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White Cube / Light Cube by David Campbell

"...*What is happening here?* Canvas, paper, or wall constitute a stage on which something happens (and if, in certain forms of art the artist intends that nothing happen, that too is an occurrence, an adventure). Hence, we must take the picture... as a kind of theater *a l'italienne*: the curtain parts, we watch, we wait, we receive, we understand; and when the scene is over and the picture gone, we remember; we are no longer the same as we were before; as in ancient drama, we have been initiated".(1)

Artemis Potamianou's *White Cube* consists of a series of photographs, illuminated by light-boxes, which take as their subject the depiction of individually identified international contemporary art museums.

Following Barthes we might ask, what kind of 'adventure' does this work offer the viewer?

The scene is set in a very particular way; all of the images reference the architectural interiors of some of the world's major museums. Locations, that like the cities to be found listed on the packaging of luxury consumer items, index an international landscape of sophistication, fashionability and cultural power - Kyoto, New York, Bilbao, London. It is clear that the selection of locations depicted by Potamianou has not been arrived at by chance, they represent a snapshot of some of the premier museums of contemporary art in the world.

Similarly, the specific images chosen to represent the various institutions do not seem arbitrary either. Many share a fascination with peripheral spaces and passageways and all strive to establish a sense of poise, silence and order. Indeed, there is something eerie and uncanny about the spaces, so primed for presentation and display. Unlike the photographs of museums taken by Thomas Struth or Andreas Gursky, which scrutinise various acts of engagement between viewers and artwork, or Louise Lawler's documentation of the protocols of display and ownership, contextualising the commodification of art, Potamianou's images of museums are often devoid of art objects. The artefacts which traditionally provide the *raison d'être* for the museum's existence are missing and we are left to linger in what *should* be considered *empty* space. To answer Barthes's question "what is happening here" we have to conclude that in the museum spaces Potamianou depicts, something has been left out. What remains, is the stage where the normal transaction between artefact and viewer takes place, the arena of display and performance.

The museum spaces depicted in *White Cube* are marked by a certain blankness and muteness. Flattened planes and expectant surfaces which offer the promise of performance and completion. Unruffled by the disruptive circulation of transient artworks and their viewers.

This is the museum as show case, display apparatus in its purest form, but hermetically sealed and perversely uncontaminated by social transaction.

As we look at these spaces, knowing that they are not mere models or computer generated simulations, the experience of viewing Potamianou's light-boxes depictions of reverence and order provoke unease and even irritation. Taking our cue from Marcel Duchamp and his contention that the artwork is 'completed' by the viewer, and adding our own experience of the physical and cognitive engagement with Potamianou's lightboxes, the viewer becomes increasingly aware of the exclusive and sterile cultural sphere represented in the museum photographs. This space stifles social transaction, it is devoid of life and yet it promises so much.

The images offer a world of order and beauty, designed for our interaction, comfort and pleasure. Elegant architectural form, and vivid illumination present a viewing experience of calm and contemplation. In almost every image we witness the choreography of space, the composure of viewing points, passageways, entry and exit points which punctuate the internal body of the museum, inviting mobility and interaction.

To my mind, this is a miss-recognition of the experience on offer, the result of deft deception. Immobility and isolation are more appropriate descriptions of the environment. The avoidance of any reference to either art objects or visitors to the museum encourages interpretation as to why they are so lifeless. So we speculate. Perhaps the museums are photographed between exhibitions; brief moments of pause before the next batch of high-status commodities arrive and are temporarily parked before continuing their international circulation? Somehow, this pragmatic account does not bite ; there is too great a level of aesthetic resolution in the display apparatus to suggest that this is the hectic period of an exhibition re-hang. This is not a space of chance or the unexpected, but the result of calculation and the sovereignty of order. Potamianou's depictions of the hermetic museum are not without beauty or appeal, far from it, they are very alluring. The manner in which she frames architectural detail or is alert to the nuances of light and colour, contribute to the construction of a stylish aesthetic. A refined theatricality governs the orchestration of the art scene, marking out the space where the "adventure" Barthes describes, is able to unfold.

As with all drama, impact, is in part, achieved through the management of the stage, luring the audience to accept its narrative authority, and Illumination plays a pivotal role in imparting status and fashioning drama. So it comes as no surprise that Potamianou has chosen to deploy her images on lightboxes.

Indeed, perhaps another description of the work's concerns could be summed up by proposing renaming the project *Light Cube* rather than the current *White Cube*.

Potamianou's photographs, and their illumination, are part of a display protocol which, although now readily incorporated into the aesthetic repertoire of the artworld through artists like Jeff Wall, are nonetheless primarily deployed in the service of consumerism, most notably those of the promotional industries and advertising. Its address is direct, confident and conspicuously auratic.

In effect the artwork advertises itself, proclaiming its status as both an act of promotion and as a commodity object.

This union is sealed in the physicality of the photographic lightbox.

The peripheral spaces and supporting paraphernalia of the viewing experience, usually kept out of sight and marginalised, are given centre stage in the lightbox. It is as if the museum apparatus itself has become the star of the show.

It is in the use of the light box and its relationship to consumerism which allows Potamianou to open up a critical space for the depiction of the roster of international museums. It could be argued, although Potamianou does not do so herself, that what the lightbox format and the museum have in common is that they are both mechanism of display. Both circulate and commodify imagery and both enact relationships of transaction. Obviously the specific nature of the transactions are usually very different, with the lightbox's realm of operation more closely associated with the promotion of everyday consumer goods, whilst the museum tending to the display of culturally rarefied commodities.

By welding the garish effectiveness of the light box to the depictions of showcase contemporary art museums, Potamianou neatly foregrounds this reality.

In identifying each of the images as a specific museum, e.g. Guggenheim, Bilbao. Etc. Potamianou poses questions about similarity and difference.

For example, are we able to identify the specifics of each museum identified in the title and are they authentic representations of the named museums? Or are they digital simulations? Does it matter?

The idea that they *are* authentic lends them a certain status, marking them out as members of an exclusive, international, contemporary art network. It underlines, if it were required, that contemporary art, like the best football is played on an international stage and that star 'players' ply their trade in the most prestigious arenas around the world.

On reflection, the stilled spaces of the museum have a similarity to the awesome grandeur of football stadia. Both are arena dedicated to the consumption of spectacle, precisely demarcating space so as to stage cultural drama, whether it be a "block-buster" international exhibition or an important match. When we see an empty stadium with its serried ranks of seats and its manicured turf, we know that the scene is being set and we imagine the *drama*. In the images of the *White Cube*, we have a similar sensation, a similar anticipation of a potential adventure.

Does Potamianou want the *White Cube* to adventure into this realm, to occupy the hallowed ground and become a player?

We will have to see.

1. Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art," in *The Responsibility of Forms; Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 1986. pp 177.