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THE HEGEMONY OF TiO₂: A DISCUSSION ON THE COLOUR WHITE

A Conversation between Mark Wigley, Olafur Eliasson and Daniel Birnbaum.

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Daniel Birnbaum.: How did modern architecture become white?

Mark Wigley: Well it only became really white after the mid-century.

D.B.: It was not in Stuttgart?

M.W.: No. The polemical exhibition of modern buildings in 1927 had a kind of off-white. It takes a long time to become a white white, like that of a Richard Meier building today which is completely unlike the white of classic modern architecture. The pioneering buildings had more like an eggshell colour, so there is a way in which modern architecture whitens over time. One could argue that it does so as a reaction to the black and white photographs. The eggshell colour looks white in black and white photos and all of the other colours on the buildings, green, brown and so on, tend to go very dark. So a first result of the photographs is that you don't realise that there are many colours. One of the main points of the "White Walls" book was to say that modern architecture was not white but multi-coloured. In that system of many colours, white was playing a crucial role as a kind of reference point. So of course I was interested in the ideological construction of the idea of white as a default frame of reference. The famous black and white photographs make white famous, and then the buildings try to look more like the photographs and become really white and all the other colours are removed. So that somebody can make a building that is really super white today and people would think that it is modern.

Olafur Eliasson: You mean the photograph representing the actual spaces?

M.W.: Yes. If you look at the photographs of Weissenhofsiedlung exhibition houses they look absolutely white but Mies van der Rohe's building was a kind of pink.

D.B.: It seems to confirm further what Beatriz Colomina has argued, namely that the propaganda agenda was formulated very much through magazines, photographs and documentation? Even if it wasn't completely white it was probably perceived as white.

M.W.: Yes. The Weissenhofsiedlung reinforces Beatriz's argument because it is an exhibition, a media event, a manifesto even. There were only two polemical rules coming from its director, Mies van der Rohe: that all the roofs should be flat and all the exterior walls should be off-white, but nobody followed those rules, not even Mies. The outside of his building is pink, a pale pink and Mart Stam was purple, a very strong purple. Every colour was on display. But if you look at the classic photographs of the exhibition that show all of the architect's houses lined up, like a paramilitary army for modern architecture, which is not yet called modern architecture but soon will be, every building appears to be wearing a white uniform. In fact, they were all wearing different colours, and even the ones that were white, were really off-white. It was a slow transformation of architecture from these many colours to just white, so that now when a clients say to an architect "I want something modern" they really mean a flat roof and white walls -- like

the room that we are in now, Daniel's office, with everything painted white. But if you look back at that moment of history in the 1920's at, say, Le Corbusier's double house in the Weissenhofsiedlung, it has many different colours including white, and you look at the people's clothes and the cars of that time beside his building they look antique to us while it still looks modern. So even this old building we're in now, I don't know what year it was built, appears modern because it is painted in white. This ideology of the white has been much more successful than even the architects imagined. It has become the invisible norm. People really do think that white transcends time.

O.E.: When they think that white transcends time—what do you mean by that?

M.W.: Well for example Le Corbusier writes in 1925 that everything should be white, that all of Paris should be painted white. He says it would be a honourable police action, because white would purify the whole city, and points to the simple whitewashed forms of Mediterranean houses to say that white is coming from ancient times. He says that white is always pure, and his books are full of associations of white with honesty. The words he associates to white creates a chain: clear, pure, neutral, honest, direct, clean...

O.E.: He means that these are universal values?

M.W.: Yes. And I think that its important to remember that Le Corbusier was arguing that white is neutral in the twenties, but white was absolutely not neutral then. It was a radical statement. To make your house white in 1925 was almost an obscenity, a radical polemical act. Yet the associations were more successful than he realised. Everybody today thinks of white walls as clear, clean, pure and so on. Your doctor wears a white coat but did not originally. Originally it was a green coat. The history of the doctor's coat goes from green to white. A person wearing a white coat can be better trusted and is cleaner in our mind, than somebody without. A part of the book project was to try to show that the white wall of the building is a form of clothing, and it has the same role for the building that a white shirt has for the human body. It used to be that people would never bathe, because they imagined their body was filled with holes. So bathing was unclean. So if you would want to be clean, if you would say to somebody "I'm going to clean myself," you would go in to a room and put on a new shirt. The white surface was not simply representing cleanliness, it was the mechanism for cleaning. It is the same in the gallery. The white room of the gallery has been cleaned of the outside world.

O.E.: Is the story also that the lime had an antibacterial affect on surfaces so to clean to wounds and to keep mass graves clean, they through lime over them?

M.W.: There is the association with the cleansing white powder. In Le Corbusier's arguments for example, this is clear, he associates white and hygiene, health, purity, clear vision. What he says is that the white wall exposes everything, not just a painting, but also your clothing, your body, your lifestyle. For him, anything that is not modern would look like a "stain" against a white wall whereas in the traditional decorated interior, everything is confused and disappears. So the white wall is a mechanism of surveillance, which purifies everything in front of it, and all of this logic is very clear in the museum.

The white wall of the museum interior comes later. So if in modern architecture you have a slow evolution that eventually gets to white, the museum evolution follows behind. You are not getting a white wall in the museum until around 1939 at MoMA.

O.E.: If lime for instance had been yellow from the start, lets say florescent yellow, do you think that museums would have been yellow today?

M.W.: No, because I don't think of the use of lime against bacteria was the dominant link, I think that it that was more a metaphorical link.

O.E.: Churches were also lime, hence the colour of the churches was a bacterial thing rather than...

M.W.: It was a genuine problem and modern architects referred to the unhealthy contaminated fabric of the old city, but in the end they were much more interested in visual hygiene. Physical hygiene is used as a metaphor for the all important visual hygiene. So when you enter Le Corbusier's "Villa Savoye" you are immediately presented with a floating basin to wash your hands, removing the dirt of the outside world, but he sees the whole building as a mechanism of purification. So the eye is being purified. He even talks of "purifying the vision". But it is important to remember that he only ever does one house which is entirely white. It is built in 1923 but already by the time he publishes his 1925 theory which says that everything should be white, he has produced his first multi-colour buildings. He does one all white house and one all white manifesto before turning to a multi-coloured palette in which white is now one colour amongst many. He launches an elaborate theory of colour, that a blue wall recedes and a green wall comes forward, and so on. Colour is a spatial instrument and the white wall is the reference point for the other colours, neither moving forward or back.

O.E.: Facades are all white or not?

M.W.: Not all of them. In "Villa Savoye", the facade in the middle plane is a pinkish white eggshell below is a deep green, and above is a light pink and inside many colours. So modern architecture was not white, but it looks white and there were arguments made for white. In the same way, the first modern museum walls were beige not white. Everything we say about white today was said of beige then. And they were right, because the scientists told us last year that the colour of the cosmos is beige. At first they miscalculated and said it is blue, if you were to look at it from a maximum distance away, just look at the whole thing you would get a blue colour. Now they say its really beige.

O.E.: What was the mistake?

M.W.: Some miscalculation! (laughter)

D.B.: The artwork was a latecomer, a late arrival to the game because it's only I think starting in the 60's and 70's that galleries get the shade that they now have. Walls are white, floors are grey, light comes from above.... the white cube.

M.W.: The book didn't talk about the white cube gallery because it was talking about the moment before that, the pre-history. More recently I have been returning to the subject of the gallery. I think that the history of the white wall in the museum or galleries space is very interesting but I am interested in it only because of the arrival of black, the new importance of the black wall. So I have done now another research, which is on the black wall.

D.B. : What is the importance of the black wall?

M.W.: Well there is a parallel history of the rise of the black wall and the "black box." Thinking about the role of the black box took me back into the whole white wall puzzle. So now I am very interested in the black and the white in the gallery space.

OE.: I just did a black box and I'm doing another one most likely in the show that I am preparing right now. There are several white elements, and this is a very big space and there is a smaller space next door, and that might just be a completely black box. I don't know if I might introduce some sort of lighting system before you go in there, so what you see in the black box is maybe something afterimage activity but also this sense of physicality. This is really not main interest, but of course in the white light you would tend to have a body. If you have a very bright light your physicality or the verticality of the body standing on the ground is destabilised because you don't have a very defined shadow, you tend to look rather flat and your sense of depth disappears. I think my main interest and what I want to ask you about is the hierarchy of whiteness, the

disappearance of nuances and the creation of white as a universal value that could be interesting to deconstruct.

M.W.: I agree. Who made that project in the “Museum as Muse” exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art? Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, right, with their “MoMA Whites.” They went into the archives of the museum and found all the different white paints chosen by the different curators, because each has had a different idea of what the perfect white is. It might be interesting for you, because you could even see whether they are hot or cold shades of white. The exhibition was a series of pots of the different whites. And for each of the curators this is the only white they used, but also for each of them this white is neutral. So the white wall is at once super generic and super specific, but its ideology is always of the generic. So the ideology of the white wall is to be the wall that has yet to be marked. In two senses: yet to receive a line, a work, or a shadow, but also yet to mark itself. It refuses to make a statement. It is what a wall would be if it didn’t say anything. It’s passive, quiet and therefore endlessly generous: It can receive anything, except its own colour, which would disappear, but it claims not to be a colour. It claims to be what comes before colour. So this is a very very strong ideology, really it’s a kind of theology and so what happened in the adoption of this particular surface as the default setting for the experience of art is that one particular experience, the white room, has been defined as a non - experience. As not being an experience, as being that which comes before experience, and therefore that which generously allow any experience, any work of art to be exposed. That’s why of course I am interested in the black box, equally, because the black box has exactly the same function relative to so called new media. There is a problem because if you bring a black box into a white box, which is what happens in every museum displaying contemporary work, is that the supposed neutrality of the white wall disappears, because the black box makes the white seem much whiter. This is one of the great paradoxes of white. I was always fascinated in this use of blue to increase the whiteness in Mediterranean houses or laundry detergents. It goes again against the ideology, it means there is something you can add to the white, that can make the white even whiter, but what makes it more white is not white, but blue. So somehow the blue is the master colour, the colour that is able to enhance the effect of that which supposedly comes before colour. I think there is something about blue that could be explored, why the cellphone screen is blue when nothing is happening, why Microsoft windows is blue, why IBM is blue... Blue as the new white, the new default. Not sky blue but blue blue. I think it has required a very long history and a lot of training and education to make the white wall invisible to give its quality. I was for example in the museum last week in Porto by Alvaro Siza, and in the one of the endless rooms in which every wall is white the gallery floor was also white. In that gallery hung a series of large paintings without frames, orange shapes against a white background. To be on a floor that was also white, to be really swimming in white, was, like you would say, a physical experience, so this supposedly innocent, modest, recessive white wall turns into a radical destabilizing act. If we were to paint the floor of this office white, everybody would come in here and say: “What are you doing, what are you doing?” But nobody would talk about your walls or ceiling, or our faces.

D.B.: If somebody would realize that the presumed neutrality is actually doing something to us all.

M.W.: Yes, and I think the explanation for it is that one of the default rules of the museum is that anything your body touches is not white; the floor, the furniture, the door, door handles, tape players, etc. So you have a system and we are absorbed into that system. So when we go to a museum, people have no interest in the floor.

O.E.: You can of course project light on a seemingly white wall and most museums do have lighting systems and there is a range of lighting products. They vary from halogen, tungsten through the whole spectrum of whites, which has consequences and regulates all activity in the spaces.

M.W.: It is very interesting, you could make a book about this, a book just on white light, and then exhibit many whites.

O.E: Maybe one could do a book of whites where the colour of the paper varies and you get a lamp with the book in order to see them.

But just to resurrect the physical potential of this. If one succeeds telling people that our notion of white, white light is a construction and not as something that we take for granted as being natural. One can also allow for the people actually introducing some reality to the total light with the white colour on the wall. One could imagine a situation in which people choose which white, out of the hierarchy of whites, and say I like this pastel, if you call it that, of all of the pastel shades of the different whites. The question is, if this is not already happening by the nature of the way we see things, we probably don't see the same white anyway, which is another discussion.

How would you imagine this kind of criticism being introduced to architecture? How does one allow for the relativity of colour or how does one allow for the use or understanding of the way we engage with a white or a space or the two together is not interpreted as being natural?

M.W.: I don't know the answer, but my feeling is that the people who really care about this are the curators. If you challenge the, let's say ideology of the pure white, the people who get angry, are not the visitors to the gallery, but the people who run the galleries. It is deeply threatening to them. For example, a very standard position for curators of exhibitions is to be angry with architecture. It's really normal, and basically the rules are very clear, if you are a bad architect you don't challenge the curator, and the curators feel free to exhibit in an "empty" box, it's alright. If you are a good architect you challenge the curator, and actually you force the curator to produce new forms of exhibition.

So the people who protect the white, who are nervous defenders of this ideology of the white, are the curators. They don't want the public to think of them, as manipulating every perception. They want to believe the room is empty, innocent of the artwork that enters and the experience of that work. But in covering the walls with white they are basically painting, producing an art work, and that you are trying to see a Picasso, but you have to see the Picasso on the top of a painting by a curator. If we label the artwork 'Picasso 1933', with very precise about the size, material and ownership, 'Crayon on Canvas, Property of whoever', you should also have a label on the wall which says 'White number 326, choice of Joseph Watson, Curator, Originally trained in wherever.' But if you start to highlight the intrusive controlling activity, the architecture provided by the museum curators, they get upset. Especially the politically savvy ones, who are eloquent about the social construction of art, they hate to see themselves in the same way that they see others. Yet to the so-called public perfectly understands that there are many whites. For example there is used to be in New Zealand an advertisement for different soap powders, and two women are sitting and watching a game of cricket, and one says "which one is your Johnny?", and the other woman says "he is the one in white", and the other woman says "but they are all...", and she is about to say "they are all in white", but then you see the boys, and you see one white is like super white. So I think everybody knows that there are many whites. It's the curators who are most nervous about losing the myth. One could even imagine an exhibition in which the visitor chooses the white to go with the painting. I am sure you are right that the people would be very precise. When people buy a plasma TV they have to adjust the blacks and the whites and there is quite a range. I think we live in the society in which people are becoming more and more used to colour depth with their computers, every digital camera has an adjustment for the white balance. But curators imagine the visitor is innocent.

D.B: It's interesting, because the curators should and would be very sensitive to the whole discussion of the ideology. Since it really is an ongoing discussion, since that book on the white cube, and the hundreds of articles that it lead to, and the fact that many people have been talking about the necessity of breaking out of the institution and to do art in other spaces and other contexts. The unwillingness to slightly alter that space is the eternal paradox.

M.W.: Yes. I have a theory that the amount of white is increasing exponentially in the world. It is not just in the museum. White was very very late in arriving in the museum and was very late to become this quite bright white that you get now. The mythology of health, hygiene, purification, conspired to give the white this special quality. But modern architecture itself isn't white for

decades. Institutions are not believing the story until recently but now are devoted to it. For example, what you call the relativity of the white is more controversial now than it would have been in the 20's or 30's. When the The Museum of Modern Art opened, its walls were beige colour and it 's fabric on the walls, beige cloth. As you know, the first art museums had deep red, deep green and deep blue walls of fabrics. So the white wall is such a recent invention and I think it continues to evolve. The black box is not a threat to the evolution, but has become part of that evolution.

D.B.: So it seems to be an accomplice?

M.W.: Yes.

D.B.: So the two are transcendental colours, or non colours?

M.W.: The black wall also has a history and I have been thinking about some aspects of it.

O.E.: How does one succeed in handing down the tools with which a person can introduce the relativity? What are the mechanisms with which we introduce the tools to the subject, so they can, in the interest of some, sort of self reflectivity deconstruct their own experiences?

M.W.: I don't know. I only know that in everybody's domestic situation they are making decisions about white. So for each person there a history of selecting the right white. Any woman is an expert on different whites.

O.E.: You said women?

M.W.: Yes. Men more and more. A woman can be very precise. A shirt is easily too white or not white enough. Remember also that we live in the age of sunglasses, an age in which each person gets to control the brightness level and the reason that modern architecture was not the whitest white was partly because such a brightness was understood to be unhealthy, that you would be blinded by it. In the 18th and 19th century there were laws in many cities against the use of white, because of a fear of blindness. We have a completely different optical regime now. Probably if you lift somebody out of 1905, and drop them inside a Richard Meier building, they would be physically overcome with the brightness of the room even if it's just neon lighting on plaster or enamelled wall panels. It is really an evolution. Likewise, there are many blacks, as any clothing maker or shopper knows, and our use of them keeps shifting. All this just to say that I think that there is an everyday cultural expertise with white and black that could be reactivated inside the museum as a critical instrument. To not do so is to be imprisoned within a dull story.