opened in 1957 on Queen's University campus, a gift upon her death from aspiring artist and art patron Ms. Agnes Etherington.<sup>82</sup> As per the request and example set out by Ms. Etherington, the Centre seeks to educate and influence the community through its art exhibitions.<sup>83</sup> The AE gallery, a large exhibition space divided into eight sub-sections, was added in 2000.<sup>84</sup> It is the primary focus of this portion of the case study. Unlike the next chapter's case study of Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum, which adapts an old military armory to exhibit art, the AE gallery is a purpose-built space. Even in 2000, however, the AEAC decided to consciously reference the white cube ideology and to construct a space primarily built to showcase traditional art forms such as painting and sculpture. Despite this, the AE gallery has had a number of shows of new media art. It is that aspect, combined with the Gallery's close structural reference to the white cube ideology that makes it an excellent choice for my case study.

The AE gallery's interior is closely linked to art critic Brian O'Doherty's description of the white cube paradigm. Brian O'Doherty describes the universal space as follows:

The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or carpeted so that you pad soundlessly...<sup>85</sup>

The AE gallery's interior has white walls that are unmarked by window niches and only sparsely hung with artworks. Even the electrical outlets are concealed. The ceiling of the

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<sup>82</sup> Agnes Etherington Art Centre, *About the Centre*, <http://www.aeac.ca/artcentre/index.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Agnes Etherington Art Centre, *About the Centre*, <http://www.aeac.ca/artcentre/index.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

Gallery has several directional lights on tracks. Together, the lights and the height of the ceiling create the illusion of one light source illuminating the entire space. Depending on the exhibition area, the Gallery's floors either have hardwood or grey carpeting.

Illustrating O'Doherty's point, the hardwood flooring creates an uncanny echoing sound under the viewer's feet and the carpeted floors seem to silence the viewer's existence.<sup>86</sup>

The construction of the AE gallery fits the characteristic protocols of the white cube ideology, since it is "unshadowed, white, clean, [and] artificial."<sup>87</sup> This is emphasized by Jan Allen, Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art at the AEAC, in the following statement: "It is a fairly traditional space, the way it is built; it has been adapted somewhat, over time."<sup>88</sup> What happened, then, when the electronic art included in the exhibition "Machine Life" was brought into this sterile space?

"Machine Life" opened at the AEAC in 2004. The exhibition:

explores artists' use of robotics through the work of Norman White and the circle of artists he has taught and influenced through the past quarter century. This project examines the aesthetics of interactivity and traces the strategies of the current generation of electronic artists by highlighting the methods, attitudes, and ethical positions that constituted the core of Norman White's legacy and influence.<sup>89</sup>

Of course, the show included Norman White's most significant electronic artwork *The Helpless Robot*, as well as important pieces composed by students and colleagues. I will first discuss Doug Back's *Frantic* in relation to the space, before moving into an

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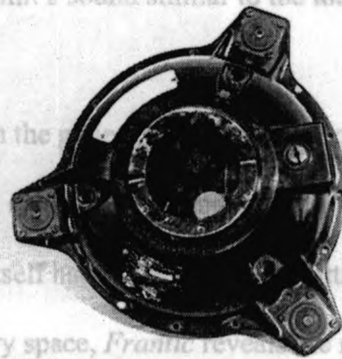
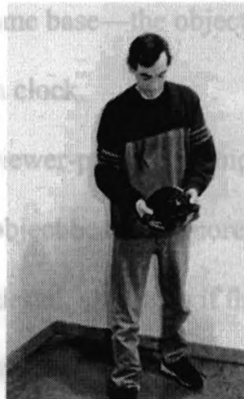
<sup>86</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> In the 2008 interview, Jan Allen continued to explain what adaptations had occurred in the Agnes Etherington's gallery spaces: "For instant putting up a track so we can suspend things from the ceiling, which we are going to live with digital wiring and wiring general. We have acquired sets of carpet tile to put down in the spaces to improve the acoustic qualities. The acoustics in the space is not designed for the contemporary programming and is quite bad. ...So even carpet down in that space for sound match the presence of the wall itself is really help the acoustics in that room." Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008

<sup>89</sup> Jan Allen, ed., *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 9.

exploration of *Frantic's* effects on David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t*. This will be followed by a discussion of *The Helpless Robot*, before departing the AE gallery space for a discussion on the Koffler Gallery.



**Figure 5:** (Left) *Frantic* with participant by Doug Back, 2001.

Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 39.

**Figure 6:** (Right) *Frantic* by Doug Back, 2001.

Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 39.

During the “Machine Life” exhibition, *Frantic* (Fig. 5, 6), by Toronto-based artist Doug Back, was placed in Space Two of the AE gallery (Fig. 3). It was situated immediately to the viewer’s left as s/he entered from the enclosed Space One. Placed on a white pedestal in the corner of the gallery, *Frantic* sat peacefully waiting for its next participant. Completed in 2001, *Frantic* is made out of discarded electronics and several heavy-duty plastic casings bolted together, which form a small ball-like exterior. Protruding from the bottom of *Frantic's* exterior is a cylinder that enables it to stand on the pedestal. Along the equator of the object, when sitting upright, there are three flatter protrusions that act as handles. The internal components of the black-shelled object holds a sensor-system commonly used for child security.

*Frantic* operates on a similar system as a child’s security bracelet and a home base receiver. For example, when a child wears a security bracelet that is synchronized

with a home base receiver, and the child wanders too far from her/his home base, an alarm will begin to sound, warning the parents of their child's possible endangerment.<sup>90</sup> Thus, when the viewer-participant picks up *Frantic* and begins to walk away from the pedestal—or home base—the object begins to emit a sound similar to the loud pulsing tone of an alarm clock.

As the viewer-participant moves through the gallery carrying *Frantic*, the sound emitted by the object becomes more aggressive, eventually forcing her/him to return the object to the pedestal, almost as if the artwork itself had willed it.<sup>91</sup> By emitting piercing sounds as one crosses the threshold of the gallery space, *Frantic* reveals the normally hidden boundaries of the Gallery and, in doing so, forces the viewer to confront the space around her/him—contrary to the desires of the traditional curatorial practice. As a mobile accomplice, the viewer-participant can take the sound wherever s/he goes, but *Frantic* can also create an increasing sense of discomfort (via the emitting sound), in the viewer-participant as s/he travels increasingly far from the pedestal. This sense of discomfort then overturns some of the central tenets of the white cube ideology, including its stage-like qualities and ability to silence the noises in the space.

Thus, the AE gallery is no longer a stage upon which the viewer sees only the artwork as essential and the space as forgettable background. The mobility of the viewer as s/he carries *Frantic* suggests that viewer is actively aware of the space that encloses her/him. In turn, this causes the viewer to focus on her/himself as being encased in the

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<sup>90</sup> Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 41.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, CD ROM.

gallery space, rather than merely focusing on the artwork—a performance termed the “museum effect” by Svetlana Alpers.<sup>92</sup>



**Figure 7:** *n-cha(n)t* by David Rokeby, 1997-2001. Installation view at the Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts.

Source: David Rokeby, *n-cha(n)t*, <http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/nchant.html>.

The sound produced by *Frantic* not only affects its viewers, but also other artworks in close proximity to it. Since the sound of *Frantic* spreads beyond the vicinity of the object, the sound waves migrate into adjoining spaces, affecting such artworks as David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t* (Fig. 7). For a moment, I will digress to explore *Frantic*'s effects on such artworks as *n-cha(n)t* to grasp the limitations of traditionally constructed space, such as the white cube. Although David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t* (1997-2001) is outside of my framework in that it is not considered a material electronic artwork, it holds value for this discussion because of its proximity in the AE gallery to *Frantic*. By looking at *n-cha(n)t* in relation to *Frantic*, I aim to further emphasize that traditional white cube spaces can be seen to be more like uncooperative backdrops or stages for electronic artworks than spaces that induce harmony between the objects and their surroundings. As Victoria Newhouse writes, “Every space has its own distinct identity that affects the

<sup>92</sup> Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 26.

contents: without a harmonious relationship between the two, museum architecture fails.”<sup>93</sup>

Installed in exhibition Space Three (Fig. 3), *n-cha(n)t* incorporates seven Macintosh computers suspended from the ceiling of the Gallery. Projected on each computer screen is an ear, belonging to either a male or female. On each screen, different words scroll across the image of the ear, while from each speaker, the same words are spoken by a mysterious voice for both the viewer and the other computers to react and respond to.<sup>94</sup> Through an evolving feedback system, the closest computer responds with text and audio words to the words and sounds uttered by another computer or the viewer.<sup>95</sup> The continuous corresponding dialogue forms a soothing mess of sound.

Now, imagine being the viewer drifting through the *n-cha(n)t* environment. While absorbing the melancholy of David Rokeby’s *n-cha(n)t*, a harsh, aggressive sound of an alarm clock goes off in the background. This sound wavers in the next room and migrates into the *n-cha(n)t* environment. Since, with the exception of Space One, the AE gallery’s spaces are neither enclosed nor constructed specifically for the exhibition or new media art, noise echoes through all the open spaces. This includes such spaces as galleries four, five, and six (Fig. 3) which are generally dedicated to historical and tribal artworks.<sup>96</sup>

Although the mobility and sound are exactly what makes *Frantic* a compelling artwork and one that questions the museum space, curator Jan Allen commented in an interview that some visitors complained that its sound drifted into other spaces, thus

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<sup>93</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Jan Allen, ed., *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), CD ROM.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

<sup>96</sup> Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008.



disrupting their perception of other artworks.<sup>97</sup> Most visitors expect to view the artworks in the AEAC in a traditional state: silent, reflective, and in meditation with the space acting as a hidden stage, in accordance with the white cube stipulations. Contrary to the white cube ideology, the viewer's state is disrupted by *Frantic's* racket, and s/he quickly becomes annoyed with the artwork. The aura of the white cube space provides a viewer expecting a traditional exhibition environment to reject artworks similar to *Frantic* and thus the white cube setting fails to sympathetically display techno-oriented artworks.

Some visitors through comments to the curator voiced the latter disruptions, but Allen made no alterations to the display of "Machine Life".<sup>98</sup> *Frantic's* sound continued to disrupt other artworks in such a way that the viewer's experience was not revelatory, but rather disconnected from the artist's expectations of how the artwork should be exhibited and interacted with.<sup>99</sup> Since the viewer is a valuable part of most electronic artworks, the artworks' environment must remain intact and undisturbed by sound fragments of other artworks. The inability, therefore, to construct flexible environments that encase sound emission reinforces the idea that a universal space, such as the white cube, is limited in presenting electronic artworks similar to *Frantic* and even *n-cha(n)t*.

During the exhibitions "Machine Life" and "Norm's Robots", viewers conditioned by museum norms had difficulty overcoming the long lasting "Please do not touch the artwork" rule. Christiane Paul, curator of New Media Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art, states:

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<sup>97</sup> Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Damian Sutton, Susan Brind, and Ray McKenzie, eds., "Realism in Practice: Introduction," in *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 75.

One of the biggest challenges for the presentation of new media art is to engage the audience for a period of time long enough to allow a piece to reveal its content. The basic rule of museums, 'Please do not touch the art,' is suddenly undermined, often with the result that large segments of the audience are hesitant to engage physically with artworks in a gallery space.<sup>100</sup>

In a manner similar to what Christiane Paul describes for most new media art, *Frantic* undermined the traditional gallery space of the AE's gallery. When *Frantic* was displayed in the traditional white cube space, the assumption was that the object should be looked at, rather than held or moved. Exhibiting electronic artworks in white cube spaces, such as the AE's gallery, becomes a guessing game for the viewer: should s/he pick up an object and risk being approached by the Gallery's security, or does one enjoy the artwork from a safe distance?

In a 2008 interview with Jan Allen, she suggested that the artworks in "Machine Life", such as Doug Back's *Frantic* and David Rokeby's *n-cha(n)t*, encountered the 'do not touch' stigmatism because they were surrounded by the traditional institutional context.<sup>101</sup> In traditional galleries such as the AE, displaying electronic artworks has become a balancing act between instructing viewers on which rules—old and new—to follow. The following case study explores how electronic art functions within an experimental space. It becomes evident therein that, by contrast, ZKM's Media Museum's atmosphere nurtures the sense of touch. The result of exhibiting *Frantic* within the traditional gallery context of the AE gallery is that the artwork cannot find harmony in its container; it thus contests the traditional space since the latter is not set up for exhibiting electronic artworks.

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<sup>100</sup> Christiane Paul, "New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions," in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 198.

<sup>101</sup> Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008.

hold of it and swivel it around following directions dictated to the visitor by the artwork. No longer just a viewer, the participant can grasp two of the three handles provided on the exterior to rotate the structure on its stationary base. Via the sensors and physical electronics found in its base, the robot vocalizes whether the participant should turn the robot left or right, and what type of force.<sup>102</sup> As the participant continues to interact with the robot, the robot becomes more and



**Figure 8:** *The Helpless Robot* by Norman White, 1987-2002.

Source: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Collection: Norman White.

<http://www.aeac.ca/mobius/detail.php?t=objects&type=related&kv=13907>.

Located in Space One of the AE gallery was Norman White's *The Helpless Robot* (Fig. 8). Canadian artist Norman White has been entranced by electronics since 1961, when he worked in San Francisco, California as an apprentice to a shipyard electrician.<sup>102</sup> Although White did not remain in San Francisco for long, he remembers this position as a significant starting point for his interests in electronics.<sup>103</sup> The experience of working as an electrician's apprentice became intertwined with White's passion for art. White's expertise for electronics and art eventually led him to teach at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) in Toronto.<sup>104</sup> It is partially from White's teaching position at OCAD that "Machine Life" evolved, as it showed work from his students and colleagues. Combining his experiences from OCAD and life, Norman White developed *The Helpless Robot* (1987-2002), which is now part of the AEAC's collection.<sup>105</sup>

In a room enclosed by glass doors, *The Helpless Robot*—a triangular-like vessel made up of recycled pieces of steel and plywood—calls out to gallery visitors to grab

<sup>102</sup> Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life* (Toronto & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> Norman White, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Durham, Ontario, August 8, 2008.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Norman White, *The NorMill*, <http://www.normill.ca/>.

<sup>106</sup> Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Collection: Norman White.

<http://www.aeac.ca/mobius/detail.php?t=objects&type=related&kv=13907>.

hold of it and swivel it around following directions dictated to the visitor by the artwork. No longer just a viewer, the participant can grasp two of the three handles provided on the exterior to rotate the structure on its circular stationary base. Via the sensors and physical electronics found in its base, *The Helpless Robot* vocalizes whether the participant should turn the robot left or right and with what type of force.<sup>106</sup> As the participant continues to interact with *The Helpless Robot*, the robot becomes more and more aggressive, taking advantage of the participant's engagement.<sup>107</sup>

White has programmed *The Helpless Robot* to become vocally aggressive with the participant, because he believes that the relationship between the object and participant parallels human interaction.<sup>108</sup> At first when a stranger meets another person, s/he is polite. As the stranger and the other person begin to form a relationship and gain familiarity, one takes advantage of the other and common courtesy is discarded. In a 2008 interview with White about *The Helpless Robot*, he noted, "It's the way we treat each other; we're most polite to strangers and most rude to our friends. I was just playing off this whole psychological framework...."<sup>109</sup> Once the robot senses that the participant has departed, *The Helpless Robot* then becomes polite again and either asks the person to return or seeks out a new relationship with another viewer.

Norman White is grateful for the Gallery's decision to purchase his artwork, but still insists that the ideal context for *The Helpless Robot* is not in the AE gallery, or any traditional gallery space.<sup>110</sup> According to White, the traditional space of the AE gallery

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<sup>106</sup> Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), CD ROM.

<sup>107</sup> Edward Kac, "Foundational and Development of Robotic Art," *Art Journal*. vol. 56, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 63.

<sup>108</sup> Norman White, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Durham, Ontario, August 8, 2008.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

banishes the necessary context for the viewer to successfully experience *The Helpless Robot*.<sup>111</sup> Instead, *The Helpless Robot* is designed for everyday public locations, such as shopping malls and government buildings' lobbies, where there is a continuous stream of people passing by who can be called to interact with the robot.<sup>112</sup>

Unlike the AE gallery, the experimental spaces found in ZKM's Media Museum's can offer artworks like *The Helpless Robot* an atmosphere that is open to the public, while nevertheless remaining a "formal" gallery environment. ZKM's Media Museum shares a lobby and public space with several arts organizations and the lobby, which is a common meeting and dining place, would be able to create proper context for White's artwork, since the public in Karlsruhe passes through on a daily basis. Similar to the space available at ZKM, White envisions an atmosphere for *The Helpless Robot* that does not automatically suggest that the robot is a piece of art. He believes that experiencing *The Helpless Robot* in an everyday context makes the encounter with the artwork more exhilarating for a viewer; this is because of the encounter is unexpected when located outside of a traditional gallery space.<sup>113</sup>

For the "Machine Life" exhibition, *The Helpless Robot* was encased by the AE's universal space, where the viewers automatically assume that the robot is an artwork. In this context, the artwork offers no significant disruption of the viewer's everyday life. Whereas *Frantic* startles the viewer in other rooms, *The Helpless Robot* is unable to disrupt the viewer's everyday life due to its being completely enclosed by the gallery; thus, it is quickly defined as merely another artwork. One might imagine that the viewer is also more accepting of *The Helpless Robot*'s cries for help in a gallery setting and that

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<sup>111</sup> Norman White, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Durham, Ontario, August 8, 2008.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

the viewer may even reject any feeling of guilt for abandoning the robot after her/his initial interaction with the work. Because the artwork is situated within a traditional white cube space, the viewer can easily dismisses any guilt from leaving the artwork, since s/he is conditioned by the space to keep an emotional disconnect from the artwork.

Consequently, the artwork becomes merely an object on display. This is partly attributed to the artwork being disconnected from the outside world. When encased by a traditional space such as the AE gallery, *The Helpless Robot* and other electronic artworks like it are decontextualized and unable to find cohesion with the walls and ceiling that surround them. It is my belief that a similar phenomenon occurs at the Koffler Gallery.

#### *The Koffler Gallery*

Established in 1977 by the Koffler Family, the Koffler Gallery's initial aims were to exhibit contemporary craft. However, under the guidance of a new curator, Carolyn Bell Farrell, who curated and organized "Norm's Robots", the aims of the Gallery quickly shifted to focus on Contemporary Art.<sup>114</sup> The Gallery's mandate, however, remains the same: to strive to influence and educate its local community.<sup>115</sup> This mandate is fulfilled in a two-room gallery that follows the white cube ideology. Current Curator Mona Filip notes, "It is a white cube in the sense that it is a space that is obviously dedicated to the presentation of art, it is out of context, and separated from the environment in a clear way."<sup>116</sup> In her comment, Filip highlights that the Koffler Gallery is removed from the context of the Koffler Centre and the bustle of the outside world.

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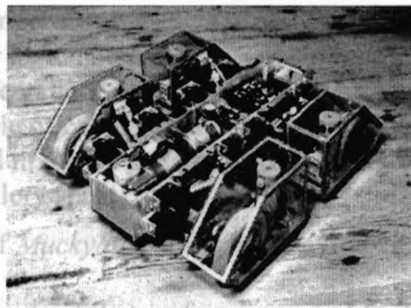
<sup>114</sup> Mona Filip, interviewed by Andrea L. Skelly. The Koffler Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, on August 11, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Koffler Gallery, *Home Page*, 2008. <http://www.kofflerarts.org/gallery.shtml>.

<sup>116</sup> Mona Filip, interviewed by Andrea L. Skelly. The Koffler Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, on August 11, 2008.

Filip, believes that the lack of context in the space is attributed to the Gallery's shape, alongside the white cube ideology.

Even though the rooms form two adjoining pie shapes and are not a square, the Koffler Gallery is here nevertheless regarded as a white cube. The Koffler Gallery's space is clinically white in colour, has a soft grey cement floor, which seems to blur the distinction between the floor and the walls, and uses a system of lights adhered to the ceiling to create the illusion of a sole light source.<sup>117</sup> Although there are windows, the spaces are still emptied of all distractions, since the windows are often closed off.<sup>118</sup> Though there are some unique elements to the shape of the Koffler Gallery, it remains a traditional space akin to the AE gallery and, as such, can be used as a contrast with the experimental fluid spaces of galleries such as ZKM's Media Museum. With this in mind, this next section will analyze the way in which electronic artworks interact with the space of the Koffler Gallery, using Norman White's solo exhibition, "Norm's Robots", as an example.



**Figure 9:** *Muckydum* by Norman White, 2001-2002.  
Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 19.

<sup>117</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>118</sup> "Often the skylights are covered because you can't have natural light. That is a problem." Mona Filip, interviewed by Andrea L. Skelly. The Koffler Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, on August 11, 2008.

In the Koffler Gallery, Norman White's work *Muckydum* (2001-2002), had to be disabled because of the close quarters and lack of an operation manual. *Muckydum* (Fig. 9) is a small four wheeled, low-lying electronic artwork that resembles a rodent but is refined to basic geometric forms; it is an object the cubists would appreciate. However, the flat surface areas and hard edges created by the Plexiglas that covers *Muckydum*'s steel frame prevent any identifiable references to a specific animal or rodent. The Plexiglas allows the viewer to see the internal organs of the mechanic device. *Muckydum* is practically constructed and refrains from unnecessary aesthetic detailing. In the context of the Koffler Gallery, *Muckydum* became a static object to be visually admired, rather than a lively electronic artwork that covers as much land as its controller allows.

Only on such occasions as the opening of "Norm's Robots", or during a studio visit with Norman White, is it possible for viewers to fully understand the concepts and theories behind *Muckydum*. During the exhibition opening in May 2004, White drove *Muckydum* around the interior of Koffler Gallery. In 2008, White recounted:

[*Muckydum*] was dangerous; It carries a lot of force. If this thing hit you, it would probably break your legs. There were people jumping out of its way and it really challenged the whole gallery spirit, which is 'don't touch the art' and this is a sacred place, a temple of calm and intense observations. So, to have this wild thing driving around in the art gallery, threatening to break your leg, is kind of a challenge to [the gallery spirit].<sup>119</sup>

During the demonstration of *Muckydum* at its opening, the viewer was actively aware of the moving artwork, but outside of that performance, and for the remainder of the exhibition, *Muckydum* remained static on the Gallery's grey floor.

Displayed on the floor in Space Two of the Koffler Gallery, and framed by the entrance from Space One (Fig. 4), *Muckydum*'s position suggested that it was the

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<sup>119</sup> Norman White, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Durham, Ontario, August 8, 2008.



protector of the spaces. At first, the viewer may have felt like s/he was unable to move into the space due to the threatening stance of *Muckydum*, but this feeling quickly subsided when the viewer realized that the artwork was disabled. *Muckydum*'s position on the floor froze its mobility, turning it into an abject object.<sup>120</sup> As an abject object, *Muckydum* can be seen as an alien object in the white cube milieu. There is no true connection between the techno-based artwork and the crisp white walls adjacent to hard grey floor.

The Koffler Gallery's presentation of electronic artworks hearkens to the theories of art critic Victoria Newhouse, who once commented that art galleries that are not designed with a specific type of artwork in mind, and that this neutral space "fails to enhance the art it is meant to serve."<sup>121</sup> The space failed *Muckydum*, since the viewer could not perceive the artwork in action. Only a mess of wires and four rubber wheels seen through *Muckydum*'s transparent shell hinted at the artwork's mobility. Without the mobility, *Muckydum* was subjected to standardized gallery viewing: the viewer became passive, rather than active. The lack of mobility and the context surrounding *Muckydum* resulted in the viewer's and the traditional curatorial practice's inability to successfully comprehend White's intentions for the artwork.<sup>122</sup>

Due to their forced compliance with static situations in clinical atmospheres, *Muckydum*, along with other stationary electronic artworks, are intensely observed by gallery viewers. The viewer perceives the artwork in a manner similar to a scientist

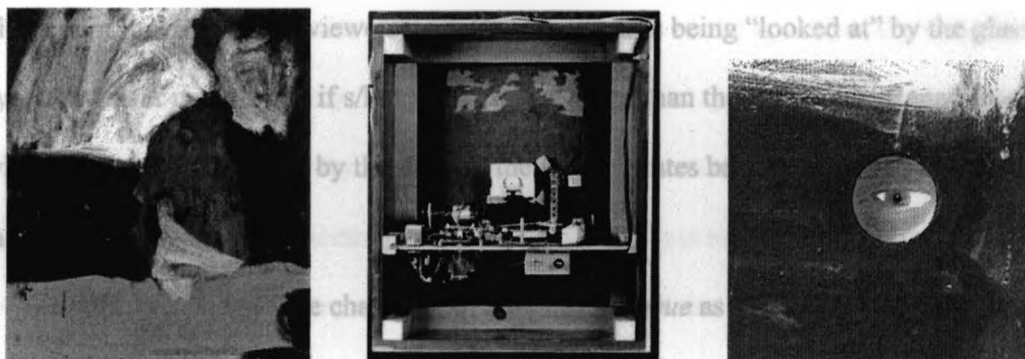
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<sup>120</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>121</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 72.

<sup>122</sup> Donald Preziosi, "Seeing Through Art History," in *Knowledges: Histories and Critical Studies in Disciplinarity*, eds. Ellen Messer-Davidow, David Shumway and David Sylvan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 215.

studying a specimen, dissecting it critically.<sup>123</sup> Influenced by the Koffler Gallery's atmosphere, *Muckydum* is no longer a living artwork and can, therefore, be considered dead.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, this intense viewing of a dead artwork in an anonymous space alienates *Muckydum* from the viewer's world and her/his understanding of it.<sup>125</sup>



**Figure 10:** (Left) Front of *Bellevue* by Norman White, 2001.

Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 34.

**Figure 11:** (Middle) Backside of *Bellevue* by Norman White, 2001.

Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 34.

**Figure 12:** (Right) Detail of *Bellevue* with eye revealed by Norman White, 2001.

Source: Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life*. (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 35.

The intense and standardized gallery viewing imposed upon electronic artwork is further emphasized by Norman White's *Bellevue* (2001), which, when shown at the Koffler Gallery, also highlighted stereotypical curatorial practices in the traditional white cube gallery environment. In this work, White uses what he considers to be a failed abstract painting on plywood to form the base of *Bellevue* (Fig. 10, 11, 12). White cut a small hole in a painting and used the piece that once-filled the hole, the cutout, to plug the hole once again. Attached to a mechanical arm, the cutout periodically recedes to

<sup>123</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25.

<sup>124</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 48. Also see Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 64.

<sup>125</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 51.

expose an ambiguous face with a green glass eye. To create the action of exposing the eye to the viewer, White installed a mechanical configuration of electronics behind the painting. When the cutout recedes, the eye randomly looks about the space and sometimes at the viewer.<sup>126</sup> This can create the sense of reversed scopophilia (the pleasure in looking) in the viewer. Because the viewer is being “looked at” by the glass eye, the viewer may feel as if s/he is on display, rather than the artwork.<sup>127</sup> Regardless of whether the eye is detected by the viewer, the face migrates back behind the painting and the hole closes up.

When faced with the challenge of hanging *Bellevue* as a part of “Norm’s Robots”, the curator had only a few walls from which to choose; this was because curved walls are not a common characteristic of traditional white cube galleries. The Koffler Gallery’s current curator, Mona Filip notes that it is hard to exhibit paintings in the Gallery due to the curved walls and for most exhibitions, the curved walls influence, in a forceful way, the exhibit design.<sup>128</sup>

By hanging the *Bellevue* like any other painting on a flat wall, the stereotypical curatorial practices associated with the traditional white cube gallery are revealed, and suggest that the space is an inadequate environment for exhibiting such electronic artworks. *Bellevue* is different from the previously discussed artworks found in “Norm’s Robots” because it does not require the viewer’s touch to be activated. Like a painting, it is not recommended that the viewer should touch *Bellevue*, thus suggesting a comfortable

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<sup>126</sup> Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), CD ROM.

<sup>127</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Oxford Journals*, vol. 16 no. 3 (1973): 8.

<sup>128</sup> Mona Filip, interviewed by Andrea L. Skelly. The Koffler Gallery, North York, Ontario, Canada, on August 11, 2008.

relationship with the traditional gallery. However, the mechanics of the roving eye undermine this connection. Here, the relationship between artwork and viewer is not a tactile one; nevertheless, *Bellevue* encourages interaction through the search for the “missing” person hidden behind the canvas, thus forcing a consideration of the museum’s architecture. Furthermore, with the electronic eye turned on the spectator, the viewer becomes the object on display, reversing the contemplative qualities associated with white cube spaces. In order for *Bellevue*’s illusion to be successful, the artwork requires a deep space to conceal the electronics on its backside so it is more like a painting than a relief sculpture. *Bellevue* hung on the immediate left wall that backs onto Space Two, which is a very shallow-width wall. In placing *Bellevue* on this shallow wall, the illusion of a person hiding in the wall or a hidden room is suspended since no person could possibly fit her/himself between the panels of drywall. The choice of wall and the construction of the space do not meet the innate display needs of *Bellevue* and, thus, the space is unable to create a harmonious and contextualized environment.

*The Broken ‘White Cube’*

The white cube exemplified by the AE gallery and the Koffler Gallery fails at successfully displaying electronic art. When electronic art is present in these presumably universal spaces, the uncanny and dream-like atmosphere, intended by the white cube ideology to affect the perception of the viewer, is no longer effective. The boundaries of the white cube spaces are exposed through artworks’ sound and mobility, as illustrated by Doug Back’s *Frantic*. Through electronic art, the physical boundaries of the white cube are not only defined, but also transcended.<sup>129</sup> Even though the AE gallery has no

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<sup>129</sup> Christiane Paul, “New Media Art and Institutional Critique: Networks vs. Institutions,” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (vol. 2 of Southern California Consortium of Art Schools symposia. Europe: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 207.

windows and the Koffler Gallery covers theirs, the external world beyond each gallery still enters via the viewer and, at times, through the artworks. The viewer brings personal experiences and a cultural background into the white cube space, and it is these experiences that assist the viewer in connecting the electronic artworks to products found in her/his daily life.<sup>130</sup> Technology-based artworks, such as *Frantic*, *The Helpless Robot*, and *Muckydum* reuse electronic components not only because of decreased material cost, but to bring familiarity to the viewer and her/his understanding of how to interact with the techno-oriented artwork. It is partly because of the viewer's ability to connect the artwork to external experiences that the white cube spaces can no longer be seen as dreamy and uncanny environments.

Contrary to its ideology, the white cube breaks down when electronic art is present and any understanding of the static nature of the traditional gallery space is questioned and complicated. When the AE gallery and the Koffler Gallery display electronic art, the white cube's milieu wants to continue to disguise its boundaries, but simply cannot. The boundaries of the white cube space are revealed, and while electronic art is present, the space can take on the aura of a laboratory. This negative effect does not bring harmony to the artworks in "Machine Life" or "Norm's Robots", since the artworks are interpreted as specimens, as exemplified by *Muckydum*. This inadequate exhibition aura is further commented on in the *Media-Art-History* catalogue from ZKM, which states that the electronic media "ha[s] been unable to find a home either in the traditional

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<sup>130</sup> Lindsay Hughes, "Do we need new spaces for exhibiting contemporary art?" *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 4 no. 1. (2005): 33.

institutions where art is kept or sold or in the diaspora of scientific and entertainment societies.”<sup>131</sup>

Although such scholars as Jan Allen may argue that the new ‘imaginary space’ has positive implications for the display of electronic art, I argue otherwise. In the closing words of the *Machine Life* catalogue, Allen describes “Machine Life” as transforming a traditional space into one taking on the “aura of a laboratory in which aspects of volition, consciousness and free will are scrutinized.”<sup>132</sup> Although said in a positive manner, Allen’s statement suggests that the electronic artworks in “Machine Life” and “Norm’s Robots” are displayed for viewers to thoroughly examine in a controlled environment, even as the artworks’ individual characteristics make attempts to break away from these types of spaces.

The traditional white cube gallery environment manipulates the viewer’s perception of electronic artworks. It may be through the viewer’s interactions with the artworks that this thorough examination can overrule the traditional gallery’s protocols. However, this can only occur if the artworks are considered for their conceptual values, rather than as forms of entertainment. According to the above quote from the *Media-Art-History* catalogue from ZKM, this is simply not the case. To reiterate, electronic art should not be displayed as a scientific experiment, or for merely entertainment value.<sup>133</sup> The traditional gallery, namely the white cube, is unable to create a *gesamtkunstwerk* (to constitute as a whole) environment, because the electronic artworks are frequently seen

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<sup>131</sup> Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stockmann, eds., *Media-Art-History. ZKM Centre for Arts and Media Karlsruhe* (New York, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 8.

<sup>132</sup> Jan Allen, ed. *Machine Life* (Kitchener & Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre & Koffler Gallery, 2004), 52.

<sup>133</sup> Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stockmann, eds., *Media-Art-History. ZKM Centre for Arts and Media Karlsruhe* (New York, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 8.

as scientific experiments or entertainment.<sup>134</sup> Based on this analysis, the AE gallery and the Koffler Gallery are unable to create cohesion between the traditional white cube gallery space, the viewer, and the electronic artworks. The lack of *gesamtkunstwerk* stems from installing electronic artworks in inappropriate contexts.

The galleries at the AEAC and the Koffler Centre have attempted to display electronic art with high standards, but the construction and ideals of the spaces cause electronic artworks to rebel, in turn implying that the white cube cannot be universally applied to all types of artworks. In her article “Do we need new spaces for exhibiting contemporary art?”, freelance writer Lindsay Hughes suggests that curators need to consider all the elements of an exhibition in order to see how these elements will affect the viewer’s discourse with the artwork.<sup>135</sup> There needs to be “the sense that the whole experience is not just about viewing an object but about finding the work, the process of arriving and how the viewer interacts with the work; for example, looking at or moving around within the space.”<sup>136</sup>

Every aspect, therefore, of exhibiting electronic art must be carefully considered, which is why cohesion between the space and the artwork in question are essential.<sup>137</sup> If the relationship between space and electronic artworks is not considered carefully, the artwork can work to reveal the white cube, and in doing so, will reveal the limitations of the structure and subvert the work itself. While this might suggest that electronic art could be used to carry forward a strong institutional critique, this is at the expense of the

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<sup>134</sup> Florian Rotzer, “Virtual Worlds: Fascination and Recreations,” in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed., Simon Penny (New York, USA: State University of New York Press, 1995), 127.

<sup>135</sup> Lindsay Hughes, “Do we need new spaces for exhibiting contemporary art?” *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 4 no. 1. (2005): 36.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 214.

function of the art object. Thus, simply installing an electronic artwork in a presumably universal space, such as the white cube, actually presents numerous difficulties for the space and the artwork. The electronic artworks demonstrate gaps in the white cube's universalizing philosophy, but nonetheless exhibiting this genre of art can instill wonder back into the use of the white cube paradigm.

The artworks in the 2004 exhibitions "Machine Life" and "Norm's Robots" unintentionally rebuke the ideals of the white cube paradigm through their characteristics of mobility, audio, and structural form. Their characteristics, therefore, function within the individual spaces to reveal these spaces' boundaries. In doing so, the electronic artworks suggest that the white cube milieu cannot provide sufficient context for the artwork or the viewer. As a result thereof, the viewer breaks free from a dream-like trance induced by the white cube and really sees the basic qualities of the space: the walls, floor, and ceiling. This freedom is encouraged by art historian Svetlana Alpers. In her exploration of the "museum effect", Alpers suggests that the amount of freedom given to the viewer and the least amount of intimidation felt by the viewer is a measurable way to gage a gallery's success in exhibiting art objects.<sup>138</sup> The white cube spaces explored in this chapter, therefore, do not create a supportive environment for the display of electronic artworks and, as a result, enable the viewer to perceive the tangibility of the galleries' spaces. The floors, walls, and ceiling of the traditional white

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<sup>138</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 30.



cube galleries are made tangible, making the gallery itself what Chairman and CEO of ZKM Peter Weibel describes as, a “white cell” for electronic art.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Peter Weibel, “Beyond the White Cube,” in *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, eds. by Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 143.

### Chapter III

#### The Experimental Spaces and Electronic Art



**Figure 13:** Exterior entrance to Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media. Media Museum is located behind the Medientheater (blue cube) and to the left.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

During the planning of a museum, it is fairly common that the institution's goals, objectives, and target art genre are decided prior to constructing the facility.<sup>140</sup> To put this

differently, "the art objects are not there for the museum; rather the museum is built for the objects."<sup>141</sup> This idea can be related to the Media Museum of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media (Fig. 13). Media Museum researcher, Sonia Alves, notes that several artworks found in the ZKM's collection were produced prior to ZKM's ownership of its physical building, and that the Museum design evolved upon taking possession of these artworks.<sup>142</sup>

In this chapter, I use the idea that museums are constructed around various art objects and the demands of different media to argue that, in contrast to the vexed

<sup>140</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 153.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew McClellan quotes art historian Alois Hirt beliefs about museum architecture. Andrew McClellan, "Architecture," in *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008), 67. Also see, Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 220-225.

<sup>142</sup> Sonia Alves, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 21, 2008.

relationship between electronic art and the white cube, the experimental spaces of the ZKM's Media Museum are organized in a manner which complements electronic artworks. By investigating several artworks presented in the 2004 "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM" exhibition, and considering the artworks in relation to Media Museum's physical structure, it becomes evident that in this location, the space "embraces" the material electronic art. I suggest, then, that the viewer becomes aware of her/himself, the space's structure, and the artworks' dependency on the experimental space, which are concepts that contradict the white cube ideology but make a strong impact on the display of electronic art. Media Museum liberates the viewer from the "museum effect," meaning traditional museum observation mannerisms,<sup>143</sup> and encourages her/him to touch art and experience its surrounding space, in contrast to the traditional white cube museum models found in Chapter 2.

Started in 1989 as an initiative to make new media art accessible to the public, ZKM was established in a semi-abandoned armory in Karlsruhe, Germany. Already occupied by artists who were squatting in the supposedly vacant structure, the German government granted ZKM the authority to renovate the facilities, which eventually reopened in 1997.<sup>144</sup> The semi-abandoned armory was the ideal place for ZKM to evolve, since "the similarity of such places to the environment in which the art was created lent a connection with the artist's working conditions that was lacking in museums and conventional galleries".<sup>145</sup> The squatting artists relocated and ZKM moved into the

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<sup>143</sup> Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>144</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003) 169.

<sup>145</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 110.

armory to create a centre that would support the local and international new media art community. Additionally, the subsequent renovations and resulting institutional structure were highly influenced by, and attributed to, the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus, formed in 1919 in Weimar Germany, was an unconventional trade school that focused on improving and creating innovative artworks, as well as expanding the discourses of such subjects as interior design, industrial production, and architecture.<sup>146</sup>

ZKM shares similarities to the institutional structure of the Bauhaus. Similar to the Bauhaus, ZKM opened its facilities to a broad range of academics, including artists and researchers trained in science, music and/or art, who were encouraged by ZKM to explore techno-oriented media and present their findings to the public. Furthermore, ZKM's space was specifically constructed to display this newer art media to benefit both the research efforts of ZKM's researchers and collection. To the present day, ZKM offers its researchers the opportunity to present visual and performance projects to the public via the flexible and experimental spaces in Media Museum.<sup>147</sup> These presentations, which are comparable to the Bauhaus' community, result in an exchange of information between the researchers, the public and, of course, the space that contains the two groups.

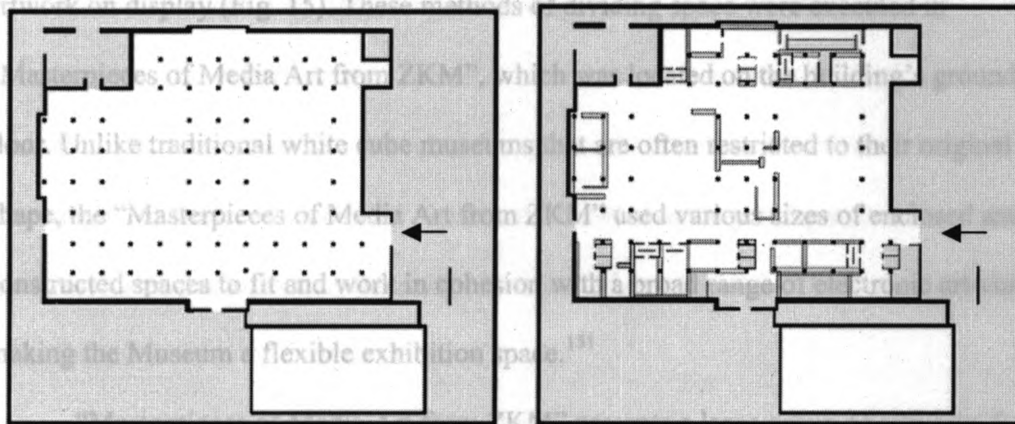
Considering and understanding the physical relationship between an artwork and its surroundings is crucial when successfully presenting an idea, concept, or message to a viewer. Victoria Newhouse, author of *Art and the Power of Placement*, argues that the artwork has an innate value that must be met by the museum to present an artwork to its

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<sup>146</sup> Sonia Alves, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 21, 2008.

<sup>147</sup> Kathleen James-Chakraborty, ed., *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xi.

full visual, tactile, and experiential potential.<sup>148</sup> In order for the viewer to develop a relationship with an artwork, the exhibition space must meet the needs and requirements demanded by the type of media-based artwork. Media Museum is established to do just this, and it does so by reconstructing its display areas for each new exhibition.



**Figure 14:** Open layout of Media Museum's ground level without any exhibition walls. Squares illustrate the support system of the industrial building.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2009.

**Figure 15:** Wall construction for 2004 "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM" in the Media Museum.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2009.

The flexibility of exhibition design in Media Museum is found in the origins of its building. Similar to most factories and armories, the Media Museum maintains the original building's specification of the essential load-bearing walls, which are concealed by large sectioned bay windows, and a roof with generous skylights (Fig. 14). Media Museum chose to keep the typical characteristics of the production facility since the characteristics allow the Museum to be flexible in exhibition design.<sup>149</sup> The army's original characteristics maximize exhibition space and allow the curator to play with both natural and artificial light. By keeping the original structure of the armory, which

<sup>148</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 213.

<sup>149</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

includes cement walls and steel support beams, the Museum measures 320 by 60 square metres of semi-open space, with three levels of exhibition areas.<sup>150</sup> Since there is a surplus of open space, Media Museum uses a number of constructed rooms, floating walls, partitions, and open rafters, all of which are painted in colours that suit the current artwork on display (Fig. 15). These methods of dividing space were executed in “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM”, which was located on the building’s ground floor. Unlike traditional white cube museums that are often restricted to their original shape, the “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” used various sizes of enclosed and constructed spaces to fit and work in cohesion with a broad range of electronic artworks, making the Museum a flexible exhibition space.<sup>151</sup>

“Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” presents a large group of artworks from ZKM’s collection that has significantly contributed to the discourse of new media art. Since new media art pieces often depend on the viewer’s interactions, the focal question of the exhibition was “How do visitors respond to an interactive artwork?”<sup>152</sup> The artworks presented in “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” such as *Tempo Liquido* (*Liquid Time*) by Fabrizio Plessi, *Art-Statement-Art* by Walter Giers, and *Versailles Fountain* by Nam June Paik, incorporate the viewer and gave her/him an essential role in the artwork. Additionally, each piece indirectly comments on the evolution of new media art including material electronic art.

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<sup>150</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

<sup>151</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 242.

<sup>152</sup> ZKM Centre for Art and Media, *Past Exhibitions: Masterpieces of Media Art from the ZKM Collection*, 2008, [http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader\\$4188](http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader$4188).

After personally visiting Media Museum in 2008, I chose to further research “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM”, since the most important and influential artists and artworks in new media art in the museum’s collection were incorporated into one exhibition. To sum up the exhibition, “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” traces the evolution of new media art, including electronic art, through artworks and made extensive use of carefully created spaces designed for each artwork. Though useful for each artwork, the frequent cutting up of the space will illustrate that Media Museum discards linear space, an important element of the white cube paradigm, and disorientates the viewer in order to present each artwork from “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” to its full potential.

When a viewer enters Media Museum’s “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” exhibition, s/he can expect to find a curved and twisted path as s/he passes deeper into the space (Fig. 15). Because the path is not linear, the viewer may occasionally backtrack, crossing over a space already explored, from which s/he may take a different path through the Museum. Audio sounds from various artworks only whisper a gentle calling from their loosely enclosed galleries, which can draw viewers into the space. There is no strict path the viewer is expected to take and thus, the linear narrative display of artworks valued by the ‘universal survey museum’ and the white cube archetypes, is undermined.

Media Museum mimics a changing labyrinth, which can cause the viewer to feel directionally challenged and disoriented. As a philosopher who investigates perception, affect, and the virtual, Brian Massumi states: “we all go about most of our everyday lives on habitual autopilot, driven by half-conscious tendencies....”<sup>153</sup> However, Media

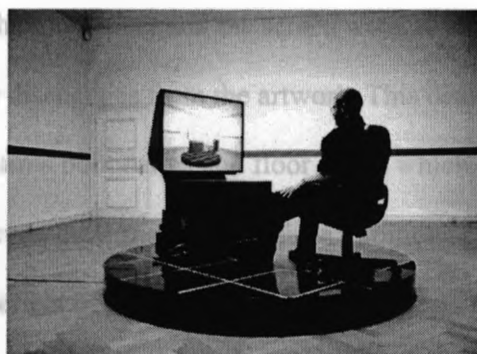
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<sup>153</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

Museum's labyrinth disrupts the viewer's habitual autopilot movement. This occurs because of the twisting chambers. Some may see the twisting chambers of Media Museum as a negative aspect to exhibiting artwork, but I argue, based on Massumi's argument, that the layout of Media Museum adds to the viewer's experience of the electronic artworks. Massumi notes:

Oddly, the first thing people typically do when they realize they are lost and start trying to reorient is to look away from the scene in front of them, even rolling their eyes skyward. ... The alarmingly physical sense we feel when we realize we are lost is a bodily registering of the disjunction between the visual and the proprioceptive. Places arise from a dynamic of interference and accord between sense-dimensions. ... Where we go to find ourselves when we are lost is where the senses fold into and out of each other. *We always find ourselves in this fold in experience.*<sup>154</sup>

Arguably, Massumi's description of a sensual experience of a disorientated person would occur in a viewer who has become lost in Media Museum. Media Museum's labyrinth-like structure awakens the viewer, and, in effect, makes the viewer aware of her/himself; in a sense, it heightens the viewer's visual and embodied experience in relation to the electronic artworks.



**Figure 16:** *Virtuelles Museum (Virtual Museum)* by Jeffrey Shaw, 1991. Installation view at Ars Electronica, Brucknerhaus, Linz 1992.

Source: Jeffrey Shaw, *Media Art Net*, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/the-virtuel-museum/>.

objects in direct sensory loss of something else. See Eric Hobsbawm, "Geographical Bodies in Motion: Simulations and the Quest for Third Impressions," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 139.

<sup>154</sup> Robinson Fickel and Greg Stockman, eds., *Media-Art-Review: ZKM Center for Art and Media* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1997), 156.

<sup>154</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 182. (Italics in original text)



The viewer's orientation of Media Museum can also be thrown off by the aesthetic components of an electronic artwork, which keep her/him from forming a mental map of the surrounding space. Electronic art's aesthetic components, such as sound, mobility, and degree of interactivity, disorientate the viewer through immersion.<sup>155</sup> Immersion undermines the viewer's ability to keep track of what part of the building s/he is in. An example of an artwork that can induce immersion and offer disorientation is Jeffrey Shaw's *Virtuelles Museum (Virtual Museum)*. An exhibition catalogue from ZKM, *Media-Art-History* describes *Virtuelles Museum* (Fig. 16) as follows:

On a turning platform, there is a chair mounted in front of a rostrum with a superscreen. The observer sits on the chair and can steer the picture on the superscreen by turning the chair and moving his body. The starting sequence offers a mirror-image of the area; the chair is empty. Four museum rooms are depicted. They show objects that indicate genres of art, distanced by movement or light effects.<sup>156</sup>

In *Virtuelles Museum*, the immersion of the viewer into the artwork is caused by the movement of the chair coinciding with the changing of the virtual space on the superscreen. Together, the movement and the screen work to amplify the viewer's disorientation when s/he disengages from the artwork. This disorientation is further heightened by the Museum's boundaries and floor plans, which change with each new exhibition.<sup>157</sup> At times, even the dimensions of the exhibition space change. Drawing on Massumi, alongside the effect of *Virtuelles Museum*, it appears that the viewer's

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<sup>155</sup> Immersion: a passage from one realm to another, from the immediate physical reality of tangible objects to direct sensory data of somewhere else. See Erkki Huhtamo, "Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>156</sup> Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stockmann, eds., *Media-Art-History. ZKM Centre for Arts and Media Karlsruhe* (New York, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 150.

<sup>157</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

“habitual autopilot” would attempt to take over her/his consciousness, but would be frequently confronted by the reality of the designed exhibition space.<sup>158</sup>

To further break away from the traditional museum’s stigma of restricting the viewer’s sense of touch, *Virtuelles Museum* also lets its viewers physically touch the artwork. A museum that allows interactivity between a viewer and an artwork challenges the most well known rule of traditional museums, ‘Do Not Touch the Artwork’. Prof. Dr. Bernhard Serexhe (curator of “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM”, and Chief Curator of Media Museum) explains:

One difficulty is that visitors do not always understand how to handle the artworks, especially the interactive artworks. And I may say two examples for this. We very often have the situation that visitors come to interact with an artwork or projection and nothing is moving, so they just quit and say, “Oh it might be broken.” But they don’t even touch the interface themselves and that’s why they don’t see any results. On the other side, other visitors might be too violent, or too direct in interacting with the interface and then they might break it. We have a lot of maintenance, which is due to what we call mannerisms.<sup>159</sup>

As an experimental space, Media Museum attempts to break down this overarching rule of not touching artworks, since a lot of “new media art requires platforms of exchange—between artwork and audience or the public space of the gallery and the public space of a network.”<sup>160</sup>

To further assist in describing the type of spaces in which the artworks from “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” are found, and how these electronic artworks form a relationship with the Media Museum’s structure, a definition of ‘experimental spaces’ is required. Experimental spaces can be described using the following criteria: in

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<sup>158</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>159</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

<sup>160</sup> Christiane Paul, ed., *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 54.

general, experimental spaces break free from the established ideologies of the white cube; they are constructed spaces designed specifically to investigate new and innovative ways of exhibiting artworks. Much like scientific experiments begin with unknown results, experimental spaces allow artworks to challenge conventional boundaries and notions of display practices, by depending, for instance, on the space's construction and on incorporating it into the artwork. This type of space allows the artworks to go beyond the expected installation guidelines set out by traditional curatorial practice.<sup>161</sup> For example, an electronic artwork may integrate the realities occurring in the world beyond the museum walls to complete the artwork. Experimental spaces also encourage both the artwork and also the viewer to explore the space by any means possible—whether that is through the installation and/or medium of the artwork, or the sensory faculties of the viewer. In experimental spaces, for instance, viewers are encouraged to pick up artworks, move through the spaces physically animated manner, and vocalize their experience at any volume. Media Museum encompasses the description of an experimental space, which is further illustrated throughout this chapter.

Unlike the white cube paradigm exemplified in Chapter 2 by the Agnes Etherington (AE) gallery and the Koffler Gallery, an experimental space is no longer a place that restricts art objects from use.<sup>162</sup> The public spaces become a platform for daily use of art objects, which, in turn, suggests neglected possibilities available in curatorial practices. Experimental spaces are not only flexible in terms of curatorial practice, but also in their physical construction. Based on the medium and the audience, a specific

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<sup>161</sup> Paul Basu and Sharon Macdonald, ed., *Exhibition Experiments* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 18.

<sup>162</sup> Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stockmann, eds., *Media-Art-History: ZKM Centre for Arts and Media Karlsruhe* (New York, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 11.

spatial design is generated for the artwork. At times, this space may call upon some aspects of traditional museum spaces, but may also branch away from these established guidelines. Flexibility is a key factor in an experimental space. The Media Museum is one such experimental space (Fig. 14), since unlike the white cube models its spatial structure offers an alternative way of viewing artworks.

In the following examples of artworks from “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM”, it is evident that Media Museum’s Chief Curator, Prof. Dr. Bernhard Serexhe, considers the best way to present techno-oriented media. For every exhibition, based on the dramatic changes in exhibition floor plans, the Chief Curator goes to great lengths to ensure that an artwork’s idea, concept, or message is being experienced and explored by the viewer in the most conducive ways possible. This occurs because the Chief Curator believes that there needs to be harmony between the “container and the contained”, just as Victoria Newhouse recommends.<sup>163</sup>

In a conversation with regards to his interest in purpose-built buildings and ZKM’s, Serexhe states, “Buildings are a way of allowing art to express itself to society.”<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the examples from “Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM” illustrate that there are no absolute rules or guidelines for exhibiting electronic art.<sup>165</sup>

Newhouse comments on this by suggesting that each media possesses basic components that require certain display elements, which influence the nature of the container or, in

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<sup>163</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 214.

<sup>164</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 214.

this situation, the Media Museum.<sup>166</sup> It thus becomes imperative to consider where and how material electronic art is placed within such experimental spaces as ZKM's Media Museum. As a result of looking at three artworks from "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM", the remainder of this chapter aims to further illustrate this study's focal questions: how does electronic art function within different type of spaces, and what does this reveal about the space?



**Figure 17:** *Tempo Liquido (Liquid Time)* by Fabrizio Plessi, 1993. Installation view in ZKM's Media Museum.

Source: ZKM, Fabrizio Plessi, <http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/meisterwerke/plessi>.

The entrance for all Media Museum exhibitions, including "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM", is from the ground entrance via a small corridor. The corridor leads the viewer to an expansive area that contains the five-metre-high *Tempo Liquido (Liquid Time)* (Fig. 17) by Italian video sculpture (videosculptura) artist Fabrizio Plessi. Plessi's 1993 artwork mimics a traditional wooden waterwheel, but is constructed out of iron, rather than wood. To signify a traditional waterwheel's purpose, a long beam-like container stretches out horizontally to illustrate the direction that the flowing water takes as it moves away from the wheel. Fresh water flows in the container, into which the viewer is welcome to dip her/his hands.

<sup>166</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 213.

The iron waterwheel illustrates a combination of fictional and real characteristics of a traditional wooden waterwheel. Instead of the container-like grooves on the wheel filling and dumping water, digital screens display continuously flowing, bubbling water. Because there is no actual water keeping the wheel in motion, an electric motor is required to make it turn – something that is obviously contradictory to the waterwheel's original purpose. Here lies the fiction of *Tempo Liquido*. The realistic characteristic of a waterwheel is preserved in *Tempo Liquido* by fresh water forcefully passing through a beam-like container, also described as a basin. A water-pump pushes the water to mimic the current that the water would originally create if it were to be moved by a waterwheel. Unsurprisingly, the water movement emits the sound of water flowing, in addition to the artwork's use of audio. Due to its sound and the large scale of *Tempo Liquido*, the curator had to carefully consider where Plessi's work could fit in Media Museum so that it could still be displayed effectively. This consideration forced the curator to exhibit the artwork on the ground floor of the Museum in an expansive space. In this expansive space, the artwork can also be lit by skylights and viewed from levels two and three of the Media Museum.

The location of *Tempo Liquido* stimulates a kinesthetic experience in the viewer, which can cause the viewer to also acknowledge Media Museum's spatial boundaries, structure, and the adequate placement of the artwork. A kinesthetic experience can occur when a person's body changes in reaction to its sensory facilities—for example, the need to 'see' *Tempo Liquido* from an elevated position.<sup>167</sup> Since the viewer is free to leave the ground floor, s/he may witness the artwork's dominating scale from the safety of another

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<sup>167</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), xvi.; and Barry Lord, ed., *The Manual of Museum Learning* (Lanham, New York, Toronto, & Plymouth, : AltaMira Press, 2007), 6.

exhibition floor, which is one of the main characteristics the Museum has maintained from its days as an armory building.<sup>168</sup> The viewer's ability to see the artwork from above reveals the exhibition space. As I myself experienced during my 2008 visit, the viewer can grasp the second or third floor railing, overlooking *Tempo Liquido*, and extend her/himself into a position to see the artwork from a different perspective than on the ground level. The physical contortions of the viewer's body proclaim that s/he, due to the presence and location of *Tempo Liquido*, is aware of the boundaries of Media Museum's physical space. This kinesthetic experience is not available in the white cube galleries found in Chapter 2, but here, Media Museum offers the viewer the ability to fully experience the dimensions of the exhibition area.

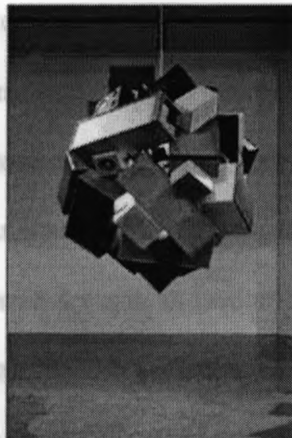
Although *Tempo Liquido* reveals the Museum's structure to the viewer, it simultaneously illustrates the artwork's dependency on a supportive space. Without the viewer's awareness or inclination to explore the Media Museum's layout, *Tempo Liquido* may not be seen from an elevated angle, as it should be. This is crucial, since the location of the artwork exemplifies that a confined enclosed space, such as some white cube paradigms, would not be a supportive space for *Tempo Liquido*. In fact, if placed in an enclosed space like the AE gallery (Chapter 2), the videosculpture would be limited: it would become, as Andre Malraux suggests, a static documentation of a sculpture. Simply put, the viewer would be unable to see the artwork as intended in relation to its spatial placement.<sup>169</sup> Electronic artworks, like the videosculpture *Tempo Liquido*, are dependent upon an expansive space that accommodates the artworks' grand scale and, in turn

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<sup>168</sup> Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

<sup>169</sup> Andre Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), 82.

creates in the viewer a sense of physical insignificance and awe—an experience of the sublime.<sup>170</sup>



**Figure 18:** *Art-Statement-Art* by Walter Giers, 1993. Installation view in ZKM's Media Museum.

Source: ZKM, *Walter Giers*, <http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/meisterwerke/giers>.

Another electronic artwork, by German artist, engineer, and musician Walter Giers, *Art-Statement-Art* (1993) purposefully competes with the whispering sound of the flowing water from *Tempo Liquido* on the ground floor. *Art-Statement-Art* (Fig. 18), a cluster of old box speakers, is tethered to a steel-beam that supports Media Museum's ceiling. The speakers emit a jumble of people's opinions and judgments on the question: 'what is art?'<sup>171</sup> In Giers' project, all of the recorded participants' audio is layered one over the other to acoustically illustrate the different perspectives on art.<sup>172</sup> The mass jumble of the speakers forms a visual metaphor that connects the difference in verbal opinions through the speakers' size, shape, colour, and age.

The sounds emitting from the assortment of speakers assist in revealing the Museum's physical structure, since it calls to viewers from across the space and activates

<sup>170</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), 46.

<sup>171</sup> ZKM, *Walter Giers*, <http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/meisterwerke/giers>.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*



their senses; in this manner, the viewers become aware of the Museum as an ‘institution.’ With the artwork’s sound is unrestricted by headphones,<sup>173</sup> the viewer can move around *Art-Statement-Art*, and possibly other artworks in the space, while listening to the projected, prerecorded statements. These free-flying discourses about ‘art’ influence the viewer’s thoughts on the ‘real’ environment, which leads the viewer to start thinking critically about the Museum as an institution. The activation of the viewer, and the acknowledgment that *Art-Statement-Art* is in an institution-like setting, is beneficial to the viewer and the artwork in the following way: the space creates a context for the artwork to criticize other artworks and, thus, meets the expectations of the artist. Media Museum’s space meets the expectations of the artist in the way it allows the viewer to think about the ‘real’ environment that the sound from *Art-Statement-Art* travels through, rather than forgetting the space, as so often occurs with white cube spaces.<sup>174</sup>

Contrary to the white cube model, *Art-Statement-Art* uses the context of Media Museum to heighten its message to the viewer. If *Art-Statement-Art* were set in a white cube space, I suggest that this work would lose its impact, as the connection between the artwork and the museum’s spatial structure would be lost, thus lessening the effect of the answers to the question “What is art?”<sup>175</sup> Ideally, though *Art-Statement-Art* should contest the white cube space, it actually does this more effectively in an institutional setting that embraces all of its contextual components, making it more of an experience than an object. Media Museum does not disguise its purpose from either the artwork or

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<sup>173</sup> Headphones are often used in Media Museum to reduce noise pollution from entering into other exhibition spaces. Bernhard Serexhe, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany, August 22, 2008.

<sup>174</sup> Dyson, Francesi, “In/Quest of Presence: Virtuality, Aurality, and Television’s Gulf War,” in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>175</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 14.

the viewer. The context of Media Museum is embraced and considered essential to the electronic artworks placed within it, and specifically to *Art-Statement-Art*.



**Figure 19:** *Versailles Fountain* by Nam June Paik, 1992. Installed at Baden-Württemberg Energy Company, in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2008.

Source: Wordpress.com, posted "Nam June Paik in Karlsruhe-or how the exhibition space 'makes' the exhibition." <http://deconarch.wordpress.com/2009/01/08/nam-june-paik-in-karlsruhe-or-how-the-exhibition-space-makes-the-exhibition/>.

Surrounded by other exhibition spaces, the expansive space that contains *Art-Statement-Art* also includes Nam June Paik's 1992 *Versailles Fountain* (Fig. 19). Born in South Korea and now working in the United States, Nam June Paik is known for his lasting contributions in video art, kinetic art, and, as seen in *Versailles Fountain*, new media art.<sup>176</sup> *Versailles Fountain* uses numerous televisions (as a medium, not a vehicle for solely exhibiting a digital image or program), flickering neon lights, and recorded abstract footage to create a sculpture. These elements are combined to compose an abstract, fountain-like monument that emits flickering sources of light. The sculptural elements and images create an abstract piece, except for when the projected images on the television screens show a glimpse of commercial consumption habits. These referential images, however, are quickly distorted by digital water ripples. One critic describes the images on Paik's televisions as "a field of operation for totally abstract

<sup>176</sup> ZKM, *Nam June Paik*, <http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/meisterwerke/paik>.

images, in motion...."<sup>177</sup> Placing *Versailles Fountain* in Media Museum's environment allows the viewers to visually consume Nam June Paik's arrangement of consumer products and images.

*Versailles Fountain* uses images to construct fictional worlds that acknowledge the viewer's present society. The artwork needs the viewer—that is, the consumer—to have access to the external world beyond the museum in order to understand the concept of mass consumption. *Versailles Fountain* pulls the outside world into the gallery via both the viewer's cultural references and the Media Museum's large skylights—these effectively open the space to what lies beyond the institution. By incorporating visual recordings of consumers shopping, and historically linking the artwork to King Louis XIV's spending of the French monies on Versailles and its fountains in late 1660s,<sup>178</sup> the viewer is expected to begin actively thinking about her/his own consumption habits.

It is not my suggestion that this work could not convey its message within the white cube, but rather, that the message is heightened in the space of the ZKM because of the aforementioned ways that the outside world is brought inside, as well as the fact that the viewer is able to think—and more importantly see—beyond the Museum's walls. Furthermore, it is beneficial that Media Museum's space opens up *Versailles Fountain* to the external world via skylights, so that the viewer may draw additional connections to the technology found in her/his daily life. By seeing the sky, the viewer is encouraged to think about the world beyond Media Museum's institutional walls. These skylights also emphasize and reenact, to a certain degree, the condition in which a fountain would be

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<sup>177</sup> John Canaday, "Art: The Electronics-Kinetics Trend. Paik's TV sets on View at Galleria Bonino," in *Nam June Paik eine DATA base* (Italy: La Biennale di Venezia, 1993), 31.

<sup>178</sup> Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 251-253.

found on the grounds of Versailles, something an enclosed white cube space would be unable to do.

Bringing forth the connection an artwork has to the society that lies beyond a museum also breaks down the illusion that *Versailles Fountain* and similar artworks are being presented in a “non-space”.<sup>179</sup> According to writer Thomas McEvelley, with reference to the white cube ideology, “non-space” is described as lacking supportive context for an artwork causing it to be detached from current reality.<sup>180</sup> Chairman and CEO of ZKM, Prof. Peter Weibel, believes that new media art generates reality, meaning that new media art in such spaces as Media Museum are a place of experience, which is similar to the viewer’s home.<sup>181</sup> The same person at home and in the Museum is connected to the events beyond the building’s walls and because of this, finds familiarity in the spaces and things it contains. If electronic art were to be contained by a “non-space”, the viewer might not understand the images of consumption in *Versailles Fountain* as readily as s/he may in an experimental space, nor might s/he make the connection that the television, which forms the sculpture’s structure, is also a product of consumption. An experimental space welcomes connections with the real world: both the viewer and the Museum’s structure play central roles in bridging the gap between an art institution and the external world beyond the museum walls. In fact, Media Museum exhibits electronic art in such a supportive space that it actually encourages discussion

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<sup>179</sup> Thomas McEvelley, “Introduction,” in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, ed. Thomas McEvelley (Los Angeles, USA: University of California Press, 1986), 8.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> *Hear, See and Experience*, DVD, organized by ZKM Centre for Art and Media (2008: Karlsruhe, Germany, 2008).

between the virtual and the real.<sup>182</sup> One can further argue that electronic art demands the context of the external world in order to be visually understood.

An art institution such as Media Museum emphasizes the importance of considering how new media art is presented to the public. To prevent future problems in exhibiting new media art, it is important that the space be carefully considered in order to enhance and define the art's idea, concept, or message to its viewers.<sup>183</sup> This belief is built upon one of Victoria Newhouse's case studies in *Towards a New Museum*. In the case study that focuses on the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, Newhouse observes that future problems in exhibition practices and administration occur when "museums [are] designed with no specific contents in mind."<sup>184</sup> For Media Museum's Chief Curator Serexhe, Newhouse's observation should always be kept in mind when planning a new exhibition. This is exemplified by artworks from "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM", including *Tempo Liquido* by Plessi, *Art-Statement-Art* by Giers, and *Versailles Fountain* by Paik.

Electronic art, as exemplified by some artworks in this chapter from "Masterpieces of Media Art from ZKM," embraces the tangible and experimental spaces of Media Museum. Experimental spaces are not simply backdrops to the artworks, as the white cube ideology recommends they should be; the Museum's so-called backdrops are, in fact, part of the artworks. Media Museum's space is an essential and integrated part of its techno-oriented artworks, since it can create viewing leverage, supportive context, and can connect the artworks and space to the world beyond the institution's walls. By way of

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<sup>182</sup> Rebecca Picht and Birgit Stockmann, eds., *Media-Art-History: ZKM Centre for Arts and Media Karlsruhe* (New York, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1997), 45.

<sup>183</sup> Suzi Gablik, ed., "Breaking Out of the White Cube; Interview with Richard Shusterman," in *Conversations Before the End of Time* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 252.

<sup>184</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 66.

experimental spaces, the spatial structure of Media Museum works with and for electronic art, thereby exhibiting it to its full potential. All aspects of the exhibition at Media Museum are carefully considered and the artworks are precisely placed in relation to the Museum's structure and other artworks. In addition, through careful consideration of the placement of the artworks, the viewer becomes active and acknowledges the space as both something that contains her/him, and as something that is essential to the artworks. This is made possible through the structural flexibility of the experimental space, which makes such art institutions as Media Museum more than just a systematically formulated display case for art. ZKM's Media Museum is an experimental space that acknowledges, through its construction of space and exhibition practices, that it must support an electronic artwork in order for the artwork's idea, concept, and/or message to be adequately presented to the viewer.

## Chapter IV

### Blurring the Boundaries



**Figure 20:** Exterior entrance to InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre. InterAccess' gallery is located behind the two large bay windows on the first floor with a workshop section in the basement.

Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2008.

In her introduction to "Breaking out of the White Cube: an interview with Richard Shusterman", art critic Suzi Gablik writes, "The aesthetic attitude [of the white cube] implies a break with the world and the concerns of ordinary life; its premise is that art and real life are, and should be, strictly separated."<sup>185</sup> Gablik assures readers that although she does not advocate the aesthetic attitude exemplified by the white cube, it does, nevertheless, prevail in the twentieth century.<sup>186</sup> Thus, curators of new media art are often in something of a bind – they may not embrace the aesthetic and ideology of the white cube, but they often have to work at least partially within its bounds. InterAccess Media Arts Centre (Fig. 20) in Toronto, which has elements that represent both

<sup>185</sup> Suzi Gablik, ed., "Breaking Out of the White Cube; Interview with Richard Shusterman," in *Conversations Before the End of Time* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 248. Further readings see Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 113.

<sup>186</sup> Suzi Gablik, ed., "Breaking Out of the White Cube; Interview with Richard Shusterman," in *Conversations Before the End of Time* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 248.

experimental space and the white cube, is no exception. In this chapter, I use InterAccess to demonstrate how electronic art is displayed in a hybrid space: a combination of experimental space and the white cube paradigm.

*Menage* and *untitled (Solenoids)* from the 2008 exhibition “IA25: Mapping a Practice of Media Art”, demonstrate how some aspects from both exhibition environments enhance the displaying of electronic artworks, as well as how some characteristics of the white cube hinder the artworks’ display potential. By drawing on Gablik’s argument, I suggest that the relationship between art and life—or between the gallery space and the outside world—forms an extremely important relationship that curators and artists need to consider when displaying electronic artworks in such spaces as InterAccess.

This chapter begins by outlining the ways in which the characteristics of both the white cube and the experimental spaces are intertwined in InterAccess’ gallery. I make this analysis by examining two of the four electronic artworks displayed in InterAccess in the 2008 exhibition “IA25: Mapping a Practice of Media Art”, a survey exhibition that reflected upon the development of electronic media at InterAccess in Toronto, Ontario.<sup>187</sup>

InterAccess’ exhibition area is equally important to each exhibited artwork and thus, becomes part of the artwork, rather than just a display vehicle. Here, the gallery space becomes “part of life and a powerful aesthetic experience rather than a didactic tool or a remote object of veneration.”<sup>188</sup> In considering how InterAccess blurs the boundaries between the white cube and the experimental spaces’ characteristics in the presence of electronic art, this chapter reveals that InterAccess’ hybrid space, along with electronic

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<sup>187</sup> Nina Czegledy and Angella MacKey, *IA25: Mapping a Practice of Media Art*, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre (January to March, 2008)

<sup>188</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 260.



artworks within it, are mutually essential for the experience of the Gallery's visitors.

Furthermore, this chapter illustrates that the aspects of experimental space found in InterAccess' gallery preserves the viewer's connection with the outside world and what s/he already knows. In the following analysis, I return to this study's two focal questions:

- 1) how does electronic art function within different types of art institutional spaces; and
- 2) what does this reveal about the space?

InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre was founded in 1983 when a collective of artists began to investigate possible artistic uses for the Telidon system,<sup>189</sup> along with other technologies, including the photocopier.<sup>190</sup> This group of artists was first known as Toronto Community Videotex, and in the 1980s the organization was one of the few resources available to artists that offered them access the most recent technology.<sup>191</sup> In the 1990s, Toronto Community Videotex changed its name to InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre. This was done in order to better describe the artists' research areas, which had become a growing component of the cooperative space.<sup>192</sup> Following this, InterAccess relocated several times throughout Toronto, until it settled in its current location in 2005, a two-story commercial building below a tattoo parlor (Fig. 20).

InterAccess occupies the main floor and the basement of the three floor grey building, which is located on Ossington Avenue. Around the corner is the busy, art-focused Queen Street West, an area that is home to a number of independent and

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<sup>189</sup> A Telidon system is a two-way communication machine that is considered a precursor to the Internet. See Peter Goddard, "Media Arts Centre Exhibit Marks 25 Years," *Toronto Star*, February 02, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/article/299272>.

<sup>190</sup> Jennifer Cherniack, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 8, 2008.

<sup>191</sup> Peter Goddard, "Media Arts Centre Exhibit Marks 25 Years," *Toronto Star*, February 02, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/article/299272>.

<sup>192</sup> Jennifer Cherniack, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 8, 2008.

commercial galleries. The basement is a studio space where artists can tinker with physical computing and programming media, as well as enjoy specialized topic workshops. This case study focuses primarily on the main gallery space and not on the studio space.

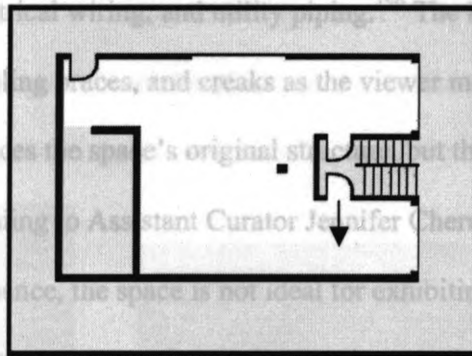
InterAccess' mundane grey façade disguises the possibilities and ideas present within the building. The exterior is divided by two large bay windows that are frequently left transparent, encouraging pedestrians to engage with the exhibitions or with working artists who are visible from the street outside.<sup>193</sup> By opening a gallery to the street life, Chairman and CEO of ZKM Peter Weibel describes the relationship between the interior and the exterior as lending electronic artworks "the right to participate in the construction of reality."<sup>194</sup> In other words, new media artworks, including those found in InterAccess, are incorporated into world beyond the gallery space. This furthers InterAccess' mandate to offer an environment where artists can present experimental artworks, work with other artists to unravel electronic techniques common in everyday products, and share the visual result of an experiment with the public.<sup>195</sup> In this way, InterAccess' artists can be seen as very similar to ZKM's in-house researchers examined in Chapter 3.

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<sup>193</sup> Jennifer Cherniack, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 8, 2008.

<sup>194</sup> Peter Weibel, "Beyond the White Cube," in *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, eds. by Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 140.

<sup>195</sup> InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, *Home Page*, 2008, [www.interaccess.org](http://www.interaccess.org).



**Figure 21:** A diagram of the floor layout for InterAccess' gallery.  
 Source: Andrea L. Skelly, 2009.

The main floor of InterAccess comprises the primary exhibition area and the administrative offices at the back of the building (Fig. 21). The space has two alcoves, each with an aforementioned large window that opens onto the street. This floor is raised from street level; thus, when a pedestrian passes by, s/he is approximately at eye level if required, the openness of the space allows for extra walls to be installed<sup>106</sup>. The white cube characteristics are also present in InterAccess' gallery, and these work to both enhance and also hinder the presentation of electronic art, as exemplified by *Ménage* and *untitled (Salenius)*. The amalgamated two types of spaces allow artists to take risks in an open-minded environment where either paradigm can become ultimately dominant. The pedestrian, now the viewer, enters into one of the alcoves and proceeds through the whitewashed, 'c'-shaped space.

InterAccess' gallery space is an open concept, except for some structural obstacles. There is a large steel beam between the alcoves in the larger section of the gallery. Along the top of the floor layout diagram of InterAccess (Fig. 21), a dip in the wall occurs. This marks two steel doors that are original to the building's structure and the steel doors, while *untitled (Salenius)*, took cover in one of the two alcoves. The exhibition "IA25" commemorates the Centre's previous architecturally bold decisions to The raw structural components of the building are also evident in the gallery's ceiling and floor. Track lights are installed on a beamed ceiling, which is open to show an aged

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 6, 2009.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

wooden framework, electrical wiring, and utility piping.<sup>196</sup> The hardwood flooring mimics the age of the ceiling braces, and creaks as the viewer moves through the space. Thus, InterAccess embraces the space's original structure, but the adapted space can also create limitations. According to Assistant Curator Jennifer Cherniack, "You work with what you have."<sup>197</sup> In essence, the space is not ideal for exhibiting artworks like electronic art, but curators try to meet the needs of each artwork to the best of their ability, while working with the tools at their disposal.

InterAccess incorporates qualities of both the white cube and the experimental spaces. Unlike the ZKM Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum (Chapter 3), InterAccess' space was never specifically designed for exhibiting electronic art; however, if required, the openness of the space allows for extra walls to be installed.<sup>198</sup> The white cube characteristics are also present in InterAccess' gallery, and these work to both enhance and also hinder the presentation of electronic art, as exemplified by *Menage* and *untitled (Solenoids)*. The amalgamated two types of spaces allow artists to take risks in an open-minded environment where either paradigm can become ultimately dominant. Nonetheless, InterAccess does attempt to break free from the white cube aesthetic attitude that Suzi Gablik discusses in her transcribed conversation.

The artworks found in "IA25" retreat to their own corners of the gallery to prevent any disruption to other artworks. The first artwork, *Menage* was located above the steel doors, while *untitled (Solenoids)*, took cover in one of the two alcoves. The exhibition "IA25" commemorates the Centre's previous artistically bold decisions to

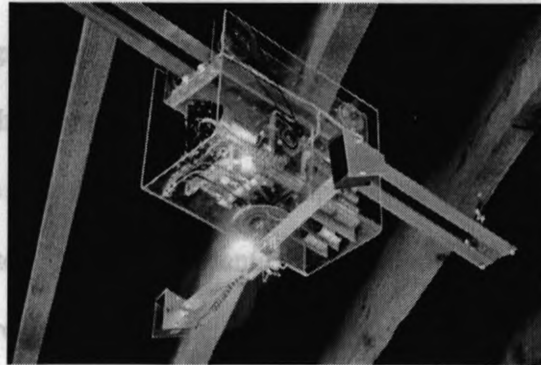
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<sup>196</sup> Jennifer Cherniack, interview by Andrea L. Skelly, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, October 8, 2008.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

challenge traditional media, which have shaped InterAccess' hybrid environment. In the following analysis of *Menage* and *untitled (Solenoids)* it will become clear that InterAccess pushes the boundaries and methods of traditional exhibition practices.<sup>199</sup>



**Figure 22:** (Left) Installation view of *Menage* by Norman White, 1974, from "IA25" exhibition at InterAccess.

Source: Dave Kemp, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008.

**Figure 23:** (Right) One of the three robots from *Menage* installed on the ceiling of InterAccess' gallery.

Source: Dave Kemp, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008.

Long-time InterAccess member Norman White<sup>200</sup> began *Menage* (Figs. 22, 23) in 1974. He maintained and updated the artwork over the years, in order to have it functioning for InterAccess' commemorative exhibition.<sup>201</sup> *Menage* has three small tortoise-like robots that move mechanically about the rafters on their own tracks. The three tracks, which form a triangular shape, resemble lighting rails. Each robot is equipped with two light sensors and one spotlight. As the robots move, the sensors on an outstretched arm swivel to detect any light sources in the area. Since the three robots are in close proximity to each other, their sensors often detect one another and they exchange

<sup>199</sup> Jan Allen, interview by Andrea L. Skelly. The Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, Canada on October 9, 2008.

<sup>200</sup> Norman White is also discussed in Chapter 2 with relation to the white cube ideology.

<sup>201</sup> Norman White, "Artist Statements," InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008. Also see Peter Goddard, "Media Arts Centre Exhibit Marks 25 Years," *Toronto Star*, February 02, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/article/299272>.

gazes, in a sense. However, these gazes are broken when the mechanical aspect of the robot moves away from the light source without consulting the sensor. In White's artist statement for "IA25", he compares this event to a scenario where "two dog owners are passing each other on the sidewalk: their two leashed dogs are attracted to each other, but the owners eventually drag [the dogs] apart."<sup>202</sup>

*Menage* is dependent upon InterAccess' structural characteristics to create cohesion between the space and the artwork. Like the raw properties of the ceiling in InterAccess' exhibition space, White paid minimal attention to the robots' aesthetic qualities. This material similarity creates cohesion between the artwork and the space, since neither overpowers the other. Were *Menage* installed on a clean white ceiling – free of texture, flaws and only sparsely marked with directional lighting, the work might seem out of place, and the three robots would seem alienated from, rather than connected to, the debris of everyday life. InterAccess' space allows *Menage* to be seen as an artwork that is a product of humanity, rather than something that is foreign and jarring – as seen with such works as *Frantic* and *Muckydum* (Chapter 2). While it might seem beneficial for *Menage* to appear alien to a viewer in a white cube space, this effect actually causes the viewer to miss the purpose behind the work: to depict social interaction illustrated through three robots. The hybrid space of InterAccess presented *Menage* in such a way that enables the viewer to see the world beyond the gallery, to understand the stigmas of an institutional space, and thus, to comprehend *Menage* as a part of the viewer's world. By placing *Menage* in InterAccess, rather than a white cube paradigm, the artwork embraces both the gallery and the outside world.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Norman White, "Artist Statements," InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

The need for cohesion between an electronic artwork, such as *Menage*, and its space refers back to the discussion of Malraux's theory 'museum without walls', and specifically, his claim that photography could not capture three-dimensional sculpture in a static representation.<sup>204</sup> Since *Menage* is dependent upon InterAccess' spatial context, which connects the artwork to the world beyond the gallery, a photograph of *Menage* would disregard the artwork's situational and historical contexts, which comments on the social interactions of the twenty-first century. A photograph of *Menage*, similar to the one found in this thesis, cannot translate to the reader the same physical relationship that a viewer in InterAccess' exhibition space might experience. Similarly, the relationship that the artwork has with the world beyond the Centre's bay windows cannot be understood from a photograph. For *Menage* to be experienced in all of its dimensions, the electronic artwork needs the qualities of an experimental space, such as InterAccess' rugged décor and access to the outside world through the bay windows. The effect of this type of exhibition space tends to work with the artwork, rather than acting as a background. Similar to the effect of a photograph, if *Menage* were placed in a white cube, the viewer would be deprived of the opportunity to develop a relationship to the time in which the artwork evolved. In order to remain current, *Menage* benefits from the aforementioned characteristics of experimental space, which work against the "timeless" transcendentalism of the white cube:

The white cube [is] a transitional device that attempt[s] to bleach out the past and at the same time control the future by appealing to supposedly transcendental modes of presence and power. But the problem with transcendental principals is that by definition they speak of another world, not this one.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Andre Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), 82.

<sup>205</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 11.

When a viewer is present in InterAccess, s/he is able to see that the ceiling plays an important role in contextualizing electronic artworks such as *Menage*. Since *Menage* diagonally crisscrosses the rafter's direction, its installation emphasizes and highlights the presence of the ceiling. Because the ceiling is not a stage for the artwork, but is interwoven into *Menage*, it cannot, as the white cube ideology demands, fade into the background.<sup>206</sup>

InterAccess' open ceiling and large bay windows suggest characteristics associated with experimental space; nevertheless, the Centre also imitates the white cube in many ways. For example, the same smooth white walls found in idealized white cube spaces such as the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC) or the Koffler Gallery (Chapter 2), can also be found in InterAccess' gallery. These blank and sterile walls, however, had a purpose in the "IA25" exhibition, particularly in the display of *Menage*. Since the blank walls of InterAccess reduce distraction, the viewer considers the wall a mere supporting feature, causing her/his eyes to quickly race over the white walls towards *Menage*, which is located above. While the latter event occurs, the movement of viewer's eyes and the tilting of her/his head suggests that the viewer is acknowledging the space's construction, whether consciously or not. Thus, the white cube qualities contribute to *Menage* even as the white cube is contested, since the viewer enters into a kinesthetic experience and realizes that the ultimate point of interest is the open ceiling.<sup>207</sup>

*Menage* then both embraces and rebukes the white cube characteristics and, in essence, reveals a juxtaposition between the two types of spaces. Even though the two

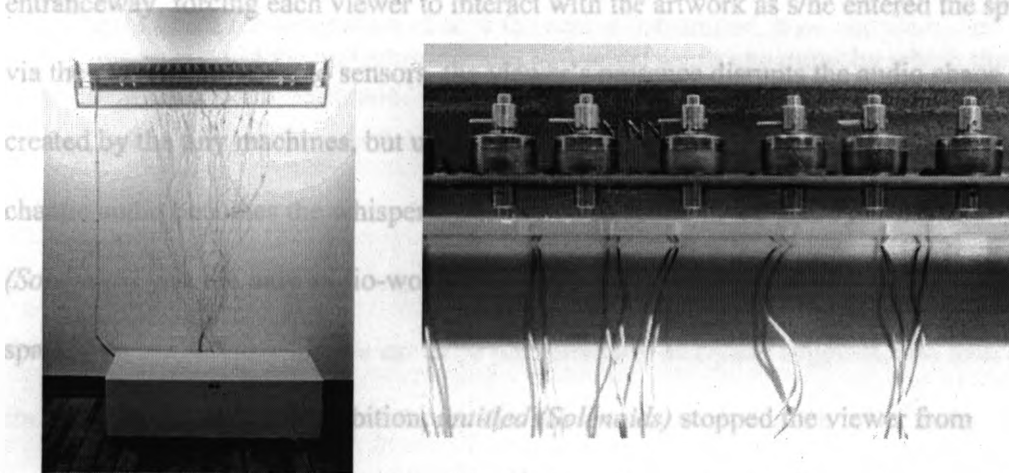
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<sup>206</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 66.

<sup>207</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), xvi.; and Barry Lord, ed., *The Manual of Museum Learning* (Lanham, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, AltaMira Press, 2007), 6.



paradigms are in contrast to one another, they assist in creating the necessary context and exhibition method for displaying *Menage*. However, it must be emphasized that, regardless of the white cube characteristics present in InterAccess, the gallery space can still be classified as a largely experimental space. Characteristics of experimental spaces found in InterAccess, such as open space and raw qualities in the construction of the ceilings, assist *Menage* in highlighting the space as an essential part of the artwork and not just a container.



**Figure 24:** (Left) Installation view of *untitled (Solenoids)* by Lorena Salomé, 2005. Source: Dave Kemp, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008.

**Figure 25:** (Right) Detail of *untitled (Solenoids)* by Lorena Salomé, 2005. Source: Dave Kemp, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, 2008.

Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) graduate and Argentinean artist, Lorena Salomé, brings attention to the essential role that electronic media plays in people's daily lives through her mechanical electronic artworks.<sup>208</sup> Specifically in *untitled (Solenoids)* (Figs. 24, 25), Salomé uses tiny, non-representational machines, sensors, and the viewer's presence in the gallery space to activate the viewer, and make

<sup>208</sup> Nina Czegledy and Angella MacKey, *IA25: Mapping a Practice of Media Art*, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre (January to March, 2008)

her/him aware of self. Toronto art critic Peter Goddard describes Salomé's artwork in the "IA25" exhibition as follows:

Lorena Salomé's *untitled (Solenoids)* (2005), a fan-shaped fibrous trellis of rust-red wires disappearing into a computer housed in a floor mounting, is arresting and entirely beautiful, like some idiosyncratically shaped musical instrument. (Think zither.) With its row of 15 tiny solenoid valves housed together under Plexiglas – each valve houses a energy-converting coil – *untitled* responds to the presence of people in the room with sharp, clicking noises like so many disturbed brass chickadees.<sup>209</sup>

At "IA25", *untitled (Solenoids)* was mounted on the white wall across from the entranceway, forcing each viewer to interact with the artwork as s/he entered the space via the alcove door. Due to sensors, the viewer's presence disrupts the audio chaos created by the tiny machines, but upon continuing through the exhibition space, this chaotic audio becomes the whispering background sound in the gallery. *Untitled (Solenoids)* was the only audio-work in "IA25" that emitted sound into the exhibition space.

During the 2008 exhibition, *untitled (Solenoids)* stopped the viewer from transcending into a metaphysical state inside InterAccess' semi-white cube space via its emitting sound, which was set on a sensor to detect a person's presence. Unlike experimental spaces, the white cube does not encourage human self-awareness within its walls. In fact, when the white cube ideology is used, it is expected that the viewer will not be aware of her/his physical state and that the space's aesthetic qualities will move each viewer into a metaphysical state, making her/him forget the physical body.<sup>210</sup> Electronic artworks, such as *untitled (Solenoids)*, prevent this from happening. Media artist and

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<sup>209</sup> Peter Goddard, "Media Arts Centre Exhibit Marks 25 Years," *Toronto Star*, February 02, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/article/299272>.

<sup>210</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. Expanded Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 11.

writer Frances Dyson believes that sound blurs the distinction between the exterior and interior of the body:

Sound cannot be held for close examination, nor can it be separated from the aural continuum and given a singular identity. In a constant state of becoming, sound comes into and goes out of existence in a manner that confounds ontological representation. Similarly, being both heard outside and felt within, sound blurs the distinction between the interior and exterior of the body, annihilating the distance between subject and object, self and other. This immersive quality, together with the physiology of the ear, destabilizes the subjectivity of the subject; unlike the eye, the ear cannot be closed. Unlike the gaze that is always *in front of* the subject and projected onto the world, listening involves an awareness of the unseen and possibly unwelcome spaces on the periphery of one's being. In short, aurality presages a reexamination of how the real is constituted, how knowledge is grounded and the metaphorical and biological sense apparatus by which the "I" and the "world" coincide.<sup>211</sup>

Because the sensors in Salomé's artwork detect the viewer's physical proximity, *untitled (Solenoids)*'s sound may heighten the viewer's self-awareness through its change in rhythmic pattern, which occurs in response to the viewer's movements. The sound that the viewer hears enters her/his ear to be felt internally as Dyson suggests, and then effects the viewer externally by way of the viewer physically expressing the "felt" audio. The viewer may purposefully change her/his movements to affect the artwork and, thus, interact with it.<sup>212</sup>

The viewer's connection of self and the world beyond the gallery is key for most successful viewings of electronic artworks, because these works are commonly dependent upon the viewer's current and previous experiences.<sup>213</sup> Similar to *Frantic* in Chapter 2, *untitled (Solenoids)* uses the viewer as a vehicle to activate and change the artwork. In spite of the fact that the walls in InterAccess are smooth and white in colour,

<sup>211</sup> Frances Dyson, "In/Quest of Presence," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed., Simon Penny (New York, USA: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29. (Italics in original text)

<sup>212</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 172.

<sup>213</sup> Christiane Paul, ed. *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

Lorena Salomé's noisy artwork reinstates the idea that the viewer should be aware of her/his own body in order to grasp and understand the electronic artwork.

As an electronic artwork, *untitled (Solenoids)* is cohesively exhibited in InterAccess' gallery due to the Gallery's experimental space's characteristics. Like *Menage*, *untitled (Solenoids)* was not created to be aesthetically pleasing; instead, it was characterized by a mess of loose red wires below the tiny machines, connecting to the evident mechanical brain box below the mounted work. Although the red wires might, for some, enhance the visual appeal of the artwork, they are not disguised and thus do not support the illusion that mechanical devices can function without an electrical source. The characteristics of an experimental gallery found in InterAccess' gallery reveal the process of an artwork in a way that is acceptable to the viewer. In an entirely white cube paradigm, that same work may, for some, be considered incomplete or a work still in progress. The idea of exposing the internal machinery and giving off the aura of being an incomplete work is similar to some Abstract Expressionist painters who, through works such as Willem de Kooning's *Women Series* and Jackson Pollock's *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)*, showed paintbrush marks to demonstrate how the artistic process is necessary for an artwork to exist and function.

Neither *untitled (Solenoids)* nor *Menage* hid the assembling media and thus did not necessarily make an aesthetically pleasing object. Instead, *untitled (Solenoids)* and *Menage* are practically built and exhibited within a context that accepts a process-oriented artistic finish. As a hybrid space between the white cube ideology and experimental space, InterAccess attempts to break free from the ideals of exhibiting art,

particularly when presenting the functional components of electronic art such as wires and electrical sources.

The hybrid space of InterAccess is a more beneficial way to present electronic artworks than a completely ideal white cube space, since characteristics of both types of paradigms are available contexts for the artworks. Moreover, InterAccess allows for electronic artworks to be perceived from different perspectives; the Centre also allows artists to see which characteristics of the white cube space work to enhance an electronic artwork, and which work to hinder it. Elements of both spaces, experimental space and the white cube paradigm, contribute to the artists' freedom to create as they see fit; they also contribute to the proper interpretation of electronic artworks within a gallery environment. The necessity of a coherent environment to display electronic art is emphasized by Charlie Gere's essay "New Media Art and the Gallery in the Digital Age", which states that "art made by using and reflecting upon new media and new technologies helps us understand how our lives are being transformed by these very media and technologies."<sup>214</sup> In other words, electronic artworks not only help people understand today's technology, but also make the viewer recognize that, without the context of daily life, it is unreasonable to expect people to ever really understand such works. This is further emphasized by art writer Sarah Cook, who notes that "[new media artworks] rely on contemporary technologies people use in their daily lives, and as such, might have preconceptions about [them]...."<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Charlie Gere, "New Media Art and the Gallery in the Digital Age," in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, ed. Christiane Paul (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>215</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 172.

The context of daily life is something that InterAccess is able to provide, and something that the white cube discourages. It follows then that InterAccess enables the viewer to come to a better understanding of new media art by feeling that s/he already has an intimate connection with the technology and s/he is encouraged to relate to the outside world. Even though the line between the two types of exhibition paradigms is sometimes blurred, and even though aspects of the experimental space do exist within the InterAccess' gallery, the walls, floors, and ceiling of the white cube continue to form visible boundaries to the effective viewing of electronic artworks.

*To Better the Containers of Electronic Art*

The diversity found in electronic artworks demand that a curator carefully considers an art form's presentation in any type of art institutions. In this thesis, I have shown that there are several disabling and beneficial ways to present electronic art by investigating three types of art institutional containers of electronic art—the white cube, the experimental spaces, and a hybrid of the two paradigms. As argued throughout *Containers of Electronic Art*, one of the most disabling ways to display electronic art is in a white cube space, even though the paradigm implies that its formulaic space is adequate. Acknowledging this, it is suitable to conclude this thesis with practical recommendations of display influenced by the three case studies—the Agnes Etherington Art Centre and the Koffler Gallery (Chapter 2); ZKM Centre for Art and Media's Media Museum (Chapter 3); and InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre (Chapter 4). However, it must be noted that these recommendations do not have a systematic order, and that each suggestion may not necessarily apply to every electronic artwork and art institution. This is the result of the diversity found in material electronic artworks'

aesthetic components, such as sound, interactivity, evolutionary systems, immersive environments, mobility, and the mandates of each art institution.

Ideally, the most successful way to present electronic art is to have an institution built for the sole purpose of presenting techno-orientated art, as exemplified in Chapter 3 by ZKM's Media Museum. Further emphasizing this, art critic Victoria Newhouse notes "the museum is an important refuge of reality, making both its contents and their relation to architecture more important than ever before."<sup>216</sup> For established art institutions, it is difficult to do as Newhouse suggests and meet the standards of ZKM's Media Museum. Media Museum's standards are out of reach for some art institutions due to their current finances and available resources. However, there are components of Media Museum and InterAccess that can be adapted and incorporated into current art institutions, even if they are white cube or hybrid spaces, so that they may successfully include electronic art into their exhibition schedule.

Art institutions can better their containers for electronic art by starting to provide an environment that meets the needs of each electronic artwork. This main curatorial action will begin to fulfill art writer Sarah Cook's calls for change in curating new media art: "[W]hat we need are new models of curatorial practice that are sensitive to [the] aesthetic characteristics of new media art and that understand and reflect the media's effect on the body, on space, and on time."<sup>217</sup> By applying some of the following recommendations for curating electronic art, Cook's call can begin to be answered and, more importantly, new media art's needs and demands can be met. To better the

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<sup>216</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998), 270.

<sup>217</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 173.

containers of electronic art, art institutions should consider applying the following recommendations:

- *Know your container*: A curator should understand the effect that her/his institution both as a physical and immaterial thing has on its visitor. Understanding the container's effects on the visitor will assist a curator in deciding how each electronic artwork is presented and perceived. This is done to create a cohesive environment between the "container and the contained".<sup>218</sup>
- *Become "content providers as much as context providers"*<sup>219</sup>: A curator of an electronic art exhibition should become familiar with the artwork's objectives, the artist's intentions, the possibilities of how both the medium and the artwork could be perceived by the viewer, and physical special needs of the artwork, in order to construct the appropriate context for each electronic artwork in an institutional space. Though this recommendation seems like a generalization, it is key when presenting electronic artworks. Striking a balance between the content (the artwork) and the context (the space) is an essential component in exhibiting electronic art to ensure that the artwork's message, idea, or concept is adequately communicated to the viewer.
- *Meet the demands of the artwork*: Similar to the above point, if the space does not provide the necessary support or context to the artwork, one may need to construct a new space specifically for the piece. This can be influenced by an artwork's emitting sound, by the fact that the artwork simply has specific lighting requirements that can only be fulfilled if the artwork is fully enclosed, and/or how the piece needs to be installed (the construction of its space is considered part of the artwork and/or the artwork requires segregation from other artworks).
- *Using the white cube*: Use the white cube's spatial paradigm sparingly when exhibiting material electronic artworks. If possible, discuss the placement of any electronic artwork with the artist to ensure that the idealized space meets the

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<sup>218</sup> Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2005), 214.

<sup>219</sup> Sarah Cook, "Towards a Theory of the Practice of Curating New Media Art," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003), 174.



objectives the artist intended for the artwork. If the artist is unavailable, contemplate the goals of the white cube and how it will affect the viewer's perception of the electronic artwork under consideration. In this situation, it may be beneficial to construct a room solely for the artwork or to consider an alternative location for the artwork.

- *Interactive atmosphere:* The space should positively reinforce for the visitor that s/he is allowed to interact with an artwork. Most electronic artworks in a traditional space encounter the stigmatism of 'do not touch the art,' which hinders the artwork's presentation. The space around an electronic artwork should encourage the viewer, either by signage or direction through the construction of the space to touch and interact freely with the artwork. Furthermore, the interactive atmosphere should emphasize to the viewer that s/he is free to express her/himself through kinesthetic actions and vocalizations. Some traditional institutional mannerisms should be discouraged to allow the viewer to think not just with the mind, but also with the body through sensory faculties.
- *Prevent marginalization:* Embrace the context of the outside world and welcome it into the exhibition space, in order to prevent any electronic artwork from being perceived as merely a scientific experiment or gimmicky entertainment. The outside world can be brought into the gallery via windows, the architecture of the institution, and by encouraging the viewers to interact with the artworks as if they are objects found in a person's everyday life. Accompanying these things with a brief didactic on the artwork's message, technique, and starting points on how to think about the electronic artwork can ensure that the artwork is seen as 'art'.

The above recommendations are provided to encourage change in the presentation of new media art, specifically electronic art in traditional white cube spaces. These recommendations, as a whole, are suggested to show that although electronic art holds some similarities with some traditional art forms, there are factors, such as aesthetic components, in its medium that can cause the artwork to be misrepresented. Furthermore, the recommendations summarize the disabling and beneficial ways of exhibiting

electronic art as exemplified in this thesis through the three case studies. Although the recommendations serve more as guidelines than strict rules, they further summarize how electronic art functions within different types of art institutions and what they reveal about an art institution's spatial structure. The art institutions that apply some of these guidelines when striving to present electronic art adequately will prevent the marginalization of the medium as entertainment, and recognize the art form as one of the newer means of artistic visual communication. In addition, these final recommendations aim to not only improve the presentation of electronic art, but in the end, do as new media curator Steve Dietz believes, which is for curatorial practices of new media art to lead "to a richer understanding of curating other contemporary art."<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Steve Dietz, "Art After New Media," talk delivered at ISEA 2004 panel *Working Across Boundaries: Curating and Preserving New Media Art*, in Helsinki. August 19, 2004, <http://www.yproductions.com/WebWalkAbout/archives/000578.html>.

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## Appendix

## Ethics Approval



## Office of Research Ethics

The University of Western Ontario  
 Room 00045 Dental Sciences Building, London, ON, Canada N6A 5C1  
 Telephone: (519) 661-3036 Fax: (519) 850-2466 Email: ethics@uwo.ca  
 Website: www.uwo.ca/research/ethics

## Use of Human Subjects - Ethics Approval Notice

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. K. Robertson

**Review Number:** 15229S

**Review Date:** June 13, 2008

**Review Level:** Full Board

**Protocol Title:** Touching the Walls: Electronic Art Interrogates the 'White Cube'

**Department and Institution:** Other, University of Western Ontario

**Sponsor:**

**Ethics Approval Date:** July 7, 2008

**Expiry Date:** August 31, 2009

**Documents Reviewed and Approved:** UWO Protocol, Letter of Information and Consent, Confidentiality Consent Form.

**Documents Received for Information:**

This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB's periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information. If you require an updated approval notice prior to that time you must request it using the UWO Updated Approval Request Form.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the study or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the subject or when the change(s) involve only logistical or administrative aspects of the study (e.g. change of monitor, telephone number). Expedited review of minor change(s) in ongoing studies will be considered. Subjects must receive a copy of the signed information/consent documentation.

Investigators must promptly also report to the NMREB:

- changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- all adverse and unexpected experiences or events that are both serious and unexpected;
- new information that may adversely affect the safety of the subjects or the conduct of the study.

If these changes/adverse events require a change to the information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment advertisement, the newly revised information/consent documentation, and/or advertisement, must be submitted to this office for approval.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussion related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

Chair of NMREB: Dr. Jerry Paquette

**Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information**

Grace Kelly

Janice Sutherland

Elizabeth Wambolt

Denise Grafton

*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files.*

cc: ORE File

## Letter of Information

Andrea Skelly  
 University of Western,  
 Department of Visual Arts  
 John Labatt Visual Arts Centre  
 Perth Drive, Mailbox 115  
 Ontario, London, ON, CAN  
 N6A 5B7

Date MONTH/DAY/YEAR

Participant's Name  
 Associated Art Institution  
 Street Address  
 City, Province, Country  
 Postal Code/Zip Code

Dear (Participant's Name),

I, Andrea Skelly a Master of Art History graduate student at the University of Western Ontario, am writing to respectfully request your participation in my thesis research study, *Touching the Walls: Electronic Art Interrogates the 'White Cube.'* The purpose of this letter is to provide you with sufficient information to allow you to make an informed decision as to whether you will consent to participate in my study.

I am asking you to participate because the objective of the study is to obtain informed perspectives from art professionals, such as yourself, regarding electronic art's function within different art institutions.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to partake in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked to discuss such topics as electronic art, the modernist 'white cube,' and the spatial structure of the art institution you are affiliated with. These discussion topics will allow you to offer general experiences, exhibition complications, and thoughts related to exhibiting electronic art in art institutional spaces. You will be provided with the discussion topics prior to the interview.

All responses during the interview will be audio recorded for your maximum comfort, and you may refuse to discuss any topic. In the case of an incomplete interview resulting from unaddressed discussion topics, the information obtained may still be respectfully used in the final academic document. If you, the participant, do not accept the terms of being audio recorded, then you will be excluded from the study without prejudice. If you agree to participate, the interview will occur at a time and location convenient to you; I, Andrea Skelly the interviewer, will travel to an agreed upon location.

---

\* Initial thesis title

You can choose to withdraw from the study without negative consequences at any time. If you choose to withdraw yourself and all of your information from the study, your information will remain secure in a locked cabinet, but not discarded or used in the academic document.

All responses from the one-on-one interview will be kept confidential and secure in a locked cabinet for an indefinite amount of time. The collected information will only be accessed for research purposes. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used; no information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent to the disclosure. (Consent Form enclosed) In other words, unless permission is specifically granted, all quotations included in the academic document will be either anonymous or with a pseudonym. In the case of publishing information from your interview, you will have the opportunity to confirm the quotations used.

The only persons who will access your information will be me, the study investigator, and my supervisor, Professor Kirsty Robertson. I must also make you aware that upon request, the Research Ethics Board at the University of Western Ontario may access the collected information and may contact you directly to ask about your participation in the study.

There are no known risks associated with participating in the interview and no remuneration will be offered, though your time is greatly appreciated. There are no known benefits to the research participants or to the culture being studied. However, participating in the interview has academic benefits. The primary information gathered from your interview will be a valuable source of data (accessible only through primary research) to my thesis. Your interview can provide my thesis with a knowledgeable perspective of electronic art and museum studies. As a result, an academic document will be compiled that can assist in bridging the gap in academic literature between curating electronic art and different types of art institutions.

I will strive to ensure the confidentiality of your research-related records. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, as we may have to disclose certain information under certain laws.

You do not waive any legal rights by signing the consent form and you should retain this copy of the Letter of Information and Consent Form(s) for your own reference.

Any questions or concerns can be forwarded to myself, Andrea Skelly, at [email], and/or to my supervisor, Professor Kirsty Robertson, at +1-(011)-519-661-2111 ext. 8053 or [email].

Any ethical concerns, complaints, or questions regarding this study should be directed to the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Western Ontario at +1-(011)-519-661-3036 or [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

I greatly appreciate your time and I look forward to speaking with you further.

Sincerely,

Andrea Skelly  
[askelly@uwo.ca](mailto:askelly@uwo.ca)

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1997, c.24, s. 18.

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