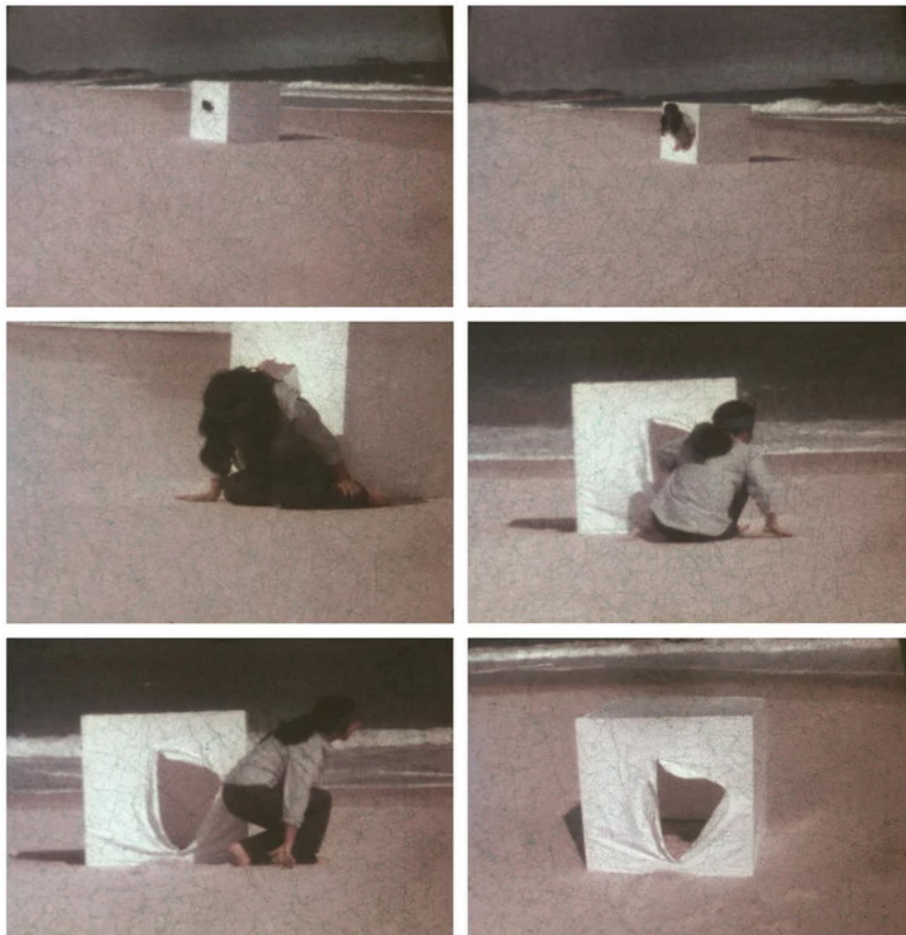


Breaking the White Cube

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In 1967, Brazilian artist Lygia Pape made one of the most revolutionary artworks of the 20th century. On a beach in Rio de Janeiro, she hid inside a hollow white cube and then, after ripping one of its sides, slowly came out onto the beach. As simple as it may sound, **O Ovo (The Egg)** was a turning point for both Latin American and global art history.



Before I go any further and explain its importance, it is crucial to ask a few questions first. The first one has been an ongoing interrogation in my research of contemporary Latin American female artists. When I looked at most of the works produced during the 60s, 70s and 80s, it is inevitable to see that most of the artists used performance as one of their primary artistic expressions. My question is, why? What was the importance of this practice, and its subsequent languages -film and photography- that made it so attractive to women in the middle of the 20th century?

Secondly, what is the significance of the concept of the *white cube*? Is it just a symbol of modernism? Or does it have another value today?

As I mentioned before, the first question has always been on my mind, ever since I started studying the work of female artists of Latin America. It is not a coincidence that 80% of the artworks exhibited in *Radical Women: Latin American art, 1960 - 1985* at the Hammer Museum, were films and photography, where most of the artists recorded one of their performances. After asking many curators, art historians and artists, I arrived at the following conclusions to explain this behaviour.

Firstly, during the 60s and 70s, second-wave-feminism allowed women to pose some questions that had never been formally posed before. How is it that women are not considered the same as men? Is *nature* the cause of our differences? If it is not, what is causing this disparity?

Laura Mulvey coined the term **the male gaze** to answer these questions. For her, the power of *looking* determined the way we behave on our day to day basis. It controls our economy, politics and social conducts. But, if that is the case, do we all have the same power to look?

Before she created this term, many philosophers, physicists and sociologists had already given immense power to the viewer in our society. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that human understanding is the source of all the laws of nature that control our experience. Therefore, the only thing that exists to us is what we see, as we cannot really know the reality of things in themselves. In other words, the fact that we might be living a lie and the computer that I have in front of me is actually merged with the table underneath is irrelevant. Reality is how I perceive it, all objects are just an extension of myself.

This posture became even more critical in 1935 when Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger described the paradox of a cat inside a box. According to his experiment, when a cat is placed inside a box with something that could kill him (poison for example), and you seal the box, you would only know that the cat is alive or dead when you open the box. In other words, until you open it, the cat is both dead and alive. It is the observer, the one that creates the actual situation and fortune of the cat as soon as he opens the box.

This small example led multiple thinkers to understand that the way we see reality determines how we live it. The things that we decide to include in our life and exclude for that matter, control how we behave. But most importantly, such as in Schrödinger's experiment, the only one that can determine the cat's fate

(the cat, in this case, being a metaphor for our lives) is the one controlling the opening of the box.

Mulvey's realisation in 1975 was not so much discovering the power of the observer but realising that only a few in our society have the right to look. Only a few determine how we see our values, our actions, even our language. For her, that small group consisted mainly of white, heterosexual, North American/European men. They not only dictated our laws, politics, aesthetics and values but the way the other people not included in their group saw themselves. In particular, women.

Being raised in Colombia, I always felt that particular gaze, but it took me quite a while to realise it. It was usual for me that many people would tell me that to be *feminine*, I had to be sweet, innocent, accommodating and vulnerable. That I had to understand that it was not entirely suitable to be thoughtful and intelligent, as the common saying dictates "*Los hombres las prefieren brutas*" (men preferred them dumb). That I had to dress up and show off what I had because "*sin tetas no hay Paraiso*" ("without breasts, there is no paradise" - the name of a well-known television series in Colombia). After all, my favourite book was *Hopscotch* of Julio Cortazar, where women, and what he calls *the female readers*, are described as inactive and passive, mere objects to be seen, like a pretty painting on a wall.

Consequently, when Lygia Pape decided to use performance as a means of artistic expression in 1967, it was a behavior that challenged the way women wanted to see and be seen. Not just as an object of adoration and contemplation - a virginal body to be preserved - but rather a mind that speaks for its own. One that is not ashamed to talk about menstruation, reproduction or even birth, as she did that day on the beach. Her gesture, like the ones of many women back then, gave women back their right to speak about themselves, not through the gaze of others but through their own gaze.

In a conversation I had recently with Cecilia Fajardo Hill, curator of Radical Women, she mentioned another reason that explains why so many women preferred performance as their primary artistic expression. As we all know, until very recently, women were excluded from the institutional art space. It was only until the end of the 19th century that a few women were allowed to attend the Royal Academy of Arts in Britain, for example. In the academies, painting and sculpting were the two most common and most valued practices. For a big part of the 20th century, film and photography remained on the sidelines of the industry. Making a film was expensive, and taking a photo was still considered more mechanical than artistic. This lack of value allowed women to explore both practices without any fear of retaliation from the institutional space. Similarly, performance allowed them to consider themselves artists wherever or not they were included in the club (i.e. inside the gallery space). You could perform in the middle of the street, and your action would be valid all the same, your work would still be viewed as art.

This particular point leads me to the second question I posed: wherein lies the importance of the white cube? Many might know the answer. After all, it is not a coincidence that London's gallery White Cube has that particular name. But for those who do not, I invite you to perform an experiment. Next time you go to a museum or gallery, notice the way the paintings are displayed. If you go to the National Gallery in London or the Louvre in Paris, the rooms where the artworks are hanged have multiple colors, gilded frames, painted

ceilings or even wallpaper.

On the contrary, if you go to more contemporary galleries and museums such as the Tate Modern in London or Moma in New York, the walls, ceilings and floors are white. Have you ever wondered why that is so? Why do contemporary art institutions resemble hospitals more than the palaces that used to display artists before?

The answer goes back to the end of the 19th century. In 1883, a rebellious artist named James Abbott McNeill Whistler wanted to challenge London's society by displaying a group of white paintings, in white frames inside a room with white walls. He wanted to create a strange and discomfoting experience for the viewers, hanging the pictures so far apart that produced the feeling of being inside an almost empty space.

Without intending to do so, he created a new way of displaying art. His cold and sterile space became the symbol of the aesthetics of bourgeoisie. One that rejected the regal aesthetic and consolidated a new artistic elite. After all, just as Whistler expected in his exhibition, the modern art world would exclude the general public that did not understand it, art was now only for his exclusive group of Chelsea's friends.

It was not only the absence of colour but the empty space that became a banner of this new way of thinking. Modernism's white cube was structured through Yves Klein's voids, Rauchenberg's white canvas and Le Corbusier's minimalist white architecture, among others.

What was revolutionary at the end of the 19th century is now mainstream in this industry. The concept of the white room, clean and almost empty, with individually lit artworks, is the way most galleries and modern museums are now organised. Similarly, this initial rejection of the general public is still quite prevalent in most contemporary art exhibitions. It is undeniable that most people find it quite challenging to understand what contemporary artists are making. This is why in 1976, Brian O'Doherty, in his article "Inside the White Cube", coined the term to define not just a mode of display but the institutional space itself.

The fact that this term was coined almost a decade after Pape's performance is beside the point. For me, it is not a coincidence that instead of using a spherical shape to come out of - a structure more similar to an egg - she decided to use a cube and a white one for that matter. Pape chose a form that represents something more than the immediate allegory of birth. Her performance shows us an artist who is coming out of the institutional space, an individual that breaks the frame and frees herself from its limitations.

Therein lies her importance, for she paved the way for many other artists of Latin America to create a new aesthetic that lies beyond the constraints of the white cube.

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