

# This is not a White Cube. The Question of the alternative space at the Mediterranean Biennale

By Dr. Daniel Wajman

The Mediterranean Biennale held in the Sakhnin valley in northern Israel exhibits art works in sixteen alternative exhibition spaces in four towns and villages. The exhibition spaces are existing public spaces used by the local residents for trade, recreation, work, education and prayer in

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places such as garages, restaurants, mosques, a Bedouin tent, and workshops. These places are functional places operating as part of the urban space which responds to the needs of the community, while the artworks are integrated with them and into the daily activity of the place. The installation of the artworks examines the question of exhibiting art and integrating it into the mundane daily life, while simultaneously examining the concept of the “White Cube” as the one true undisputed exhibition space of contemporary art.

The “White Cube” concept is a metaphor representing a wide range of values and concepts in modern and contemporary art, maintaining that one must create a white sterile environment around the artwork which empowers it and detaches it from the world surrounding it. Many articles and books were written on the formation of the modern exhibition space, first and foremost among them is Brian O’Doherty’s book, *Inside the White Cube: the ideology of the gallery space* (1998, University of California Press). O’Doherty presents a process starting with the European Enlightenment in the Protestant and Puritan culture, which repressed images and decorations and advocated clean, functional, white spaces. Another change he brings up is the characteristics of the way art is traded, gradually distancing itself from the aristocracy, who often commission artworks for a specific space, and moved to bourgeois buyers who preferred to select pieces that were already finished.

We all experience the disparity between the way the “Old Masters” are exhibited in palaces turned into museums, such as the Louvre and the Uffizi, and between the exhibition of modern and contemporary art in a clean white space. A disparity which serves to emphasize the context of the artwork and the cultural world in which it is exhibited.

In response to O’Doherty the curator and critic Simon Sheikh claims in his article *Positively White Cube Revisited* (e-flux journal #3, February 2009) that: “The gallery space is not a neutral container, but an historical construct. Furthermore, it is an aesthetic object in and of itself. The ideal form of the “White Cube” that modernism developed for the gallery space is inseparable from the artworks exhibited inside it... The white cube is conceived as a place free of context, where time and social space are thought to be excluded from the experience of artworks. It is only through the apparent neutrality of appearing outside of daily life and politics that the works within the “White Cube” can appear to be self-contained—only by being freed from historical time can they attain their aura of timelessness.” Furthermore Sheikh claims that “...galleries are shops—spaces for producing surplus value, not use value—and as such, the modern gallery employs the formula of the white cube for an architectonics of transcendence in which the specificities of time and of place are replaced by the eternal. In other words, the “White Cube” establishes a crucial dichotomy between that which is to be kept outside (the social and the political) and that which is inside (the staying value of art).”

Clement Greenberg maintains unique features of modern art is that it reflects upon itself. Modern art examines itself, its own boundaries as a medium, its role and its own ethical values as much as it examines the world around it and the lives of people as it had done throughout decades. The self-reflection process is expressed in the avant-garde movements in art, in conceptualism, minimalism, and deconstruction. They all focused and empowered the status of the artist and his work, which in turn led to the design of the white exhibition space. A clean, sterile space where the artwork would be exhibited, undisturbed, and with no external context of place and culture. The space protecting the





artwork is also related to the concept of the aura of the work, as discussed by Walter Benjamin in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* 1936, in which art seeks to preserve its unique status within the culture of reproduction and the danger of the loss of the creator within that culture.

During the 1970s and the 1980s the leading artistic conceptions examined the existing exhibition space, the artwork's place and the connection with the audience. These conceptions were expressed in the development of performance art, the happening, and installation pieces. New concepts were formed such as the "Black Cube" and the "Gray Cube" to describe the additional exhibition options in the museum and the gallery spaces. These spaces have become inseparable from the field of contemporary art. The underlying assumption being that the audience entering the art space, accepts, by purchasing a ticket or by the context enforced by the place, the values and autonomic concepts of contemporary art as a separate reality.

Nowadays, many artists want to leave the comfort of their studios in search of an alternative space to the "White Cube", to create in the context of current events and to deal with burning social questions. However, they still know that eventually the artwork will be made to accommodate to fit the "White Cube" or the "Black Cube" by being shown in the space, and by adding a documentation of the process in stills or video. The artwork that tried to break the alienation, touch "real life", face it head-on, eventually returns to the same safe, conservative, cube, and ends up being exhibited there.

Furthermore, There are also many examples of alternative exhibition spaces that leverage the authentic characteristics of spaces such as factories, warehouses, churches, hospitals and more, to create new features of the display. The problem is that an effort is usually made to transform these alternative spaces into proper museum spaces and direct the exhibition to a "captive" art audience so that the alternative space fails to raise new questions about the art, the exhibition display, and the direct connection between art, audience and life.

The choice made at the Mediterranean Biennale to use alternative spaces, does not only question the "White Cube", but also examines the artworks themselves, exposing them to different audiences and undermines the elitist autonomy of Art and its reflection on itself. The alternative spaces were not modified to accommodate

the art, but rather the works were integrated into the existing spaces. By employing this unorthodox method of exhibiting art, the Mediterranean Biennale enables new and surprising processes of artistic meaning, where the space enriches the exhibited art and adds new meaning to it, and the artworks enable the existing spaces to transform into a place where different audiences and communities can meet and engage in dialog and discourse.

Artworks were placed in restaurants, a fish store, and narghile coffee houses, integrating tastes and smells as part of the art experience. The exhibition places are rich in details, with various elements and decorations, which together with the artworks create a disorder that requires searching and identification of the artworks. The need to identify the artworks among the richness of the items requires a deep examination of the other items in the space. This process can be perceived as disruptive and harmful to the art, however once one can distinguish between the art and the other items, a two-fold process occurs, which focuses on the individual artwork while at the same time subsumes its connection to the surrounding space and elements. I would like to give a few examples to the characteristics that make the display at the Mediterranean Biennale unique.

An artwork by Nardeena Mogezeel-Shammas is exhibited in Micha's Hummus Restaurant, in the town of Sakhnin. Mogezeel-Shammas's medium is performance art and photography. The artwork exhibited is a photograph from a series that deals with women's status in Arab society. The photograph shows the figure of a young woman wrapped in fabric, and in the background the story of Red Riding Hood written in Arabic. The Arabic speakers

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among the visitors immediately recognize the text as the story of Red Riding Hood and form an association between the covered figure and the story, along with all the contemporary sexual connotations it contains. The visitor for whom Arabic is a foreign language has a different experience, and even if they read about it in the caption beside the artwork, they don't receive the original text. In addition to the aesthetics of the piece, it brings up to the surface issues of sexual exploitation. These works are displayed alongside family photos of the restaurant's owner and signs with blessings from the Quran.

Another work in the same place is the collaborative work of Elmgreen & Dragset. The video art work *"The End is Always Nearer"* refers to fateful and apocalyptic dates made up by Western culture as a need to express the sense of disaster and the cultural crisis associated with progress. The work follows a digital clock counting down and connected to what may be either a bomb or a mechanism to open a safe. The viewer waits for the countdown to end to see what happens and what's in the safe. Once the awaited moment arrives and the content of the safe is not revealed and the process restarts, there is some disappointment but also an acknowledgment of the intensity of the process and the natural need people have, to expect and discover the future. Micha, the owner of the restaurant, says that the artwork is an effective conversation piece and the audience responds in many different ways to the anticipation and to the moment of discovery when it ends. The fact that the anticipation takes place in a restaurant while dining makes it easier to accept the artwork and its message.

In the fish store next to Micha's Hummus Restaurant, "Sakhnin Fish", there are artworks by Hamra Abbas, an artist from Kuwait. The artworks are exhibited near crates of fresh fish and a table used for cleaning fish. The space integrates an art exhibition of paintings with the intense smell of fish, strongly associated with the sea. Abbas's

artworks, that deal in a cultural, iconic image of the "Kaaba" as a religious archetype stand in absolute contrast to being exhibited in the clean, sterile "White Cube" space, without external interference, where in this case the smell is an inseparable part of the art experience.

Behind the Doha football stadium in Sakhnin, one can find the narghile coffee house Yaara. It's a place where men gather to smoke a narghile and watch football matches together. Photos of the players of the "Bnei Sakhnin" football team, a focus of pride for the town, are installed alongside photos of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Kaaba. Between them there are photographs by the artists Meinrad Schade and Kai Weidenhöfer who created art documenting refugees from Chechnya, Syria and Kosovo. In complete contrast to the "conventional" form of exhibition, the smoke and smells of the narghiles mixes up with the exhibition of the artworks themselves.

In the adjoining room, used as a restaurant and for playing card games, there are five video art works by the artists Cengiz Tekin, Rui Xavier, Jola Wieczorek, Lisa Truttman, and Lisbeth Kovacic, installed around the place among the tables used for dining and gaming. Similarly to the adjacent space, between the screens on the walls, there are blessings from the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The artists' video works deal with issues of refugees, border checkpoint, immigration, the way we look at the other, and the situation of breaking up a house. The viewers looking at the artworks create a direct connection with the locals creating opportunities for meeting and conversations.

Near Sakhnin is the ethnically mixed village of Deir Hanna. At a prominent place in the village there is a mosque considered to be one of the oldest mosques in the area. During the formation phase of the exhibition spaces, the curators met several times with the Imam of the mosque for various discussions in order to get to know the local community. These talks sprouted an unusual cooperation of exhibiting contemporary art inside a mosque. Traditionally Islam, like Judaism, forbids art that creates figures and discourages non-religious art. This cooperation is ground breaking, and there is no similar artistic cooperation known to exist in Israel. The Imam of the mosque asked to focus on abstract pieces or on pieces with no clear figures, and was an active partner in selecting the works. The works exhibiting in the mosque are by the artists: Muhammad Said Kalash, Moshe Kupferman, Damien Hirst, Abdullah Dehabra and Belu-Simion Fainaru.





Muhammad Said Kalash draws his inspiration from an ancient tradition of Islamic ornamentation and from the rich art of calligraphy. Kalash says he is excited to be exhibited in a mosque, since his works have a deep religious meaning for him and he would especially like the audience to be exposed to them in this religious-Muslim context. His artworks fit in well with the place and appear to have been made or commissioned especially for the mosque. The artists selected to be shown alongside him are international artists like Damien Hirst with a mandala of plants and butterflies, that in some way connects to the religious spiritual meaning of the mandala in oriental culture. As well as the Israeli artists - Moshe Kupferman who created abstract paintings, and Belu-Simion Fainaru with a series of expressive flowers and Hebrew letters inspired by Jewish Kabbalistic texts and mystical imagery of flowering letters. The people who frequent the mosque for prayers welcomed the change and were especially enthusiastic about the art that resonates closely with Muslim tradition. They further note that due to the new visitors, the mosque and its special story are gaining recognition.

In the Bedouin neighborhood, near the mosque, one can find the tent of Abu-Saleh. A traditional Bedouin tent used as a place of assembly and education for the community. In the tent and in the house next to it, art works by Sener Ozmen, Lela Ahmadzai, Thomas Galler, Carlos Amorales, Belu-Simion Fainaru, Sigalit Landau, Shahar Marcus, and Avital Bar-Shay were exhibited. At the beginning of the collaboration, Abu-Saleh said that he did not understand what the art represents and how it can fit in with the values and ideas he is trying to promote, however the opportunity to host and meet people from different places and present his culture to them appealed to him. Once the artworks were exhibited in the tent, Abu-Saleh realized that the art offers new possibilities for discourse and brings up ethical, political, aesthetic, and social questions. The tent used for hosting, meeting and rest can become space of discourse around current issues.

Belu-Simion Fainaru's work "Traffic Light for Love" is installed in front of the tent. The artist uses a traffic light that flashes the words "love/ don't love" making use of ready-made object in the public space, thereby the artwork emphasizes the curatorial concept of artworks leaving the museum walls and going out to the public space. One of the questions the artist brings up in this

artwork is whether one can use an emotional imperative such as "love" in a traffic sign and what would it do to us as a society if it were possible.

In conclusion, we see that Simon Sheikh points in his article "Positively White Cube Revisited" that: "most galleries, museums, and alternative spaces still employ the white cube as the favored modus operandi for exhibition-making—as the dominant model for the showing of art. Gallery spaces and museums are still white cubes, and their ideology remains one of commodity fetishism and eternal value(s)..."

In contrast to this perception, we can see from the few examples cited, how the functionally charged spaces, become meaningful in reading the artworks in both the local and the global context. What the exhibition spaces have in common is the active and collaborative nature of the audience that responds, discusses, questions, and listens to others' opinions. Unlike the passive, introverted audience of the "White Cube", where every person keeps their opinion to themselves and discussion is only created when it's organized, the alternative spaces of the mosque, the restaurant, or the fish store allow for a non-intimidated look by an everyman who is free to express his sincere reaction with no prior obligation to like or respect the artworks. The artworks are integrated into the spaces and relate to the specific place where they are installed, thus creating unique interpretations. This situation is in contrast to the "White Cube" concept which seeks to neutralize the meaning of the place and create an absolute autonomous value of the artwork. We are in fact seeing that the curatorship process has a component that enables a renewal of existing artworks with a primary context and meaning, and by integrating them into charged spaces, they can absorb new meanings from their environment and contributing additional meanings to the alternative space.

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# >>>ALBATUFMARBLEFACTORY



EXHIBITING ARTIST  
**Lola Ahmadzai**





>>> **THE HOUSE OF ABU-SALAH**



EXHIBITING ARTIST  
**Lola Ahmadzai**



# >>>THEBUTCHER'SSHOP

EXHIBITING ARTIST  
Minrad Schade







EXHIBITING ARTIST  
Minrad Schade

# >>>FAHEMGARAGE

EXHIBITING ARTIST  
Günther Förg

