

White Rabbit: Embodying the Old and New in an Artistic Wonderland of Free Expression

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White Rabbit gallery is a site dedicated to the exhibition of contemporary Chinese art post-2000, realised through the notions of modernity and postmodernism. Consisting of a body of Chinese artists spanning a vast array of backgrounds, the gallery effectively represents China's art in its highest form, with works carefully selected for their originality and artistic professionalism by the gallery's private owner Judith Nielson. These works instil a sense of awe in their viewers, whilst also expressing ideas on a deeper subversive level. White Rabbit gallery employs a profound general visitor discourse; extending an emphasis of attention on the visitor and ensuring their experience is one which aligns with ideals of modernity such as progress and renewal as represented through the gallery's purchased level of work and incorporated capitalist structures including a gallery shop and teahouse. Exclusively housing contemporary Chinese art in a postmodern renovated knitting factory, the gallery further represents progress and hope for a world recovering from a global financial crisis in the utilisation of a site built in the wake of this crisis. Through the role of the gallery's physical structure, its exclusive Chinese art content, and its experiential visitor discourse, notions regarding Marxist ideas on commodity fetishism and other theoretical perspectives on postmodern and modern spaces are revealed; the construct of the site further embodying Lyotard's notion of the 'nascent' state from modernity to postmodernism. This article interrogates the modern and postmodern notions embodied by White Rabbit gallery in order for an understanding relevant to the present moment in which we live, as part of this modern and postmodern context, to be fully realised.

Keywords: modernity; postmodernism; present moment.

Introduction

French philosopher and theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard writes "[the postmodern] is undoubtedly a part of the modern [...] Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 1992, p. 147). White Rabbit is an art gallery that effectively takes the world of contemporary Chinese art in new directions "with not an image of Mao in sight" (Baum 2010, p.71). Furthermore, the space is having a profound effect on the way we view our world from a cultural, physical and spiritual perspective, realised through its adherence to both modern and postmodern notions; these perspectives provoked by artists from varying backgrounds as disparate as Taoism and Mao's army (White Rabbit 2010). Professing, on its website, to hold "one of the world's largest and most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art" (White Rabbit 2010), this gallery is providing Sydney with an accessible haven of free expression where ideas are given ways of communicating via the enthusiasm and passion of artists, visitors and curators alike. Throughout this essay, I will interrogate the notions of the modern and postmodern, observing specifically how they allow us to understand both White Rabbit and the present moment we live in. My hypothesis is that through an examination of the site's adherence to particular discourses,

such as general visitor and gallery discourses, White Rabbit gallery as an inevitable embodiment of modern and postmodern ideas will come into sharper focus, these ideas consequently providing a greater understanding of the present moment we live in through their realisation of the gallery.

Beholding the gallery's inclusion of works such as Dong Juan's artwork 'Dust' (2008), part of the 2009 exhibition 'The Tao of Now' which "...suggests the insignificance and transience of our lives..." (The Week 23 July 2010, p.25). Among an extensive range of other artists and their work, it reveals a collection of art that is part of the gallery's own private collection; these works challenging universal ideas surrounding capitalism, politics and the environment. These subversive aspects of the gallery come into greater focus as one further observes the gallery as an embodiment of the modern and postmodern. Gallery founder Judith Nielson states her desire to "share the art because I can. And to share it with as many people as possible" (Keenan 2009, p.4), a statement which demonstrates hope for our world where alienation and class conflict are thought to be a growing concern in the wake of the recent global financial crisis.

My interpretation of White Rabbit is based on a particular understanding of how these subversive actions function within the gallery through the notions of postmodernism and modernity. My analysis begins on the micro-level, with an initial focus on tracking these actions in relation to the site as a construct that operates for the general visitor. For instance, the site provides visitors with guides to assist in the interpretation of works, a gallery shop and tea-house, a book club, film club and monthly lecture series. The essay will then lead into a broader consideration of the significance of the gallery's establishment in an old knitting factory in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis, and its exclusive focus on contemporary Chinese art, which gallery manager Paris Nielson claims "...is a hot commodity right now, and among the most fascinating in the world" (Dent 2010). All of these actions link to modernity's desire for progress and Marxist notions of commodity fetishism. Drawing upon Lyotard's notion of the interconnected nature of the modern and postmodern (Lyotard 1992, p.147), the illumined liminal space that exists between these terms and the differences that arise to define each term, will be simultaneously discussed in relation to these actions and the subversive nature of the gallery's artists and their ideas. My claim is that White Rabbit is a site that is realised through the notions of the modern and postmodern, and consequently reveals contemporary culture as one which cannot escape these notions in order to be fully realised in both its modern and postmodern context.

White Rabbit: A visitor's wonderland

There is, firstly, a confirmation of the words of Nick Prior in his work 'Museums and Modernity' as one enters this gallery;

Museums are more eager than ever to embrace commercial emphasis and provide accelerated levels of entertainment and sensation. The emphasis on shopping and eating as central to the experience of visiting a museum is complemented by popular techniques of display, blockbuster exhibitions and interational information systems that intensify the visual and turn the museum into a 'distraction machine' (Virilio, 1994; Harvey, 1989) (Prior 2002, p.213).

On arrival, the visitor is bombarded with stuffed white fluffy rabbits, gallery badges, gifts and gadgets, and exquisitely bound exhibition books; tables and chairs are neatly arranged in a teahouse setting to the left, whilst to the right, an enlarged figure with long, elongated limbs and a warm smiling face greets one by the door. This work, the first we encounter, is by artist Chen Wenling and seems to diminish the line between what is art and what is to be bought and consumed by the general visitor in this modern capitalist environment. Its bronze medium attains a plastic appeal through its polished red glow and shine. Thankfully, one is soon whisked away by a passionate volunteer dispelling any of these thoughts; saving you from embarrassment she relays countless facts about the artist and the meaning of the work, sending you to the third floor to start your self-guided tour of the gallery assisted by other volunteers, instead of the cashier to enquire about the cost of the ‘sculpture.’



Figure 1. Valiant Struggle, Chen Wenling

What is gained from the outset is an amount of attention extending far beyond anything experienced in the average life you were part of before you entered the gallery. In other words, there is a great emphasis on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s notion of “...the modern individual...” (Arendt 1958, p.39), this notion consequently leading to “...the phenomenon of conformism [...] characteristic of the last stage of [...] modern development...” (Arendt 1958, p. 40). Stimulants embrace you, from tactile objects to movie screens flitting through short animation sequences, and volunteer talks every floor. Clothed in matching aprons the guides challenge perceptions of the works, which span multiple artistic disciplines. Hannah Arendt writes, “[modern] society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalise” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (Arendt 1958, p.40). Expressed in Arendt’s book titled ‘The Human Condition’, these ideas as part of the modern aptly coincide with the visitor discourse of White Rabbit; the volunteer guide whisking you

away, the fluffy rabbits, the ‘Teahouse’, the monthly book club, film club and lecture series titled ‘Speakeasy’, are all constructs or ‘rules’ established for a mass enjoyment of the gallery.

Marshall Berman writes: “Modernity marks a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal” (Berman 1982, p.15). As one climbs the stairs leading up to each floor, it is as though one is marching toward the future, the volunteers emphasising the incredible level of work present in the gallery as they enthusiastically answer questions concerning artworks extending thirty metres, constructed with hand-crafted honeycomb paper comprising thirty thousand sheets of paper. With each work markedly different from its neighbour, the gallery demonstrates a progression, where only new and better things transpire. ‘Thrown to the Wind’ by Wang Zhiyuan presents a twisting tower of plastic bottles; viewable from every level (Ground, One, Two and Three) it exemplifies the extraordinary level of work contained in the gallery, an extraordinariness achieved through both physically big and small works as demonstrated by Ai Weiwei’s ‘Sunflower Seeds’ consisting of “a single 500-kg pile [which] provided work for 160 people for six months” (White Rabbit 2010). Resting breathless amidst polished floors, clean and spacious whiteness, and vaulted ceilings, we view these works “as if [their...] value were intrinsic [...] as if [they...] were born with that value in [their...] genes”, as if they were Karl Marx’s idea of an ‘illusion’ (Reiss 1997, p.103). For Marx, the idea of commodity fetishism inherent in modern capitalist notions was “the mistaken belief that the value of a commodity is intrinsic to it” (Reiss 1997, p.103); this is a ‘belief’ embodied by the guides as they expel a wonder-filled aura of appreciation for these works, instilling the same level of passion and enthusiasm in gallery visitors.



Figure 2. Thrown to the Wind, Wang Zhiyuan

Analysing the notions of modernity and postmodernism reveals key differences between the terms as Lyotard writes,

Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one [...] The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (1992, p.148).

Postmodernism retains its “nascent state”(Lyotard 1992, p.147) from the modern yet its concerns are shown to have markedly evolved over time. This is exemplified through White Rabbit’s collective of artists and their desire for producing their works; which is starkly removed from the world of its exhibiting gallery construct. It is from the artists and their personal lives and the ideologies reflected through their works that the gallery’s postmodern subversiveness stems. Lyotard extends further on his analysis of postmodernism, writing

[The postmodern is that] which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work[...] The artist[...] is] working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done* (Lyotard 1992, p.148).

The ‘unrepresentable’ is denoted through the gallery’s website and token artist statements placed around the gallery near their corresponding works. These modern gallery elements are an implicitly postmodern aspect of the general visitor discourse, as through its modern ‘nascent state’ imply something against the mainstream - beyond the rules and construct of the gallery. Artist of ‘Sunflower Seeds’, Ai Weiwei, is quoted on the gallery website, “Art was a secret haven for me, it gave me a chance to live with all the things I had seen” (White Rabbit 2010). Looking at these modern elements through a postmodern lens, one begins to ask ‘why?’ instead of ‘how?’ - a question which directly challenges the modern mainstream this gallery has to offer.

An exclusive modern and postmodern enterprise

Friday, Saturday, Sunday has passed. Visitors return to their everyday lives; perhaps still asking how, perhaps beginning to ask why. All that remains is a building; the gallery’s employees intermittently entering the building throughout the week to busy themselves with administration, the outline for their next lecture series, and the organisation of their flights to China to purchase new works for the gallery’s 2011 exhibitions. The current artworks are dusted and the floors polished to their finished new and sparkling quality.

Beyond the distinct methods present in the general visitor discourse of White Rabbit gallery, is an overarching discourse regarding the physicality of the gallery, including its industrial structure and history as “a former knitting factory”, as well as the gallery’s exclusive “...dedicat[ion] to contemporary Chinese art post-2000” (Baum 2010, p.71). Nick Prior speculates on the way modern museums are socially constructed, “in the last twenty-five years, museums have become the focus of unprecedented levels of political and economic attention as institutions variously trading on spectacle, commerce and cultural tourism reach for new audiences”(Prior 2002, p. 213). White Rabbit “reaches for new audiences” through its unique operation as a non-commercial private institution, additionally having “more freedom than

government funded galleries”, yet still a great “focus of unprecedented levels of political and economic attention” as it presents an establishment “funded by the Neilson’s \$30 million foundation” (Schwartzkoff 2010, p. 1); Caroline Baum writes in *AIR: A Qantas magazine*: “despite the economic gloom, Sydney’s White Rabbit Gallery opened last year [...] With a set-up price of \$14 million, White Rabbit was created and funded by a low-profile couple, Kerr and Judith Neilson of Platinum Asset Management” (Baum 2010, p. 71). Focusing purely on art from one place and time, “Sydney can be proud that it is home to one of the world’s biggest collections of contemporary Chinese art, made available to the public” writes John McDonald (2010, p. 1) in the *Sydney Morning Herald*; a marked modernist achievement of progression and “renewal” (Berman 1982, p. 15). With countless trips to China, the Neilson’s purchase works on a grand scale, “adding something more to Sydney’s cultural scene” says Judith’s daughter Paris (Schwartzkoff 2010, p.1). Judith Neilson’s reasoning behind this exclusive collection stems from, “Many of the issues that today’s Chinese artists deal with- love, loss, environmental degradation, the mass media, infertility, consumerism, outsiders, the futile pursuit of happiness - are issues for artists the world over”. And yet, says Judith, the Chinese do it in such a fresh, original way. “It’s different,” she says, “in our collection, there are no two artists who are similar and there’s not one piece I think is mediocre. That’s quite something for more than... 120 artists” (Strickland 2009, p. 1). Again, the gallery can be shown to implicitly represent the ‘unpresentable’ postmodern individual. However, in already analyzing the gallery at the micro-level of it’s general visitor discourse, this exclusivity of a collection of only contemporary Chinese art adheres to similar notions prevalent to the nature of the modern in galleries and museums alike. Prior observes,

For writers like Baudrillard (1982), Featherstone (1991) and Virilio (1991; 1994), the expansive crowds at the new ‘supermarkets of culture’ move through at a bewildering speed, impatient and carnivorous, no longer searching for aesthetics but agitated in an aesthetics of the search- scanning the cultural horizon for ever more spectacular forms of entertainment (2002, p. 213).

The crowds here are not only representative of the general visitor, but also the broader gallery construct and its owners who ‘search’ for the work to be shown to the general public. These ideas link to Marx’s notions of commodity fetishism; of which Edward Reiss writes:

[Commodity fetishism] could be extended to social products, institutions and ideas, whose powers are not intrinsic properties, but human creations. Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand. (1997, pp.103-104).

However, in returning to the modern and its nascent state as it reaches towards an integrated postmodern future, Neilson does express her “fervent hope [...] that people from all walks of life visit, particularly those who usually feel intimidated by art galleries” (Strickland 2009, p. 1). This challenges mainstream art galleries as it confronts neo-Marxist concerns of alienation and class conflict in the wake of the recent global financial crisis.



Figure 3. White Rabbit Gallery

In moving further away from the internal constructs of the gallery, a building is envisaged adhering to Prior's writing on the modern museum; he writes, "The most prominent artefacts in art museums are no longer just the art objects but the striking buildings themselves, many of them designed by fashionable 'postmodern' architects in unconventional and eclectic styles" (Prior 2002, p. 213). A building is constructed before any work can be exhibited. In true modernist fashion, White Rabbit transformed a former knitting factory into a sophisticated, spacious multifaceted gallery space; an embodiment of modern 'simplicity' as explored by Adrian Forty in *Words and Buildings A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (Forty 2000, p. 249). Forty quotes the influential modernist architect Le Corbusier: "Great art is made of simple means [...] Simplicity is the result of judgement, of choice, it is the sign of mastery" (Forty 2000, p. 249). Housing four levels of exhibition space, a library and resource room, a film room, shop and 'teahouse', the physicality of the gallery is in itself a commodity. Once more, this fulfils the gallery's goal of demonstrating progress for a world obsessed with capitalism as it adheres to Prior's interpretation of contemporary culture and its modern development of gallery sites. To paraphrase Prior (2002, p.213), a world no longer interested in just the art works but the building which houses these works. However, as written in *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, "We need cities that will be conditions of life, of full and free and unfrAGMENTED lives, not cities of discretion and domination; we need walls that welcome and shelter, not walls that exclude and oppress" (Watson & Gibson 1996, p.251). The nascent state of modernity to postmodernism again emerges: through the gallery's anarchic, characteristically postmodernist, appropriation of the knitting factory, White Rabbit gallery now warmly welcomes visitors through its polished glass doors and into its exclusive enterprise, which is both modern and postmodern.

Conclusion

This essay is premised on the claim that close observation of the modern and postmodern within White Rabbit gallery reveals an underlying understanding of the present moment in which we live, and thus contemporary culture's ever constant adherence to the nascent state of modernity to postmodernism. The essay unpacks the often paradoxical nature of this state as embodied by the gallery through its general visitor discourse and exclusive focus on contemporary Chinese art, as well as its physical structural form as a modern and postmodern gallery. This is illuminated through its subversiveness as a gallery, employing postmodern works by "unpresentable" (Lyotard 1992, p.148) individuals, and how it simultaneously adheres to modernity's desire for progress and Marxist notions of commodity fetishism. Underpinning the analysis has been Lyotard's (1992, p.147) understanding of this nascent state of

the modern to the postmodern inherent in the realisation of contemporary culture. Using Lyotard's notion in the interpretation of White Rabbit reveals that a text's realisation inevitably stems notions of both the modern and postmodern. Drawing on scholars who address the modern and postmodern gallery space, this nascent state is further reiterated as they address the liminal space that exists as one emerges from the other in terms of structure and purpose, inclusion and emphasis. The first part of the essay sought to reveal this state with respect to the general visitor discourse and its structured illumination of the wondrous possibilities of contemporary Chinese art and all it has to offer now and in the future. An observed emphasis on 'how' rather than 'why' is presented to the visitor in order to embrace them in a pure modernist environment, with the 'why' only implicitly inferred as part of a postmodern paradigm also inherent to the gallery. The essay then moved to a broader focus on the gallery; beyond a visitor's experience, it analysed the way the gallery upholds the notions of the modern and postmodern through its more general physical structure as a gallery and its exclusive focus on contemporary Chinese art. This new perspective further demonstrated the gallery's embodiment of the nascent state between the notions of the modern and postmodern; this state 'constant' and inherently engrained in the present moment we live in.

Notes on Contributor:

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