

“Where am I supposed to stand?” wrote Brian O’Doherty of what a spectator must ask when inhabiting the ‘white cube’ art gallery space.

The Irish installation artist, writer and critic’s book *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* is one of the most seminal writings on the type of white-walled, artificially lit art gallery that has become commonplace from the early 20th century onwards.<sup>1</sup>

O’Doherty suggests that, in spite of its architectural implications, the white cube gallery is not a neutral space. Rather, it is a construct founded on political, economical and ideological motives; a hangover from the modernism of decades prior, from which an ornamentation and context-free venue holds art in what is supposedly its most ideal state for both viewing and purchasing.

The plain, windowless gallery space is inseparable from its intention as a place of commerce. Through the division of art from the outside world in which it was created, an object can supposedly become worthy of appreciation. The rejection of time and space can be considered less an act of preservation of the nature of the art itself, but rather one aimed at immortalising its value and desirability; art intertwined with capitalism. This concept has long been debated and seen many opponents. The emergence

of virtual gallery spaces, often designed with tools conventionally used for video games, take the discussion in a new, unforeseen direction. Dramatic shifts in the art viewing experience are occurring through technology’s embrace of fantasy, allowing for the creation of otherwise physically or financially impossible works; the establishment of new platforms prime for subversion or appropriation for artistic means; or the notion of video game structures dramatically shifting the act of viewing itself.

In this abridged version of a full-length essay published on PLAYSTYLE’s website, we highlight some of the virtual gallery spaces that boldly challenge pre-existing notions as to where and how art can exist and encourage an evolving perspective of the relationship between the digital and the physical.

<sup>1</sup> Brian O’Doherty (1976) *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*

WORLD, HARD AND COLD, Heather Flowers (2018)  
hthr.itth.io

Virtual space provides an interesting opportunity to re-consider the place of site-specific art in the gallery structure. A flexible term, site-specific art was popularised by the Californian Light & Space artist Robert Irwin and his contemporaries, who sought to challenge traditional gallery structures. This trend, which largely emerged in the 1970s, encompasses movements ranging from land to performance art, focusing on works intrinsically tied to a certain space, be it physically or conceptually.

In the case of Irwin’s works, sculpture is used to intervene in a space, heightening awareness of its imperceptible qualities. For example, *Two Running Violet V Forms* (1983) – an elevated V-shaped structure of chain-link fencing coated in translucent plastic, running between the trees of a eucalyptus grove (pictured below). Subtle contrasts and parallels are simultaneously drawn between the limitless variety of the organic treetops, the rigidity of a sculpted form and the unnatural grid formation of the human-made forest. Such an artwork naturally challenges the modernist white cube notion, in which “the work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself.”<sup>2</sup>

There is an inherent site-specific quality found in much digital artwork, with unique questions raised by that situated in virtual space. Unseen systems grounding art to a space are suddenly made visible.

Heather Flowers’ *WORLD, HARD AND COLD* (2018) is described by its creator as a downloadable museum. Viewers



are led through a sequence of architecturally spare, white-walled spaces, in which procedurally generated structures ‘grow’ with a plant-like quality (pictured reverse). A viewer interacts by navigating and observing the space, changing their perspective of the unfolding transformation if each object and observing the interaction they have with the space’s simulated lighting. The structure and colour of each sculptures varies from room to room; with timing, it is possible to climb atop them, although this does not produce a particular response.

Though aesthetically drawing on the tropes of the white cube, there are fundamental differences in intention. O’Doherty presents the white cube as a pseudo-religious venue of implied material worth: “so powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber” he suggests, “that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status.”<sup>3</sup>

*WORLD, HARD AND COLD* differs in that it is not an elitist space; in a virtual space, there exists no outside world and therefore concept of value to apply – nor any context from which the works must ‘isolate’ so as to preserve their divine status. The purpose of the white cube is brought directly into question.

The procedural forms invoke the sculptural work of Donald Judd; repeating structural ‘templates’ are reinterpreted through changing order, colour and space, creating a self-designed language of form.<sup>4</sup> However, the sculptures in Flowers’ gallery are minimalist only in appearance. Their very procedural growth and concern with the navigation of space implies a hidden complexity of designed systems, that could not exist outside of a site in the form of a game and therefore tie them inherently to their space and medium.

<sup>2</sup> O’Doherty (1976) *Inside the White Cube*, 14

<sup>3</sup> O’Doherty (1976), 14

<sup>4</sup> Hal Foster (2020) *Object Lessons in Artforum* Vol. 58, Issue 9, 137



Small stories about video games + the world

MUSEUM OF THE SAVED IMAGE, Flan Falacci (2020)  
flan.itth.io

The divergent structure of Flan Falacci’s *Museum of the Saved Image* (2018) challenges the conceptual boundary between what can be considered an ‘art game’ and a ‘game as art venue’.

Viewers explore an abstract 3D environment, in which the artist presents a curated collection of found images; screenshots, downloads and clippings, gathered together in loosely themed rooms framed as the displays of a museum or gallery. Memes and anime stills, photos of the artist’s friends and intimate screenshots of Facebook messages become re-contextualised by their presence in a gallery space; images-as-artworks imbuing the environment with a subtle narrative structure.

In this act of creating value for the found object, we find traits shared between Falacci’s museum and the white cube. O’Doherty said of the gallery phenomenon that “things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. Indeed, the object frequently becomes the medium through which these ideas



are manifested and proffered for discussion.”<sup>5</sup> However, *Museum of the Saved Image*’s architecture and environmental design could not set it further from the modernist gallery ideal. Vivid, unique ornamentation is spread through each virtual room. The spaces are often sculptural, and the museum itself satires the gallery-going experience with fantastical re-interpretations of an institution’s structural norms. Food-themed found images are displayed together in an area labelled ‘Museum Cafe’, for instance – situated on an island amidst a sprawling body of water, inhabited by colossal, cat-like icons.

These transgressions of the ‘laws’ of the white cube show a virtual gallery making effective use of the traits of its medium. A particular concern with storytelling and spatial intervention arises naturally in the re-purposed structure of the explorative video game, making the act of moving through space as visible and valuable as that which is considered as art.

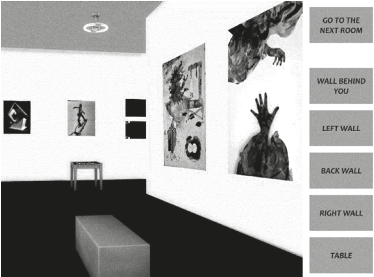
<sup>5</sup> O’Doherty (1976) *Inside the White Cube*, 14

HANDS IN THE DIGIT(AL) AGE, Big Rat Studio (2020)  
@bigrat.studio

Of vital importance to recent developments in the creation of virtual gallery spaces is their implications for the distribution of power amongst the ‘classifiers’ of the art world. For the many artists and artworks for which traditional gallery and institutional structures are inaccessible – be it for reasons economic, physical or social – a viable alternative for distribution has emerged in the form of accessible game development tools and techniques. Experimentation in this area has been accelerated by the impact of lockdown policies imposed during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw the birth of practices centering on virtual space.

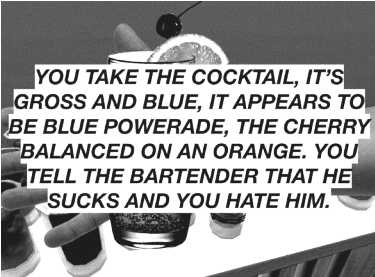
Molly Stredwick and Elliot Martin’s Big Rat Studio emerged in this moment, specialising in creating digital exhibitions that seek to democratise the viewing

and sharing of art. Their work effectively calls into nature the experience of art-viewing itself, whilst subverting the visual and structural language of video games to create embedded narratives. In online-only show *HANDS IN THE DIGIT(AL) AGE* (2020), digitised versions of physical art are placed within curated virtual environments designed in Maxis’ *The Sims 4*



(2014) – a unique case of pre-existing commercial game spaces being re-interpreted as space-making tools. Each exhibition is in fact a series of still images, arranged using Google Slides with navigational buttons to give the viewer a sense of control as they move between rooms.

Stredwick cites the law professor Julie E. Cohen’s writings on cyberspace<sup>6</sup>



as informing of the studio’s practice. She elaborates: “The galleries we make can be simultaneously continuous (the gallery is on a laptop in their room) and discontinuous (the gallery itself bears no relation to their room).” Suggested is the unique quality of virtual space as a tool for introspection. The studio use writing and sound design to make direct reference to aspects such as venue costs, alcohol consumption and social encounters entrenched in the culture of the private view.

The implicit surreality of digital viewing, too, is brought into question. With humour at their core, the studio’s exhibitions are self-aware and self-deprecating, whilst still championing the prospects of an accessible new medium for sharing art.

<sup>6</sup> Julie E. Cohen (2007) *Cyberspace As/And Space*

VIDEO GAMES + THE WORLD

PLAYSTYLE explores the way we play, examining interactions that take place between video games + the world.

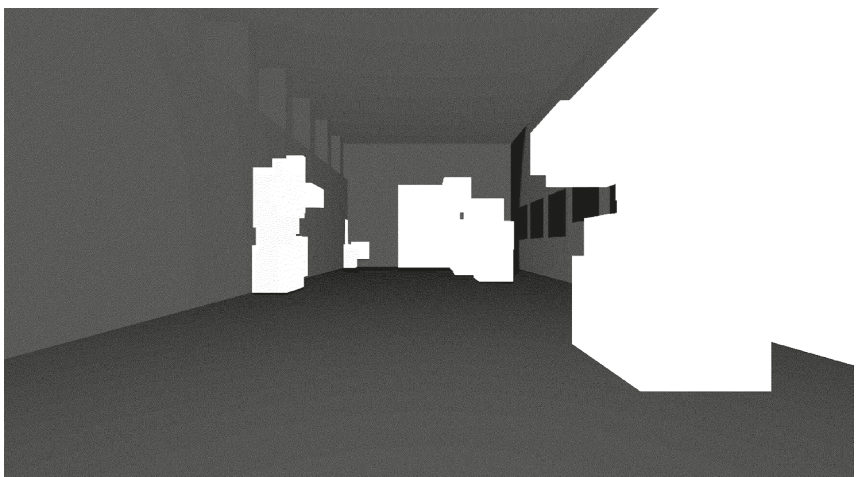
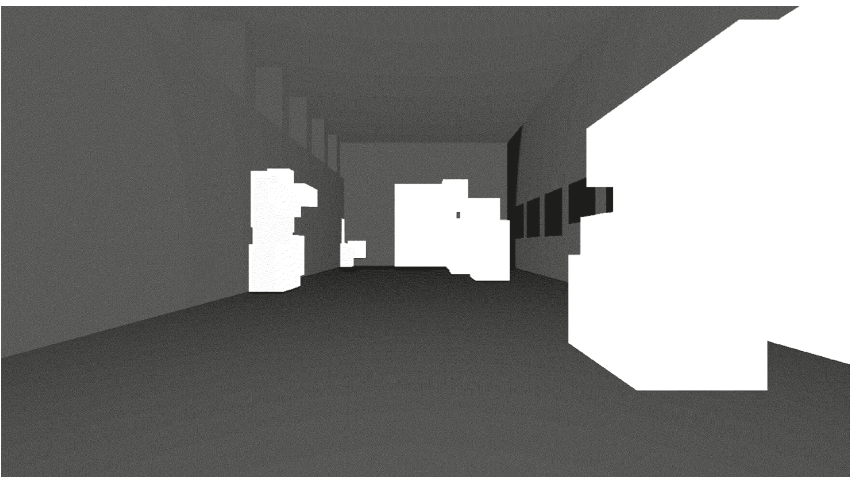
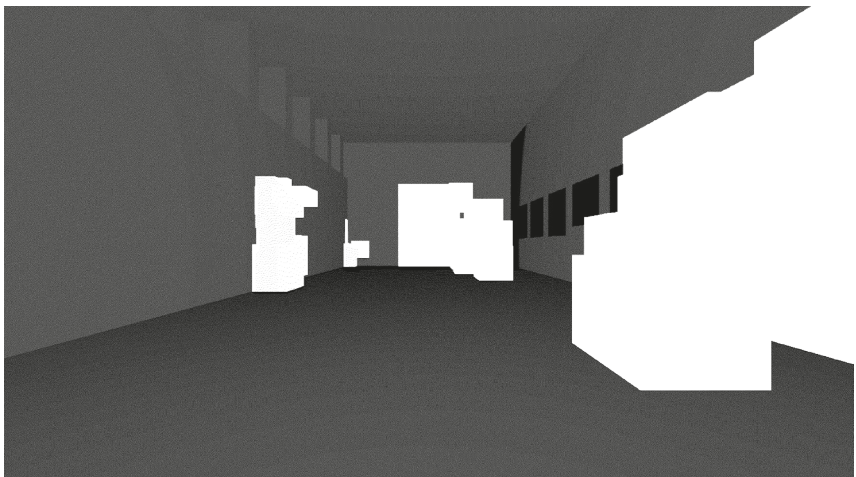
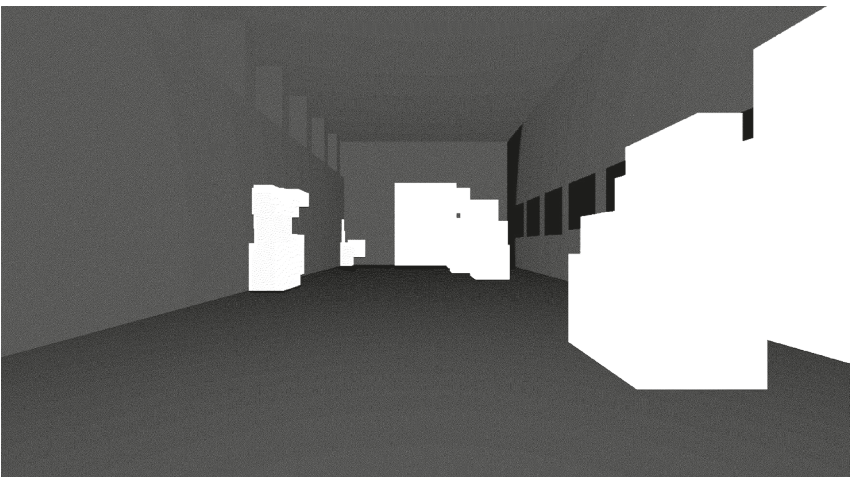
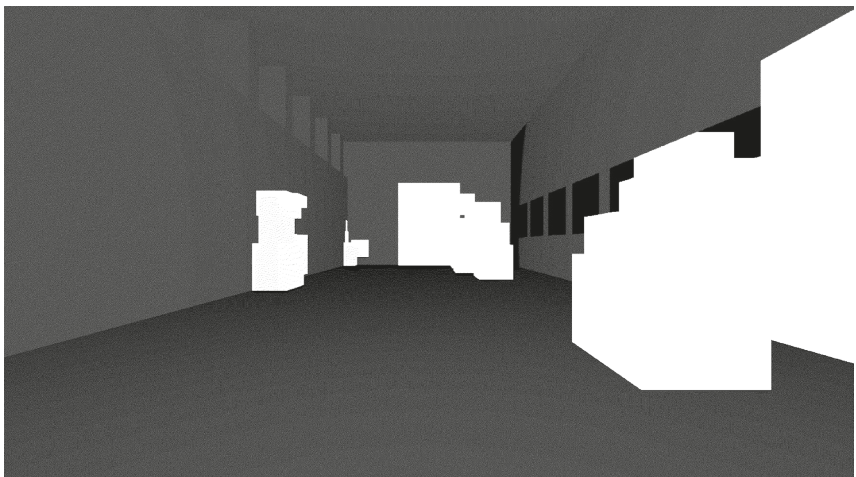
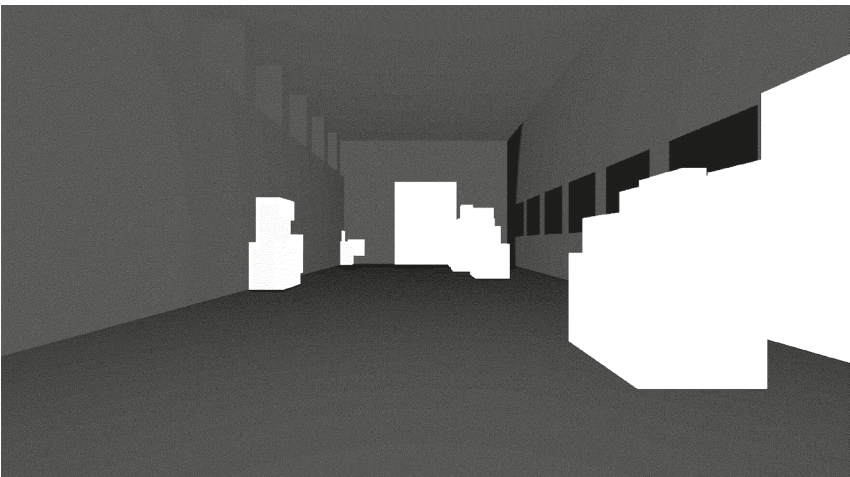
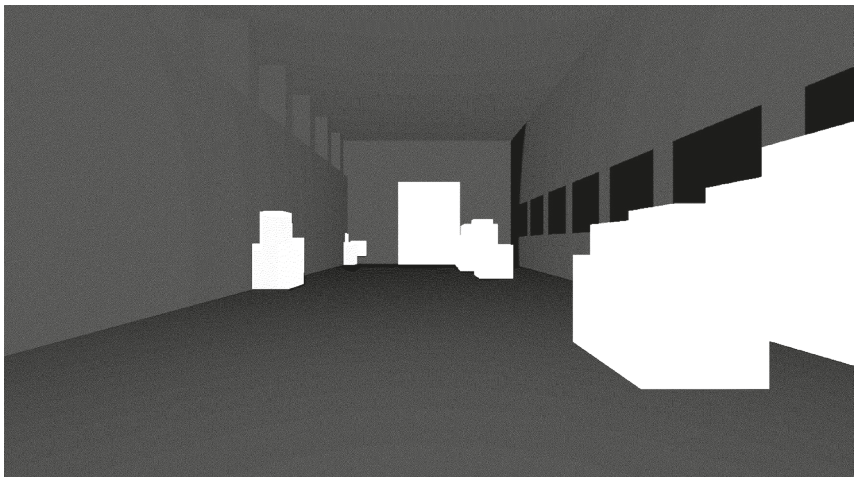
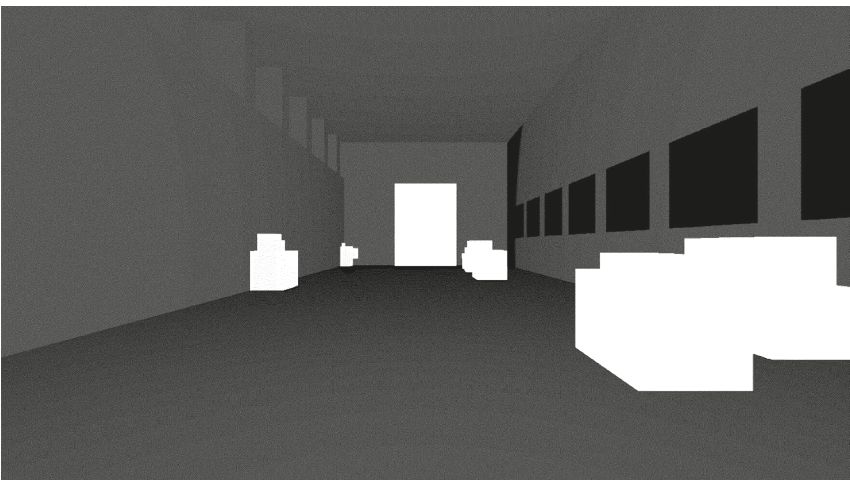
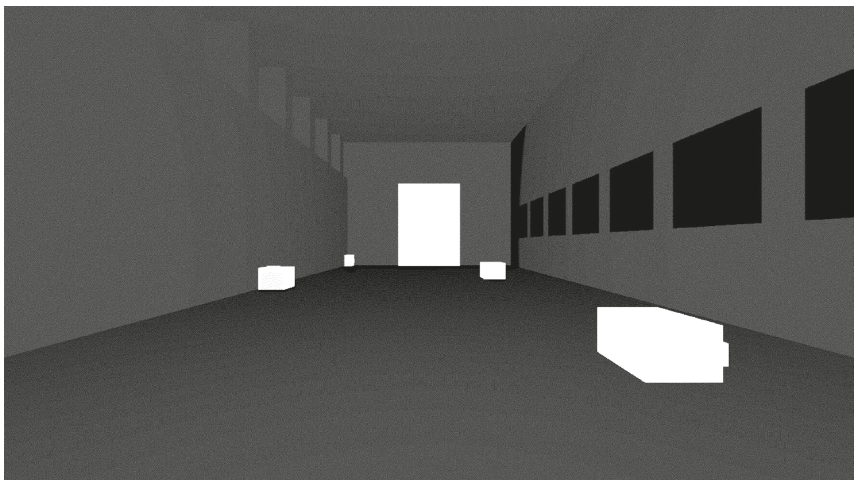
Each issue features a single story about people, projects and ideas that place the medium of games into a wider cultural or societal context. We look to give space to an evolving view of video games that challenges many of the codified ideas we have about what games are, what they can be and who they are for. Our stories place games in relation to topics such as art, design, architecture, music, fashion, food, sports and more, whilst creating space for voices often unheard within the traditional discourse that surrounds the medium.

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