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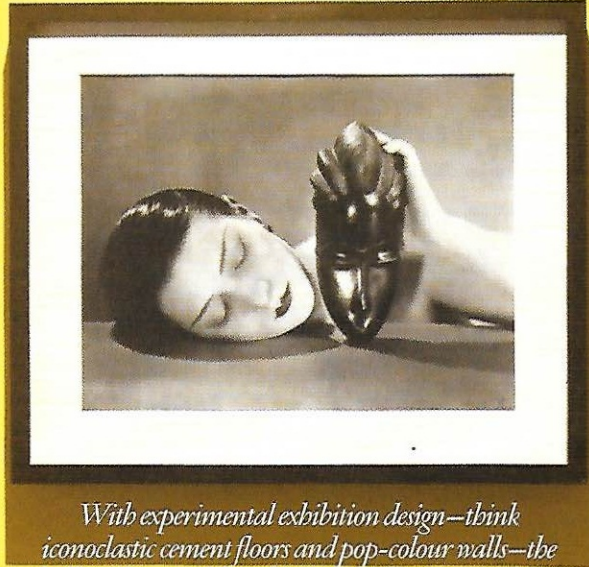


## THE ART ISSUE

DAYANITA SINGH  
ATUL DODIYA  
PRINCESS PEA

# NOT WHITE

# CUBE



*With experimental exhibition design—think iconoclastic cement floors and pop-colour walls—the balloned space of the ‘white cube’ gallery is morphing. The jury is still out on its relevance, but the culture makers agree—the white cube is thawing*

WRITER KAVERI ACHARYA

TARQ, Mumbai (*Noire et Blanche*, 1926, from the 2017 Man Ray exhibition ‘Views of the Spirit’).

The mid-20th century art gallery was a peculiar being—a cold, intimidating and awe-inspiring space that embodied the aesthetic of the age, a secular temple to modernism. The design of this windowless gallery with its clinical white walls was canonized as the “white cube”. In his seminal collection of essays titled *Inside the White Cube*, art theorist Brian O’Doherty described the gallery as “...a white ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art”. O’Doherty was, of course, writing in the heyday of the ‘art for art’s sake’ ethos; when Rothko’s abstract colour-field paintings called for a chapel of their own.

Cut to the 21st century and art has melted off the canvas and onto the screen. Why then bother going to an auction house, when you can bid online? Why worry about queues when you can have a virtual walkthrough? We’re in the age of distraction and staying relevant means being malleable, mutating, and shape-shifting. Globally, galleries are beginning to wonder: is the age of the white cube over?

## COLOUR & CURATION

Making the case for the post-white-cube age is, somewhat ironically, MoMA’s recent exhibition—‘Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive’. The museum collaborated with Farrow & Ball to create a definitive palette for the exhibition. Writing for *Architectural Digest*, Hadley Keller takes up the seemingly unimportant subject of wall paint, in a revelatory piece that includes an interview with Charlotte Cosby, the creative head at Farrow & Ball. Keller talks about the painstaking process of creating a suitable palette to serve as a subliminal conceptual connector through the multimedia exhibition. The interview reveals an important truth about contemporary exhibition design—the experience of viewing art has undergone a seismic change. Institutions and brands such as Farrow & Ball are coming together to create a subtle orchestra of colour, texture and light design, carefully calibrated for the viewer to consume it in this age of visual glut.

The sentiment resonates with leading galleries in India. For a 2015 exhibition, Rafiq Kidwai, the chief >



*Clockwise from left:* TARQ, Mumbai (an installation view of the Man Ray exhibition; the Museum of Modern Art, New York (an installation view of Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive, 12 June–1 October 2017); Pundole's, Mumbai: DAG Modern, Mumbai ('Kingdom of Exile', a solo exhibition of Rabin Mondal's paintings).



PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ARIEN FERNANDES/TARQ; © 2017 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; KRISHNA HIRJIBAI TALIB CHITALWALA

< exhibition designer at DAG Modern—worked with Kishore Singh, the gallery's chief curator, to create a massive alcove within the roomy ground floor of the Mumbai chapter of the gallery. The structure's false walls sported a startling blood red, and its checkerboard floor drew upon the colours and motifs of the paintings on display. The carefully crafted space evoked the essence of the art, and the effect was compelling.

For other galleries, the motivation to reinterpret the gallery design is driven by the idea of humanizing spaces. Art, after all, is a lived experience. Talking about her vision for her young Mumbai gallery, TARQ, Hena Kapadia says: "The white cube model served as a useful starting point for experiments. But it's a model that has to be played with, otherwise it is too cold and uninviting." Housed in one of the city's iconic art deco buildings, the gallery is a partial opening up of the traditional model, with ecru walls and windows that break the conventions of an outside-inside dissonance. For a recent exhibition of Man Ray's photographs, the gallery went with chrome yellow walls that created dynamic interventions within the colour scheme, revitalizing the iconic black and white photographs.

## FOR THE PEOPLE

Having recently opened the art gallery as an extension of their identity as an auction house, Pundole's has been drawing attention as a space unafraid of curating unconventional exhibitions. Mutability is an important factor for a space that puts together events as diverse as exhibitions, formal sit-down dinners for collectors, as well as more conventional auction previews. Talking about the gallery's approach to exhibition design, Pundole's art consultant Mallika Sagar Advani says, "There has to be a balance between creating a backdrop for the art and overpowering it."

A balanced view on the subject is perhaps best held by Mortimer Chatterjee of Chatterjee & Lal, who says: "The logic of having a white cube space does make sense; there are only so many times that artists can respond to the architectural specificities of a space. But it needs to be done correctly, with a healthy balance. Art spaces cannot afford to be soulless."

Like a stage set for a performance, galleries have the power to enhance the engagement between art and its audience. It is a fine line to walk—but a worthy one. ♦