

INSIDE THE WILD CUBE

**Chua Chye Teck
Marc Gloede
Hilmi Johandi
Wei Leng Tay
with
Brian O'Doherty**

INSIDE
THE
WILD
CUBE

Inside the Wild Cube is an art exhibition purposefully positioned outside the museum and gallery space. It addresses the architectural implications, economic structures and institutional expectations that significantly impact creative labour.

Conceptualised by the collaborative group Progressive Disintegrations, this exhibition asks how one can become aware of one's surroundings, and how these environments shape ways of seeing. Through photography, painting, and installation, the exhibition steps away from the classical independent art space environment and embraces white cube aesthetics, which in this instance are the remains of a former gallery. The works presented in the project investigate how the group's own history co-mingled with that of the space, can create structures that deeply influence the creative outcomes.

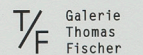
The works and processes, while stemming from long-term and deep interests in each member's practice, are made specifically in consideration of the dimensions, light, and architectural requirements that inform the contemporary and historical context and site specificity of the space. At the same time, the project reconsiders the spatial implications and impact on art production that Brian O'Doherty addressed in his groundbreaking book "Inside the White Cube". Therefore, the work of Chua, Gloede, Johandi, and Tay are situated in dialogue with one of O'Doherty's seminal rope drawings that impacted his ideas formulated later in his book. With this, the exhibition asks what it means to actively create a zone that questions the immediate demands of an art industry, to create a structure of criticality.

Progressive Disintegrations began in early 2020 out of the need to create a format that provides a space to exchange creative and artistic practices between Chua Chye Teck, Marc Gloede, Hilmi Johandi and Wei Leng Tay. The project aimed to open normally individual artistic and curatorial practices up to those of others, creating situations to explore and expand the participants' notions of their own practices.

**CHUA CHYE TECK
MARC GLOEDE
HILMI JOHANDI
WEI LENG TAY**
with
BRIAN O'DOHERTY

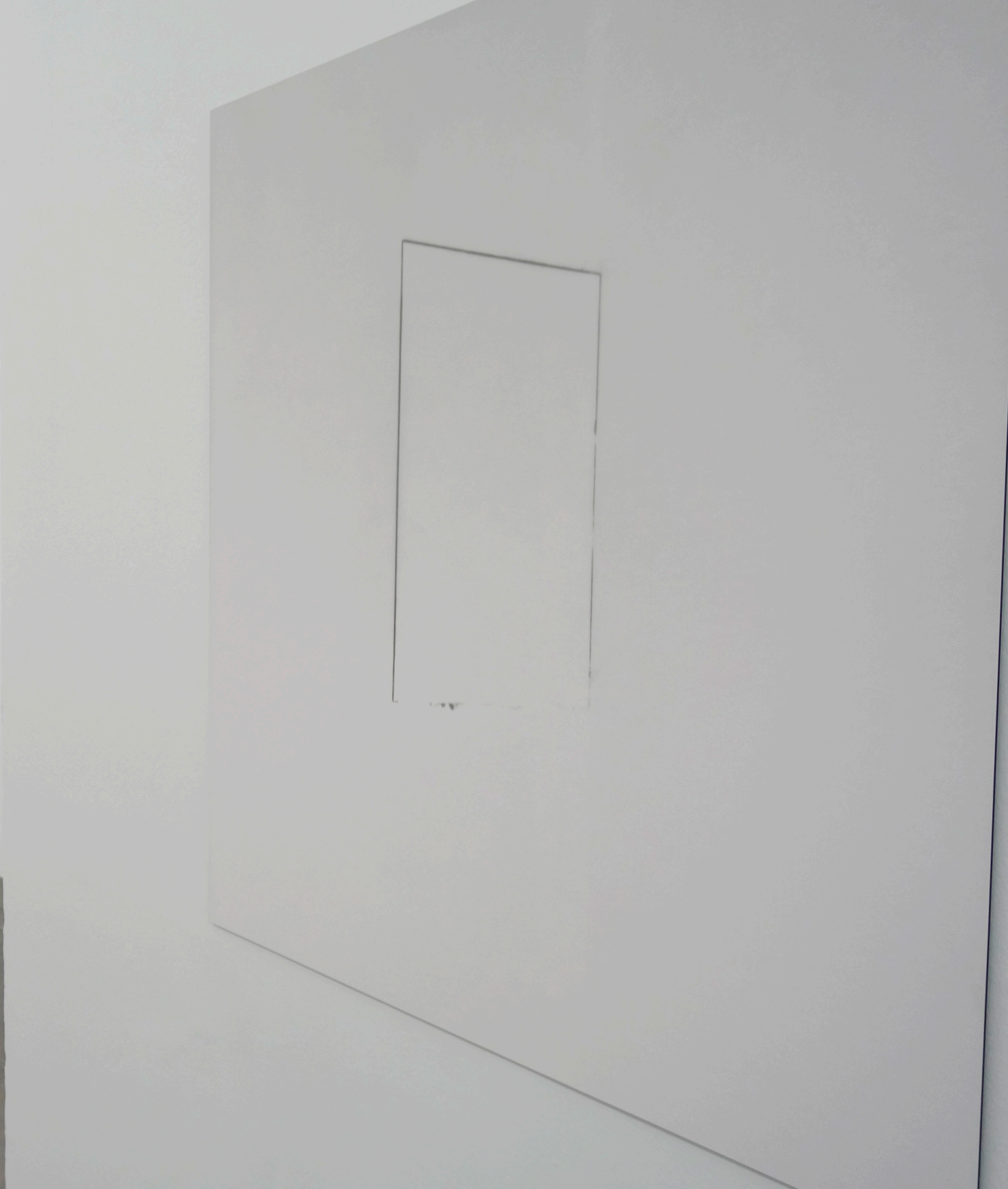
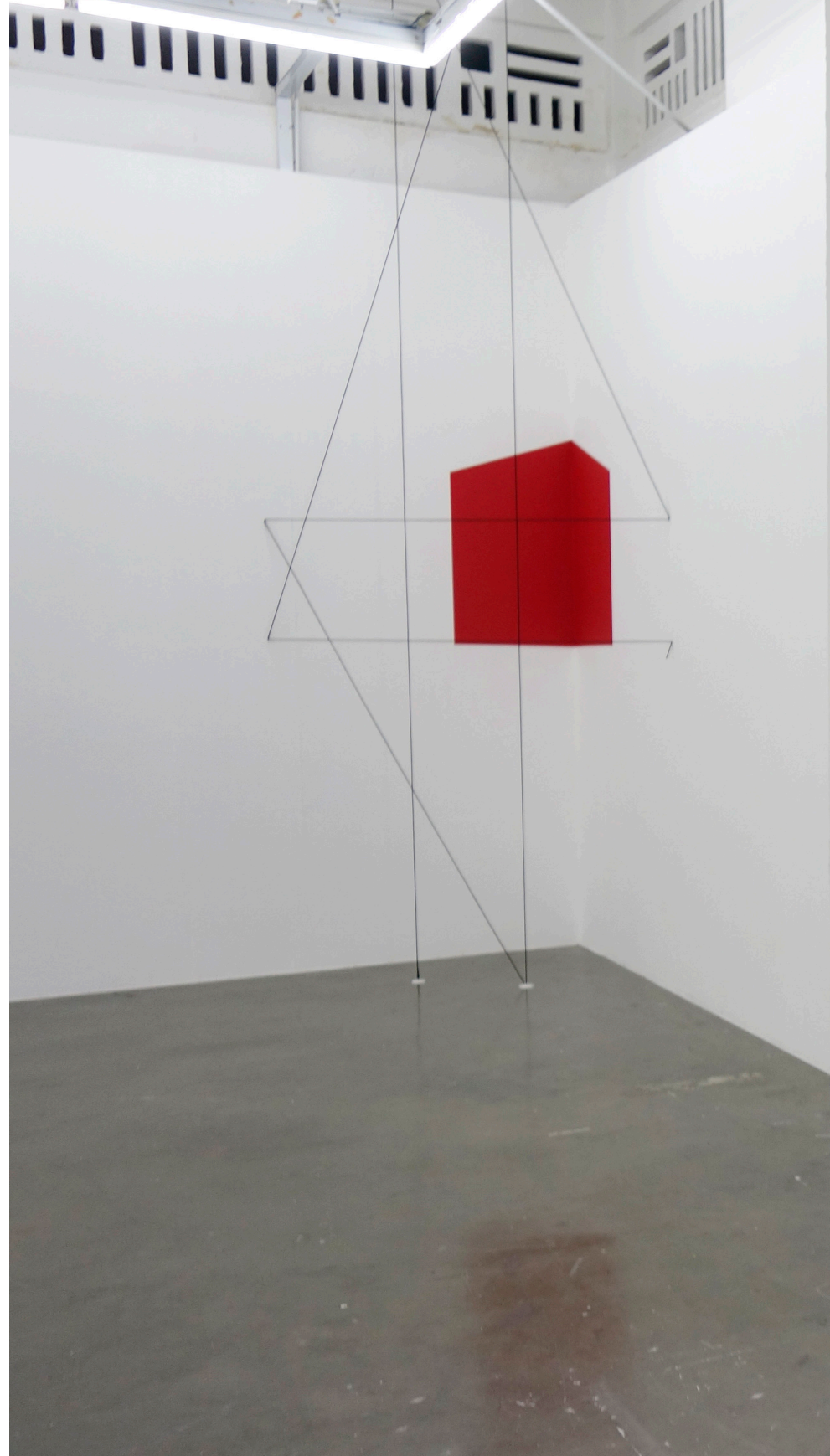
**11AM–7PM TUE–SUN
13 JAN–26 FEB 2022**

SUPPORTED BY



PART OF













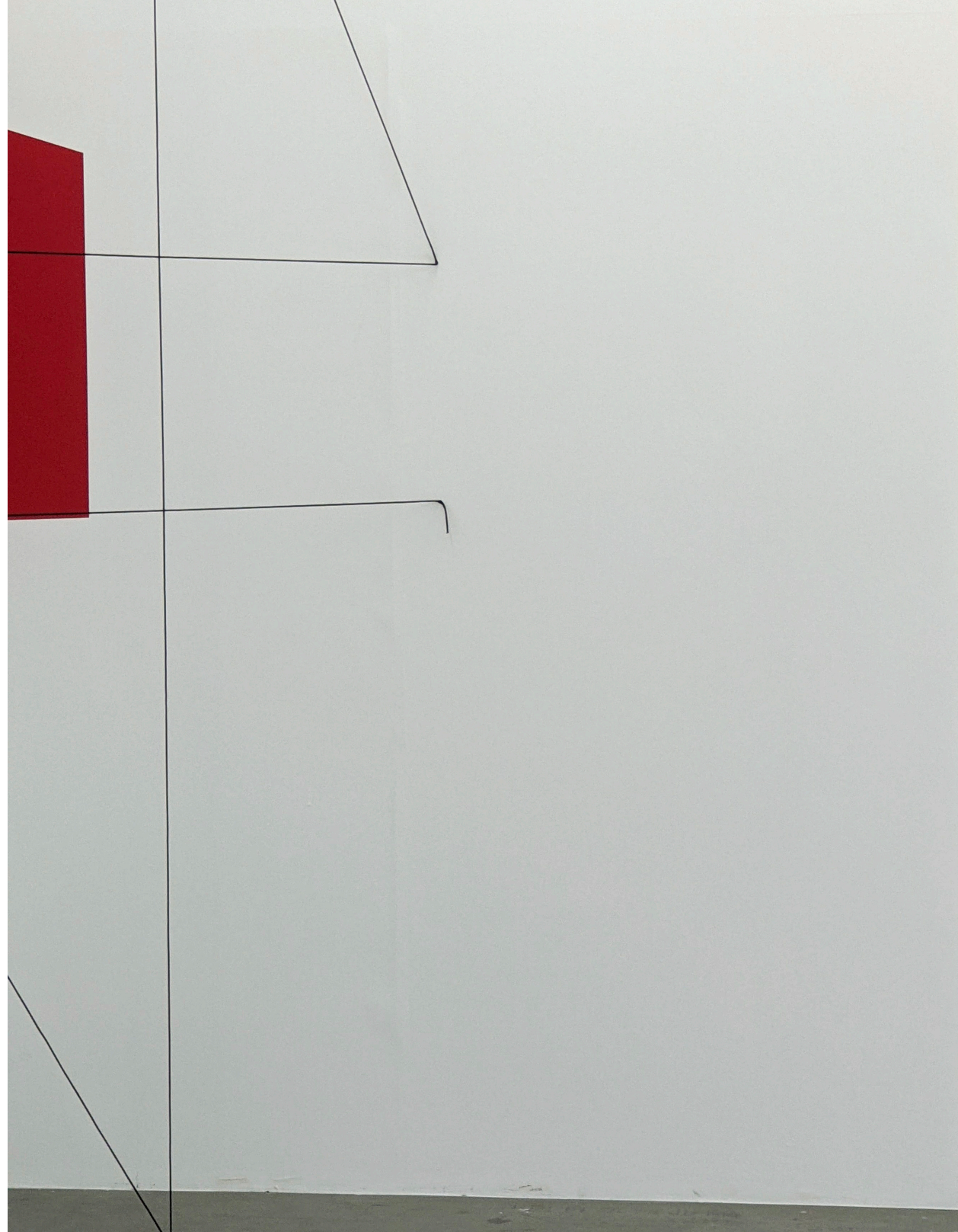


Staging illusion: seeing void — *Into the Wild Cube* was another phase of exploration into a set of conventions in my artistic practice. Through the act of staging an illusion to create anticipation and expectations, to see how unfilled spaces on the wall can be confronted.

These objectives prompted a number of questions: How does one resituate what is conventionally understood as the negative space of white walls for display, into one that is an active component and subject matter for the work? How do the theatrics of construction and function contribute to image-making in the context of the white cube?

In *Stagecraft*, as with previous works, visual forms continue to be extracted and adapted from archival postcards. Subtitled with the names of the actual postcards they come from, *Stagecraft* is made in response to the architecture of the remains of #03-21.

It was previously fashionable to use borders to frame and decorate idyllic representations of places and scenes in postcards. In one of the works, the Singapore souvenir postcard had its visual contents removed. The remaining yellow and red borders were painted directly onto the walls. What is implied when the “frame” is applied directly on the walls of the gallery? The mural painting here does not merely decorate or frame a window into a depicted picture but dislocates the “image” to draw attention to the form and surface that is being painted on. Similarly, postcard borders were reconstructed into painted protruding beams that emerged from the walls of the gallery space, presenting viewers with the opportunity to imagine what lies beyond the arches and frames. Standees of images such as of people posing at the beach or a view of a hotel swimming pool become props situated in site-specific locations in the gallery. Each intervention continues to highlight the construction of representation, and at the same time bring out different ways for the viewer to see the space.

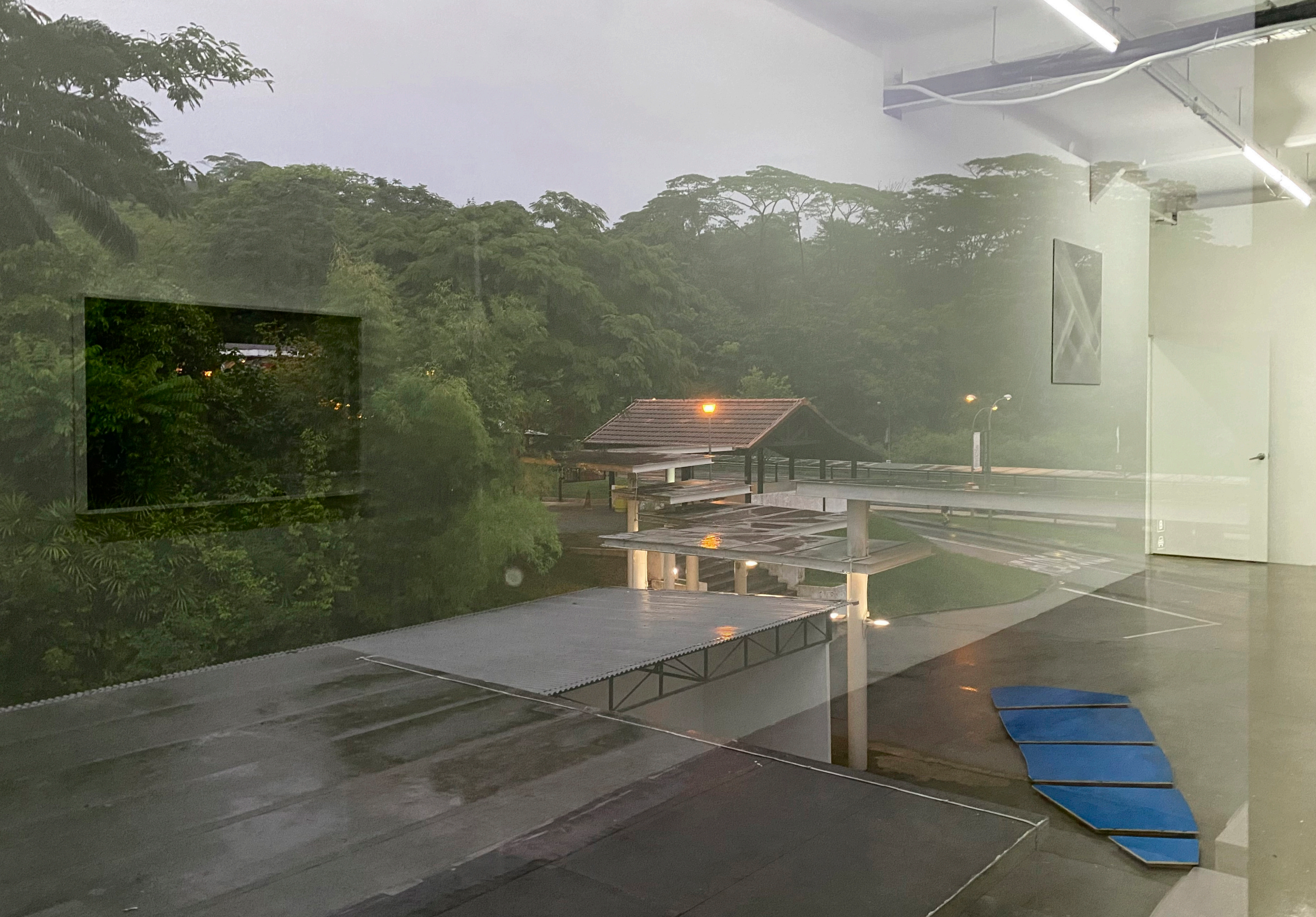












A white wall is a white wall, is a white wall... until it is not. Spending time with a white wall means having the time to understand that there is no such thing as a homogenous white wall.

Each wall is filled with alterations that 'disturb' the idea of its pure state of being. What becomes clear with each minute we spend with the whiteness of a wall are the other forms – traces of processes, traces of histories — that are counter positions to the whiteness. We can try to erase these facts and look away, but as soon as it comes to the floor and ceiling, we are no longer capable of ignoring the wild patterns that exist within what we consider the white cube. What exists between the whiteness of the wall and the accumulation of other traces creates a tension. This tension is the foundation of our work.

When Yves Klein decided to expose the white cube of the gallery by showing *Le Vide*, he was breaking with preconceptions and a specific routine. If today's routine is to either accept the white cube as institutional form or discredit it for the same reason, a similar routine can be seen. Here, our main question, instead, is how we can break away from these cliches, and re-install and re-appreciate the potential of the white cube.







But not yet have we solved the incantation of ... whiteness ... is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the invisible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color atheism from which we shrink?
— Herman Melville¹

Space is shapeless so we continually box it, delivering quotas of void. Box is easier to understand than space, so we ask it questions we used to ask of space. So box must be prompted to mumble, parse and speak for itself. Thus the boxed interventions we are pleased to call installations, which have attitude, particularly to what boxes them. Every installation is engaged in a reciprocal definition with its box, asking the (sometimes bewildered) question “Where am I?”, the answer being of course, you’re boxed. Which brings us to the six dimensions of containment.

The box, which I have called the white cube, is a curious piece of real estate, and has a long history of occupants like a room in an exclusive hotel stripped to its basic function: enclosure.² The history of this space, as we know, is a history of developing self-consciousness; a room, a gallery, intensely conscious of itself? How does a room, a box, get that way? It has its own comedy of manners, comedy being a frequent off-stage voice when we talk of art matters.

Consider the space Modernism delivered to the rude transgressions of Postmodernism. Sensitised walls. Corners enclosing turbulent space. A floor no longer just something underfoot. A ceiling that is more than just a light-giving lid. A box so self-aware that it may be neurotic.

It—the box—had a love affair with Modernism. The modernist white space celebrated above all the medium and the regnant medium of Modernism was paint. Like any medium it had an alchemical potency that no matter how exploited, remained simply paint. The mythologies of paint—juice, organic substance, secretion stroked into representation, revelation and

“expression”—are twinned with the mythology of the hand, a five-tentacled member with “touch,” leaving residues of “process.” Or so it went. The most radical of modernist paintings quietly hung on the wall. In retrospect, what strikes us most is the civility of late Modernism, and its ability, through formalism, to suppress minority dissent and not make a mess on the floor.

However roughly treated, the white cube is like a straight man in a slapstick routine. No matter how repeatedly hit on the head, no matter how many pratfalls, up it springs, its seamless white smile unchanged, eager for more abuse. Brushed off, pampered, repainted, it resumes its blankness. Its still potent powers, like those of the blank canvas, should not be underestimated. The empty canvas springs upon the first stroke made upon it with a confusing presentation of historical options and prohibitions. The gallery-box, invisible through most of Modernism, ultimately hot-housed similar complexities. Once its implicit content was outed, it was no longer mute. It was—is—ready to engage in conversations that, like those about the theater, question its relevance.

Many installation sites, apart from museums, which have their own cosseted spaces, are often won from unforgiving architecture. Sometimes these rooms have an admirable previous function. Apart from a courteous nod to history, I’m not in favour of memorialising origins, but that is a matter of variable taste (all taste is period). As we know, to produce the pseudo-neutrality of whiteness, several repressions must be practiced. Elimination of distracting cues inversely releases the potency of whiteness. Now every white gallery speaks a spatial esperanto. The gallery in Buenos Aires or Krakow or London encloses the same space, the same timelessness, the same assumptions. What a triumph of a cultural model. A neutral space everywhere pretending to be placeless.

But the immediate context of most galleries is the city and its mythos. Galleries and museums are almost exclusively urban. What pulsations from city life permeate the international galaxy of white cubes suspended in their aesthetic ether? Physical location is as much a fact as a fist, and there is increasing pressure of the white walls from without. How much of the street do you bring with you when you enter timelessness?

Since the sixties there is a subliminal anti-white cube history—for example, narrating the unseen view outside the windowless gallery, physically breaching the wall to let the outside in, pretending the gallery is something else (a media room, a schoolroom, a disco—the impersonations are endless). All acknowledge a desire for the quotidian and secular. What city vibes pass through the walls of these exclusive white spaces? It depends on the city. Because the conditions—aesthetic, social, monetary—that maintain their

white cubes vary from city to city. It is difficult to calibrate the way a city influences the artist working inside his/ her white box. Site-specific is more than just the room you work in. Is there a city-specific content that gets into the work and how do you recognise it?

So the white wall is a filter, with degrees of permeability. Like its sister applied spaces, theater and concert hall, it tends to preselect its audience, keeping out the un-moneyed, the so-called lower classes, the uninitiated and the indifferent. It issues an invitation to the opposite of these. The white walls are social regulators subscribing to the rhetoric of inclusion. There’s nothing inherently evil about this. It isn’t much talked about. Highly pedigreed spaces tend to be exclusive, and sometimes vice versa. But when we speak of art we must now speak of money, even as, saturn-like, it now consumes its own value.

Money has become part of the discourse. Some art takes money as medium and content (the wicked cheekiness of the bejeweled skull?). We are close to black comedy. What is the aim of art? Pleasure? Spiritual enhancement? Political action? Psychological insight? Entertainment? Re-visioning ourselves? None or all of these (though museums are making a case for spectacle and entertainment. The answer is money. If there is product, there is money.

Money has become a prime player in our trade. It is the young artist’s expected reward, the collector’s viaticum. Its supermarket is the art fair. Its temple the auction house where price but not value is determined. The ghost of Ezra Pound utters its feeble “Usura.”

But tainting art-as-money and money-as-art is probably misguided idealism. There are greater follies abroad in our culture. Dysfunctional idealism gratefully migrates to what are rumoured to be the more reputable precincts of the temporary installation. Does the fact that you (usually) can’t buy it bestow an ethical superiority? But any claim of ethical superiority—though I have made it on my own behalf—is suspect. Installations, like every other kind of art, are accompanied by the obligatory (often self-delusional) rap. But there is a case to be made for installations (the word covers a mongrelised plurality of genres) apart from fiscal purity.

Something addressed unequivocally to the “now,” with no future (except in photographs) puts another set of responses in motion: double-track watching, remembering even as you look, not much different from recalling the last performance of a play, perhaps, or remembering the only time you heard Sutherland sing. The great divide in memory of events is location, before and after. Or as David Hume put it: “The chief exercise of the memory is not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position.”³

You might say that installations are stuff, disposed in self-supporting conditions, asking to be deciphered. Responses must be made now, or posthumously in the space of memory where, implicated in its restless landscape, they are categorised, edited, eventually diminishing, by half-lives, like the memory of dead friends. Which is as it should be, since the future, once a marvellous potency moving towards us, has withered with our expectations.

There is something exhilarating about impermanence, particularly since modernist art addressed itself to the future, converging there with the bourgeois desire for immortality. That future arrived like an express train and went by into the past. There is no future left. Installations avoid both money and future by ignoring both. They depend not only on their enabling box, but (rarely spoken of) the context of ideas into which they are inserted: the curator's. For the context of an installation includes not just the city and the artist's previous work, but the curator's shape of mind. How much risk is invited, encouraged, allowed? What prior dialogue took place? What is the curator's aesthetic and social profile? All irrelevant when subsumed in mutual amiability.

The white cube I described over thirty years ago is no longer the same place. The stresses on it from within have increased. This has to do with the diversification of artistic practices, of which photography is one. Photography's mass invasion of the gallery is as recent as the early 1970s. It competes with paintings, and calls on the powers of the white cube when it plays to spectacle—blown-up size, light-boxes, aesthetic mystification. But usually, photography does without the gallery's ratifying powers. Most photography exhibitions look like slices of neatly framed life inviting you to walk through a spatialised book. Photographs have a kind of vagabond status like letters. They are at home anywhere, since their (usually legible) content is, like a letter's, self-contained. Photography did its share in demystifying the gallery as a privileged space. It reduced the white cube to a utilitarian frame.

The greatest breach in the white cube's walls was the invasion of film and video. Video's beginnings around 1980 aspired first to broadcast, then the gallery. Monitors were stacked, pyramided; feedback and delay introduced to installations as the observer became the subject (Peter Campus, Dan Graham). Such installations became rare, though there were still some mega-spectacles (Nam June Paik). Video didn't require a gallery, just an empty space. It turned the gallery into a viewing room. Screens, including the "I-Thou" computer screen, define their diverse audiences. Video prefers a neutral twilight. Film asks for a measure of darkness. Neither need the transforming powers of the cube. They aspire more to the theater's experimental black box. The black box presents a different neutrality. Its walls dissolve. Its darkness has no implicit content beyond the rhetoric of

expectation and disclosure. Video and film define the white box on their own terms. Their unruly energies, time-based demands and "theatricalisation" of the viewer demystify the space inherited from late Modernism. When something is demystified it migrates elsewhere. Where is the demystified white gallery's "elsewhere"?

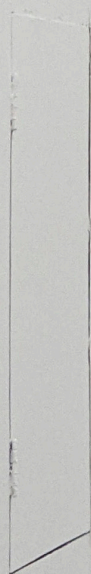
It has migrated, like some science fiction virus, into the audience, into us, into our white-walled attitude, into our fetishised eye, into the mental scarifications of a tribe connected by internet and blogs, extending the artworld's verbal culture. As a tribe we cross national but not social boundaries. We can be located by the triangulation of money, public relations and the attitude that is the residue of the white box's powers. Some may call this post-post panorama the great decadence, an allegory called "The Triumph of Money." But such a dystopian tizzy needs to be regulated by low dosages of irony. We are what we have developed, or developed into. Art and its reception always intersected finance. Art is made to be co-opted. Does counter-cultural exceptionalism merely re-inforce this? Can installations escape? Perhaps.

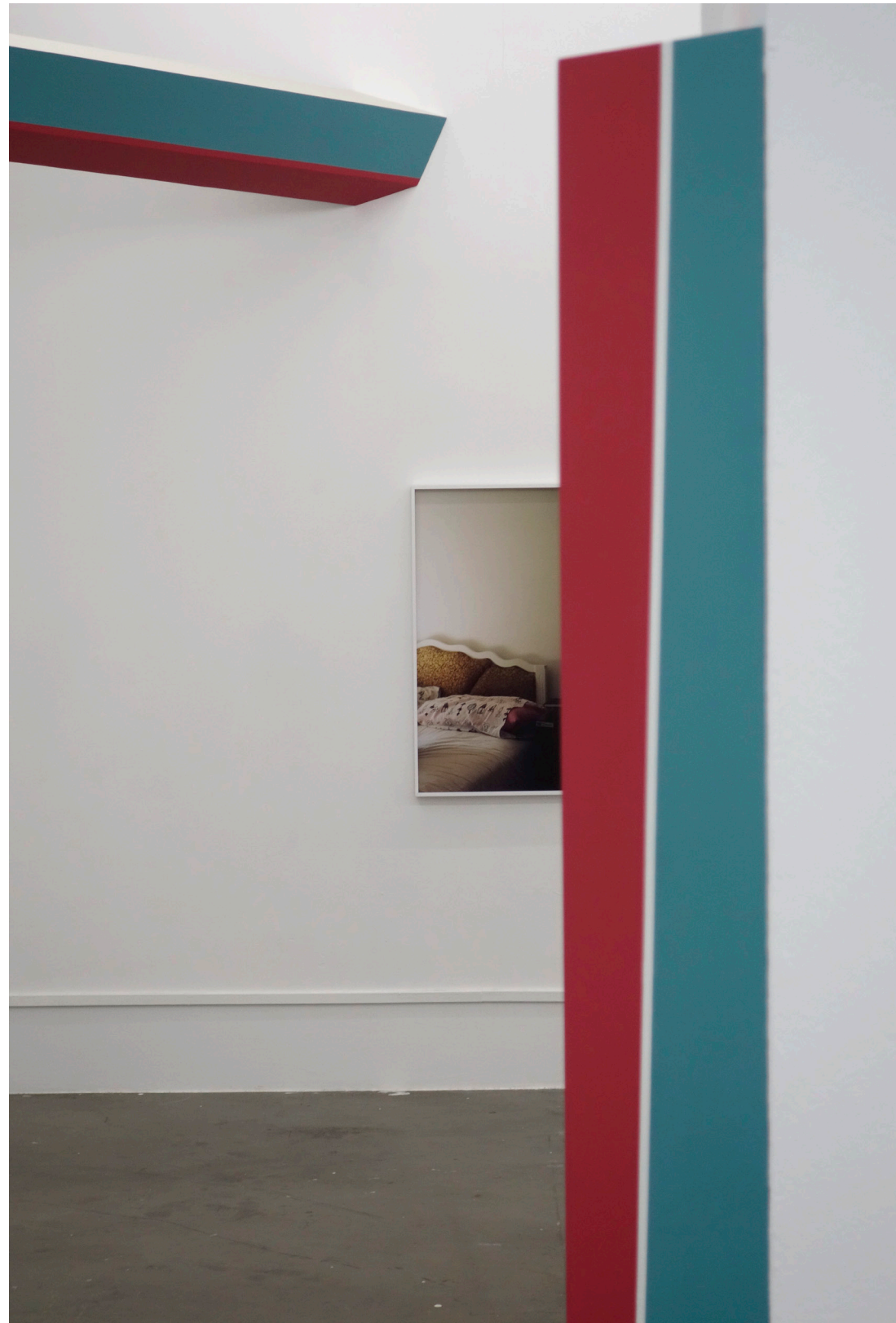
Installations—a site, a place, the spectator's literal presence—call on and sometimes attack the multi-purpose, polymorphous spaces which host with equanimity the shouts of contrary aesthetics and house-broken protests. They force an immediate dialogue before they swoon into memory, which is "compounded," as Proust wrote, "of an exact proportion of remembering and forgetting."⁴ Not quite true, as it happens. In the end, all we most certainly have, like installations, is the "now."

Originally published in *A Manual for the 21st Century Art Institution*, edited by Shamita Sharmacharja (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Koenig Books, 2009), 26–30.

NOTES

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Ware: Wordsworth editions, 1993), 163.
2. see Brian o'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: university of California Press, 1999).
3. David Hume, "of the Ideas of Memory and Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Brian Beakley and Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1992), 181-182.
4. Cited in Margaret Mein, *Proust's Challenge to time* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), 43.









In relating to ideas of the ‘white cube’, I decided to work directly with the exhibition space from our first visit.

Using my iPhone to capture details of the gallery space, I photographed the building’s interior, highlighting its corners, beams, walls, and concrete floor in less than 20 minutes. With this casual and spontaneous approach, these low-resolution captures became the material in my art-making process.

I use photography as a tool to emphasize the details of the white cube space.

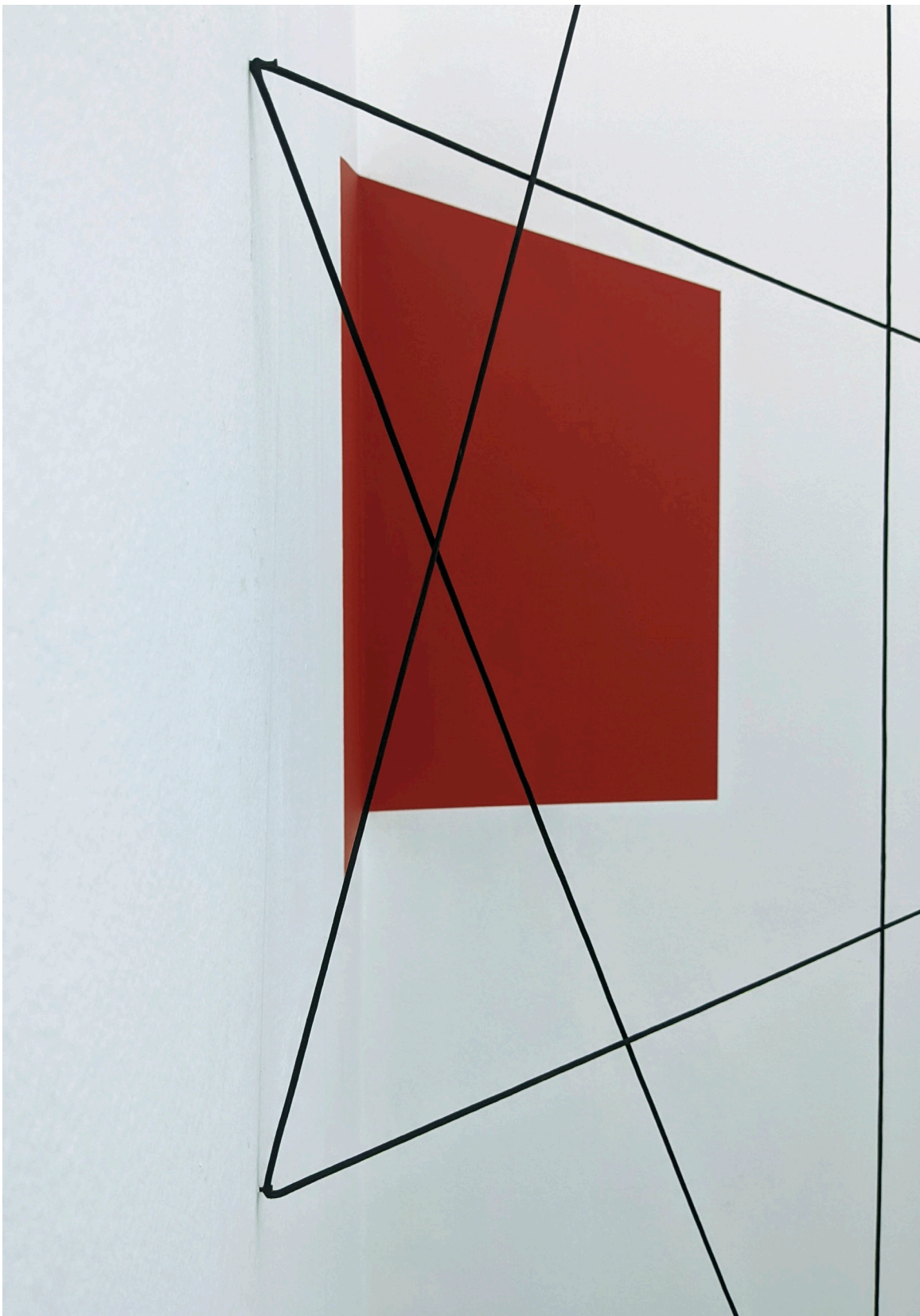
I am not only highlighting the “textural surfaces” found in the gallery, but also these “new surfaces” I created in the final prints using a mix of digital and chemical processes.

This process allows me to create images that have a soft and almost drawing-like quality.

The final prints made in the darkroom are scanned in high-resolution to allow for large format printing with an inkjet printer.

The monotone blandness present in the series of photographs acts as a reminder of the make-up of the white cube gallery space.

The choice of printing paper further removes the look of a “photograph”.





Inside the Wild Cube. A place to come together, to create together. A place to bring in another time, another space, another form.

Inside the wild cube, my images of walls of homes situated more than 2500km away sit on the spare white walls of the gallery. Initially made with medium format slide film, portraits of then-residents of Hong Kong, in a place and time that no longer exists, are now reframed and cropped. The people in the photographs disappear. Instead, the photographs depict surroundings. Walls, tablecloths, and ceilings become. The support is the point.

The objecthood and materiality of the photograph become entwined with not just the other works in the space, but also with architecture and light. *“Desmond (2005)” without Desmond*, hooked to screws on one side of a wall, ascends and overcomes it, before descending onto the floor on the other side. Here, the tension between its own weight and its attachment to the wall enables the form. A band of painted wall in *“Kitty (2015)” without Kitty* transgresses the frame of the photograph, and emerges into the gallery space in the here and now, inside the wild cube.

Through the exhibition, together here, we bring in our past, our experiences, our influences. We bring in our family, our friends, our nation. Stripped down, pared back and concentrated, inside the wild cube.

7, 9, 50	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 107x107cm, inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, 2022.	8, 10, 11-12, 38, 52	Hilmi Johandi. <i>Stagecraft, Night-time view of Orchard Road at the Scotts Road end</i> . Dimensions variable, emulsion paint on wood, 2022.
11	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 50.8cm x 50.8cm(4), inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, 2022.	13-14, 35, 40	Hilmi Johandi. <i>Stagecraft, Sentosa Island</i> . 219x140x58cm, 65x60cm, emulsion and acrylic paint on wood, sandbags, wooden stretcher frame, 2022.
14, 15, 37, 53-54, 60	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 107x107cm, 326x285cm, inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, wood, screws, emulsion paint, 2022.	25-26, 30	Hilmi Johandi. <i>Stagecraft, Pool at Hotel New Otani</i> . 214x71cm, emulsion and acrylic paint on wood, 2022.
27-28	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 55x55cm, inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, 2022.	55, 61	Hilmi Johandi. <i>Stagecraft, Singapore Souvenir</i> . 190x144cm, emulsion paint, 2022.
21-22, 30, 33-34	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 107x107cm, inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, 2022.	7, 9, 49	Wei Leng Tay. <i>"After karaoke, (2013)" without karaoke</i> . 37x27x10cm, archival pigment print mounted on metal composite, painted wood, anti- reflective glass, 2022.
6	Chua Chye Teck. #03-21. 107x107cm, inkjet print mounted on aluminium composite panel, 2022.	10, 52	Wei Leng Tay. <i>"Untitled (2015)" without Oneness</i> . 61x90x3cm, archival pigment print mounted on metal composite, painted wood, anti-reflective glass, 2022.

10, 11-12, 13-14, 39	Wei Leng Tay. <i>“Desmond (2005)” without Desmond</i> . Dimensions variable, archival pigment print, cardboard roll, metal clips, screws, 2022.	9-10, 36, 56	Wei Leng Tay. <i>“Son (2008)” without son</i> . Dimensions variable, archival pigment print, painted wood, 2022.
29, 62	Wei Leng Tay. <i>“Tanny and Candy (2006)” without Tanny and Candy</i> . 55.3x81.8x4.5cm, archival pigment print mounted on metal composite, painted wood, acrylic, 2022.	5, 20, 36, 54, 55, 59	Brian O’Doherty. <i>Rope Drawing</i> . Rope, paint, size variable, 1973.
15, 23	Wei Leng Tay. <i>“Kitty (2015)” without Kitty</i> . Dimensions variable, archival pigment print mounted on metal composite, painted wood, anti-reflective glass, wall paint, 2022.		

ISBN: 978-981-18-4425-6

Inside the Wild Cube participants:
Chua Chye Teck, Marc Gloede, Hilmi Johandi, Wei Leng Tay and Brian O'Doherty

This booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Inside the Wild Cube*, presented at Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road, #03-21 Singapore 108937 from 13 January 2022 to 26 February 2022.

Photo and text credits:
Progressive Disintegrations participants unless otherwise stated.

Text by Brian O'Doherty:
BOXES, CUBES, INSTALLATIONS, WHITE-NESS AND MONEY, Originally published in *A Manual for the 21st Century Art Institution*, edited by Shamita Sharmacharja (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Koenig Books, 2009), 26–30.

© 2022 Progressive Disintegrations

Progressive Disintegrations is a collaborative project consisting of Chua Chye Teck, Marc Gloede, Hilmi Johandi and Wei Leng Tay.

Publication design:
Currency Design

Print Run:
500 copies

Acknowledgements:
Ace Chua, Thomas Fischer, Aaron Ing, Syahrudin Pasha Dasa, Allister Towndrow, Anna Lovecchio, Studio Brian O'Doherty, Jean Hong Ting, Michelle Wong, Marina Zuccarelli

We would like to thank our families and friends for their continuous support of this project.

Supported by:



Inside the Wild Cube

creative labour

Progressive Disintegrations

independent art space
aesthetics

gallery

history

space

Brian O'Doherty
"Inside the White Cube"

exhibition

art industry

criticality

artistic practices

Chua Chye Teck, Marc Gloede, Hilmi Johandi
and Wei Leng Tay

curatorial practices

explore and expand

