

# **company**

## **Henry Babbage**

*What are the operative functions of the architecture in an art gallery? How can a gallery acknowledge its prevailing situation as a space constructed to show artworks?*

Gallery spaces do not always begin as gallery spaces. In the case of The Physics Room, the third floor of 209 Tuam Street was a nascent or potential gallery space. For the exhibition *company*, The Physics Room delayed establishing a layout and refurbishment at the request of Michael Parr and Blaine Western so that the artists could stage an opportunistic project outside of a regular exhibition setting.

Prioritising a process-based approach to spatial configuration and the use of building materials provided by The Physics Room, the artists undertook a daily process of reconfiguring the walls on the third floor. The provisional installations addressed a temporal experience of the gallery, specific and contingent on the time of visiting. The walls that were installed by the artists enacted a new space with each daily proposition and consisted of the dimensions produced by various considerations with emphases on the gallery context.

The material gesture of rearranging the walls of the gallery – a customary but usually invisible action for such a space – stages the viewer's social and intersubjective relations to the gallery visit itself. The viewer is not presented with an object, but rather a matter of relationships between the gallery and themselves as audience (defined by material and spatial affect), as tests of an interior composition in which to facilitate artworks.

Building the walls of a gallery involves an intersection of manual labour and expertise. Exhibition designer and audience are attached via the architectural frame of the gallery space. When artists design the space of a gallery, they control the context in which an artwork can be experienced. The conflation of the art installation with the interior structure of the building (such as the gallery walls) concerns the notion of utility in relation to artistic labour. In this instance the walls were constructed during the day and visitors to the gallery could view Parr and Western physically assembling and collapsing walls with the materials and tools on hand. The physical, manual labour of the artists resembled the work of the builder or technician. However, the manual labour could be simultaneously defined as intellectual labour – completed by the same

subjects who made the decisions that contributed to the artistic content. Immaterial labour describes a subject responsible for his/her own command, who combines labour and creativity, conception and execution. The manual labour that produces *company* is a procedure integrated in the artwork. The physical facet of *company* began with the purchase and acquisition of materials – 30 sheets of 9mm MDF, 5 sheets of 18mm MDF and 250 metres of 90x45mm framing – materials to be reused and absorbed into the final refurbishment. The artwork was then generated from the same resources and the artists provided part of the manual labour for the walls: walls that will eventually create the interior layout of The Physics Room after its refurbishment.

This exhibition strategy is complicated by the fleeting nature of each display. If an exhibition involves a final and immobile platform for viewing, then this continual negotiation of the space is conditional and open-ended. The viewer in this case, who has been connected with the artwork via the gallery, is presented on their arrival with only the material props that initiate the viewing process that is routine in a gallery visit. Working within a liminal space, Parr and Western fold the act of exhibiting into mediation, involving themselves in the manipulation of a pre-gallery space. The rhythm of a given composition surrounds the viewer – there is no singular objectified work of art. Each new composition alters the physical encounter that the viewer experiences within the pre-gallery space – the very space that will frame and determine an artwork's existence. The multiplicities of spatial relations are imbued with an expectation of display, and the strategies implemented in each layout determine how visitors will understand and proceed through the space.

The continuous labour and regeneration of the artwork over the exhibition dissolves any separation between the installation of the artwork; the exhibition of the artwork; and the de-installation of the artwork. Parr and Western's continuous construction and deconstruction of walls as inchoate installations in a pre-gallery space refuse the finality usually required of artworks for a static exhibition. Every day of the project offers a different temporary position for this artwork to occupy prior to the establishment of the symbolic gallery space - the discrepancy between the pre-gallery and the space yet to become - and The Physics Room gallery, is a relationship generated by the artwork which occupies the middle ground. The artwork gestures towards a signification of the future space and, in the intermediary stage before The Physics Room's refurbishment, the artwork mediates the possibilities of the space.

In this case, the 'site' of the gallery space is defined by the physical location and social conditions of the institutional frame; this discursive relationship is a manifold engagement with site. Artworks displayed at The Physics Room are subject to the images, designs, social relations, economic factors, political conditions and institutional regulations that are projected as the totalising identity of the gallery. Artworks are equally subject to the architecture and physical identity of the space: the third floor and the building itself. The building is on the boundary of the cordon,

otherwise known as the 'Red Zone' in Christchurch, and its ability to function is dependent on a ruling of safety in order to officially reopen. Likewise, the artwork produced by Parr and Western is dependent on invisible factors; the forces acting on the gallery that determine whether it can operate.

The temporary graphic identity for The Physics Room was designed by Matt Galloway and expresses the very situation the gallery finds itself in currently. The identity is composed of a makeshift typeface, created by manually altering the letterforms to create a geometric version of Giambattista Bodoni's serif typeface, Bodoni. The angular forms are composed of vectors in Adobe Illustrator, rather than a typeface creation programme. As a result, the singular letters were assembled like individual images to produce each word in the public notice posters that were released on each day of the *company* exhibition. The posters detail the interventions and movements made in The Physics Room space. Mirroring the movements in the building, the typeface was also altered and adjusted each day to produce a multifaceted model of delivery in the design of each poster. The angular Bodoni was a permanently unfixed typeface, a design that acted as a reflection of the transitional state of The Physics Room as it relocated its gallery space.

An identity is a statement of distinction between that and the other. Paradoxically though, an identity is also defined in relation to other similar identities – for instance, within the larger category of art gallery identity. Design, in the case of a new identity, perhaps aims to propose new orders and variations. In this sense, graphic design challenges a singular well-established representation of The Physics Room by foregrounding each elaboration of its design.

The space that presents artwork is a stage for particular strategies of display and installation; the discursive modes by which art engages with an audience. In the case of *company*, Parr and Western inhabit the third floor of 209 Tuam Street prior to its signification as the new gallery space of The Physics Room. Parr and Western mediate the pre-gallery space, exploring the discursive and material limitations of the hypothetical site. The pre-gallery space facilitated speculation in the spatial configurations of Parr and Western, in anticipation of the staging of the symbolic white cube. The exhibition operates outside of the formality of a finished gallery space. Instead, it engages in a discourse free of the mediating setting of the symbolic white cube. In *company*, the artists and The Physics Room collaborate by jointly generating an exhibition and jointly investigating the identity of the gallery.

Through joint roles, the traditional organisational logic of an exhibition is challenged to include and consider the input of both parties in aspects of each other's processes and methodologies. The labour that will eventually produce the refurbishment of The Physics Room is a combination of the labour of Parr and Western and the labour of the staff, the Board of The Physics Room and others. Evidently, this labour to produce the

interior space of the gallery – its physical identity – is bound in the transaction of exchange, deployment, and representational functions. The artists traversed the exhibition context and inscribed their presence in the administrative, operational and structural systems of The Physics Room.

Parr and Western’s continuous, discursive project is altered daily, demonstrating not one response to site but a multiplicity of transitional foci, “... the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004, p.29.