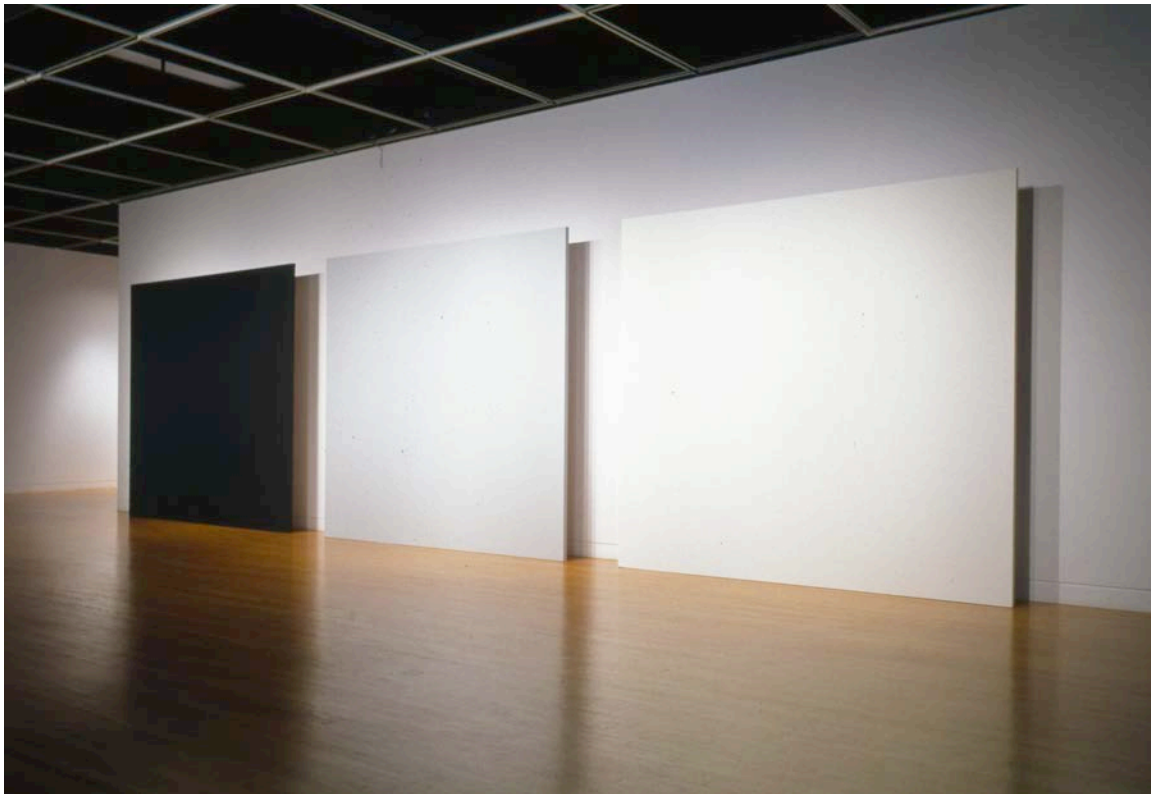


**BLACK, GREY, WHITE AND THE PLAY BETWEEN SPACES
REFLECTIONS ON CLAUDE TOUSIGNANT'S PRACTICE AND THE WHITE
CUBE**

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Claude Tousignant, *Codicille*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Litherland.

In a commentary made to curator Danielle Corbeil sometime in 1973, Claude Tousignant spoke of a sculpture project based in spatial immateriality. Using only sound as a medium, space would be determined (and experienced by the visitor)

by the sound's distribution according to a preset pattern.¹ Such a proposition by an artist with whom we associate the very visible materiality of picture plane, colour and volume seems strikingly out of place in the development of his practice. Indeed, it can be read with a certain amount of irony, given how much has been said and written (by the artist himself as well) about the objecthood of painting in relation to his work; and given the artist's own repeatedly asserted efforts to make that objecthood ever more real. Yet, nine years later, at the time of his exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, curator Normand Thériault notes that the artist is now at the experimental stage of the "sound" sculpture project announced in 1973.²

The singular nature of these enquiries into the question of space, and Tousignant's sustained interest in them, are of particular interest to a curator working with contemporary art today.³ They are a point of departure for a critical questioning of the role of the gallery space: the relevance of the white cube and of the silent and subversive presence of its whiteness. This reflection is being articulated in the midst of Claude Tousignant's markedly *spatial* abstractions that are presented in the current exhibition in the form of three "paintings" and one "sculpture." Works, we can all agree, whose stature and evocation of the sublime are the supreme embodiment of the white cube. What is attractive to a contemporary curator in Tousignant's early "sound" project is how prescient it appears to be in light of the proliferation of sound-based artistic practices today. In recent years, the presentation of such work, together with projection-based art, has necessitated a rethinking and reconfiguration of the white cube. It is this context that compels one to look more closely at how Tousignant's work functions as a whole in an exhibition space, and the nature of that space.

This being said, my desire is neither to try to redefine his work in relation to such practices, nor to fetishize a moment in his career as one that marks a 'before' and an 'after' in his development – making it a linchpin of the exhibition

and this essay.⁴ Nevertheless, however uncharacteristic is the use of sound as a sculptural element for Tousignant, the motivation governing the project is very much in keeping with a concern for deep or three-dimensional space and im/materiality that has accompanied his artmaking from its early years. The broad parameters of this concern are the filter through which the current work is considered and the issues of the exhibition space envisaged.

The Space Within

I will use Tousignant's 1982 exhibition *Sculptures* at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as a focal point for my discussion of the exploration of three-dimensional space and the significance of the deployment of his practice into open space – away from the wall so to speak. This presentation, not so much of his work but of his *practice*, is significant in more than one respect. Although Tousignant had been, and was at the time, the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, the approach followed was always the conventional one. Recent work was presented as the culmination of his chronological development (with the inevitable inscription within Montreal's *plasticien* movement), accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the work displayed. Without wanting to dispute the contribution made by such curatorial endeavors, Normand Thériault's exhibition adopted a different approach, one that sought to problematize Tousignant's practice within a critical questioning of the language of art itself: "It should be understood from the outset that this is not simply an art exhibition, but an exhibition *about art!* [...] It is a discourse about the language of art. Not about one of its disciplines."⁵ What Thériault is doing – and what demarcates this exhibition from the usual one-person presentation at the time – is ascribing contextual considerations to his project. He asks the visitor not just to stop at the work but to consider it within the larger framework of the gallery itself: "Everywhere then: by the rooms, by the walls, by the space, by the objects, it is a language that asserts itself ..."⁶ And so the "place" of space is made significant and "visible."

This makes sense in relation to Tousseignant's work and practice because it attempts for the first time to position it within the parameters of its spatiality; by doing so it brings to the forefront a fundamental aspect of his work. Indeed, the show titled *Sculptures* included a series of small sculptures – or more accurately constructions – done between 1959 and 1961. It also presented a large number of monochrome paintings beginning with the important *Monochrome orangé* of 1956 and moving on to large scale abstractions of the 70s and early 80s. Moreover, Tousseignant was also given the opportunity to create two large temporary environments – simply named *419* and *420* after the number of the rooms he transformed with his immense constructed and painted planes. Clearly then, the visitor was led to experience his painting(s) no longer as simple planes on a wall but in relation to the open space and to occupy it in various ways that called upon complex involvement of the body. Conversely the sculptures could no longer be read as belonging to a separate “discipline.” In fact, although Tousseignant is perfectly comfortable calling himself a painter, and at times a sculptor, he actually defies those two categories, straddles them, and, in a very contemporary way, renders them unstable.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the integration of the surrounding space in Tousseignant's practice; that is, of work clearly experienced by the visitor as *existing* in space: for example, from the 1970s he would produce maquettes – most of which were not realized – for environmental works in which he positioned series of large paintings at various angles in the open space, thus creating complex “immersive” environments for the visitor.⁷ Let us go back to the year 1959 and the famous group exhibition *Art abstrait* at the Montreal School of Fine Arts. Tousseignant presented *Verticales jaunes* (1958). It was an imposing painting (at 244 x 117 cm it towered over all the other works), which he requested not be hung *off* the floor but rather rest *on* it (a request that met with a categorical refusal from the organizers). Both the size of the work and its desired mode of presentation were ways for Tousseignant to make painting an autonomous object.

Already, in the late 50s, and unlike his colleague Molinari who believed that it should all take place within the frame of the painting, Tousignant was envisaging painting that was part and parcel of the surrounding space. Certainly painting that appeared as wide expanses of color (as *Verticales jaunes* did) and was positioned on the floor represented a serious attempt at rendering the work autonomous, at objectifying it.

Painting as object, however, did not signify the search for a decontextualized autonomy. Tousignant and his colleagues were very much concerned at the time with cutting all ties with the external world, particularly from the history of painting and its long and complex relationship with nature. But this did not include the world of the exhibition context – of floor, wall, ceiling. In fact Tousignant became concerned with that context and he would be the only one of the *Art abstrait* group to push his painting so resolutely “off the wall” and into its immediate environment, thus making its constitutive elements a part of his work.

Although one cannot claim that the series of sculptures to which he devoted himself between 1959 and 1961 is conceived with the aim of producing “environmental” work, in retrospect there is a strong architectural dimension to them that points toward a deployment of the pictorial into real space that would be fully realized some years later. The much celebrated and powerful series of targets produced in the 1960s and 1970s that explored, in ever more subtle ways, the tension between form and format, and the role of colour in inflecting that tension (*Transformateurs chromatiques*, *Gongs*, *Accélérateurs chromatiques*, *Quadriptyques* and *Diptyques*) are significant in relation to the role of contextual elements in this discussion. Significant in the way the circular format, repeated in its concentric circles, encounters the surrounding wall, rendering it awkwardly present, forcing the viewer’s gaze out of the circle and back, in an in-and-out movement.

But most revealing is the effect that seeing and experiencing Barnett Newman's *Here II* (1965) would have on his practice. Tousignant declared to Thériault in 1981 that "... I understood that the opening it offered was an opening into sculpture itself. This work defines the relationships *between* certain objects and space rather than presenting an object *in* space ... It shows us that an object exists through the space that contains it."⁸ And, he could have added, allows the visitor to experience the work *through* the space. The "Newman effect" as it could be called, was to transform his work in subtle but resolute ways. When Tousignant says it gave him a "new notion of sculpture"⁹ it speaks to much more than sculpture as a separate category. It deals with spatiality itself in artmaking and in relation to his project of painting as object. And so in the 1980s he began producing large paintings whose depth created a thickness so present that they appeared to be pushing themselves *out* of the wall (they were shown for the first time in *Sculptures* at the MMFA in 1982). He also installed works away from the wall by means of large right angle brackets, and reintroduced the practice of resting the canvas on the floor.

Tousignant's desire to articulate painting through space by a *total* participation and transformation of the exhibiting area and its constituting elements (wall, ceiling, floor, lighting) was finally concretized in his show at the MMFA in 1982. Austere, categorical, uncompromising and "at the limit of" (in that they were both entirely painting *and* sculpture), the environments *419* and *420* are, as Thériault states, "the room".¹⁰ In *420* two large thick painted constructions are placed on the floor with two others of the same size placed upright at right angles. In *419* a large, thick, standing painted construction cuts across the room relating to another triangular expanse – this one painted directly on the wall. In both environments it is not possible to assume a vantage point for viewing and so the work can only *be* – and partially so – in the succession of viewing points one adopts. In this respect, his endeavours relate in many ways to the viewing conditions of Minimalism and of such artists as Robert Morris, whose early

“sculptures” elicited this kind of corporeal, multi-viewed experience from the visitor.

Ironically, colour has not been discussed here – colour that is so central to Tousignant’s practice. But it is very much there, inextricable from his spatial explorations, traversing his every work in both its materiality and immateriality. In *3 paintings, 1 sculpture, 3 spaces* white and black are at play in a deceptively complex fashion. These works rhetorically ask the visitor: “what and where are white and black?” Nothing could be a better foil for opening a discussion on the *white cube*.

The Space Without

When I rather simplistically proposed to Claude Tousignant in a conversation that these black and white paintings and one white sculpture were about presence and absence, fullness and void (an idea that would have afforded me neat discourse about the white cube!) he immediately dismissed my suggestion and made it clear that such notions were the furthest from his intentions. In fact, as he gently pointed out, it could not be, because the paintings are not really *black* and *white* or *black* or *white* but a whole range of subtle variations of those two colors. As for the white modular sculpture, the various inflections of light create delicate changes to its whiteness. In fact, Tousignant’s assertion disallowing a simplistic binary plunge into whiteness and blackness metaphorically points to the complexities that inhabit the white cube, leading to a much more productive discussion of its possibilities.

Tousignant’s exhibition, spare and simple in its propositions, creates “prismatic” viewing conditions: at every turn transformations of a visual, spatial, and corporeal nature take place. What is happening in the Gallery is, in essence, a modernist act in the sense that the work is reflexive in the questions it asks about its own materiality and viewing conditions. This self-reflexivity was

announced by Marcel Duchamp before the Second World War and carried through by the avant garde in the 60s and 70s. In this context the white cube became an important focus or foil for these enquiries and often an active participant in both its presence, (as was the case for Minimalism and Conceptual Art), and in its absence, (as was the case for Land Art). In the 80s the much publicized foregrounding of figuration marked a return (a regressive one for many) to the white cube as a simple presentation “salon” closely linked to the market interests of the art world. But throughout the 80s there also existed a stream of artmaking exemplified by artists such as Sherry Levine, Louise Lawler and General Idea, that critiqued the white cube through the values it reinforced in its increasingly perverse role in the commodification of the art object: authorship, connoisseurship, authenticity, originality and objecthood. Other non gallery-based groups such as the Guerilla Girls in New York, or political artists such as Hans Haacke, made it their concern, in elaborate genealogical projects and in various public campaigns, to expose the discriminatory and exclusionary nature of the white cube culture, and the powerful alliances that govern it. Such actions, however, have never succeeded in really challenging the power of the white cube. A cube which is, in many ways, at the dawn of a new millenium more present than ever in its latest and most spectacular incarnations. One only has to think of the Tate Modern in London and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.¹¹

Clearly art is presented or occurs in other places, as we are endlessly reminded: the Web, the public place and other non-gallery or museum-based locations (hotel rooms, private residences etc.) The desire to practice effectively as an artist outside the white cube is generally motivated by a desire to circumvent the constraining parameters of the gallery, whether physical or socio-political. Throughout the twentieth century numerous attempts have been made to function that way: Dada performances and concerts, Happenings, Fluxus projects, Situationist walks, Land Art, the more recent relational actions and, of course, Internet-based practices. But one knows that as soon as they reach an

identifiable critical mass the edifice of the white cube attempts to integrate them to its structures. As such, non-gallery-based relational practices become sponsored by galleries, and the same venues present exhibitions and programmes of Internet-based work. The white cube often manages to be *dans le coup* after all, even though a whole set of artistic practices are not suitable to it or claim to be.

In fact an interesting phenomenon of the last ten years is the way practices and artists move easily from one set of contextual parameters to another. They adapt themselves and their practices so that they can effectively respond or engage with the specific parameters. The Canadian collective Instant Coffee creates “convivial” environments and events in both gallery and public spaces. In Montreal Devora Neumark makes interventions that sometimes have a public space and a gallery-based component. Rirkrit Tiravanija, one of the most influential relational artists today, finds no conflict in working in both contexts. At the basis of relational aesthetics is a shift away from the utopian and more directly critical agenda of the art of the 60s and 70s, and their radical turning away from the white cube, to the proposal of provisional solutions that will enhance a relationship to an existing context.¹² The white cube, it appears, has become part of the very fabric of the art world – a kind of presence that artists and practices weave in and out of.

In the last ten years the white cube has also been challenged from within by film and projection/sound-based practices and by the use of sound in installations. It is common both in Montreal and across the contemporary art world to find oneself looking at single or multi-screen projections in a darkened exhibition space, or immersed in ambient sounds. This opening up to the cinematic in contemporary art has had such a huge impact that it is now claimed by some to be a dominant category, and one that is redefining other categories such as painting and sculpture.¹³ This transformation of the image through

projection, coupled with the invasion of the sense of hearing in the gallery space is what, in the end, has had the greatest impact on the constitution of the white cube. Its physical being has had to be reconfigured. The very whiteness of the gallery has had to be dissimulated, opacified, even erased; the artificial lighting that was meant to produce ideal viewing conditions has been replaced by a lighting emanating from the work itself and darkness is what often conditions the visitor's experience now. Expanses of space have had to be divided up into small, enclosed viewing capsules; floors and walls have had to be acoustically regulated; walls soundproofed.

What is clear is that, for a whole segment of art, the white cube has had to rethink itself in ways that are antithetical to it. Conversely, the visitor finds him or herself experiencing works in ways that no longer rely solely on the activity of looking. Because the presentation of this type of work involves expensive technology on the one hand, and extensive rebuilding on the other, only well-endowed institutions have been able to provide the proper conditions in which to experience this work. This implies, to a certain extent, that projection-based and high technology work are gallery bound in the same way that abstract practices have been inextricably tied to the white cube structure. However, it has also forced other institutions to come up with makeshift solutions somewhere between the white cube and the black or sound box. Moreover, we know that there remain all kinds of work and approaches to art (that may even be film or sound-based), that are happily, in part or in totality, framed by the white cube. Because a commitment to contemporary art is not a commitment to a specific medium but rather to criticality in all its forms, the white cube does retain viability if it positions itself as a multifaceted, multifunctional place: a kind of prism with a corresponding internal structure whose exact parameters are determined by the specificities of locality.¹⁴ It must find a *modus vivendi* that is meaningful to its locale by using the idiosyncracies of a space to respond to both local and non-local realities.

Without any doubt the white cube has been indispensable to the canonization and success of abstract practices such as Claude Tousseignant's. As far as its public framing is concerned it has been its preferred place; abstract art and the white cube have had, and continue to have, a symbiotic relationship. It is a context that elicits from the visitor a deep state of contemplation, that isolates him or her and the work from the exterior world and everyday life and that reinforces values (autonomy, authenticity, uniqueness, objecthood) which have been the subject of a sustained critique throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. But such critiques do not devalue or render obsolete abstract practices such as Claude Tousseignant's because, by their very nature they are, in fact, intimately linked to the development of the modern museum and its expanses of symmetrically deployed whiteness. In a sense it is within that whiteness that they come fully into existence. The more rigorous of these practices have always dialogued with the gallery's or museum's "whitened" space or "spatial" whiteness.¹⁵ They have given it presence and complexity and, as such, have surreptitiously undermined its claim of neutrality and invisibility. The works of Tousseignant presented in this exhibition create "prismatic" conditions which, in a dramatic way, make the constitutive elements of the gallery (its skin, so to speak) very visible. Because of the subtle passages that take place between black, white and grey, and because of the height of the works (244 cm) it is impossible not to factor the peculiarities of the Gallery's own walls, floors, ceiling and lighting sources into one's relationship with the work. And because of the way in which these four works occupy deep space and push *out* and *off* the wall, the visitor is, forcibly, made to take note of the *space* of the exhibition.

That space is a university art gallery built 13 years ago in total conformity with the dictates of the white cube and fully assuming that it is indeed the most versatile of exhibition venues. In order to bring relevance to that space and to make it a *living* one, it is, however, important at this point in the gallery's history

to turn away from this complacency and to mine the unstable nature of the ground of the white cube. It is necessary to tease out the already occupied surface of this blank slate, to consider whiteness as just another layer and to make the silence resound. Claude Tousignant's exhibition *Black, Grey, White* is such a project: a critical proposition that plays out in many registers the issues at the heart of the spatial construction of the visual.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Danielle Corbeil, "Introduction", *Claude Tousignant*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada. Exhibition circulated by the Extension Services, 1973-1974, p. 10.

2. See note 24 in Normand Thériault, "Proposition", *Claude Tousignant: Sculptures*, Montréal, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1982, p. 40.

3. Singular in the sense that Tousignant was very much part of a painter's and sculptor's milieu at the time and the idea for the sound work evolved out of his spatial concerns coupled with an interest for dodecaphonic music. It was not developed in relation to

process based or Conceptual art which had only begun to manifest itself in Québec in the early 70s.

4. Tousignant does not consider this project as a break in his development but simply as one that delves further into spatial considerations.

5. Normand Thériault, *Claude Tousignant: Sculptures*, Montréal, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1982, p 23.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Translated by the author.

7. Apart from 419 and 420, constructed at the MMFA in 1982, Tousignant created other environmental works namely the plexiglas pieces presented in *Une exposition* at Graff in 1982; *Faux vacuum* at the Musée d'art contemporain for *Graff 1966-1986* in 1988; *Espace mnémonique* at the 49th Parallel in New York in 1987 (shown again in *Claude Tousignant* at the Musée

national des beaux-arts in Québec City in 1994).

8. Thériault, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 35. From an interview with Normand Thériault in July 1981.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 47. All elements that structure the room were involved: walls, floor, entrance frame and dimensions of walls (the sizes of the panels were calculated in proportion to the room's dimensions), ceiling and lighting. In fact, lighting was natural for 419 and 420 coming from the skylights that were opened up again especially to accommodate Tousignant's request. He has always favoured natural lighting for his work.

11. One could add the new MOMA in New York but the Tate Modern and the Palais de Tokyo are of particular interest in their powerful revalorization of the white cube ethos. While the new MOMA offers "more of the same," the Tate Modern and the Palais de Tokyo raise it a notch. In its transformation of a massive early 20th century power plant into a series of white spaces, the Tate Modern has *monumentalized* the culture of the white cube, subsuming every project and its maker(s) to its economy. The Tate Modern has brilliantly created a self-sustaining local culture with tentacular ambitions. The Palais de Tokyo at first glance has gone in the opposite direction, but the result is much the same. That is that the white cube, in its constitutive elements – the white wall and the neatly delineated smooth space – has been deliberately destroyed, leaving in its place an unfinished space that creates a laboratory effect: a place of creation and encounters where the work, whatever its manifestation, is open ended, always in progress. One can agree that it is not so much a place of contemplation – something which has been brought to new heights at the Tate Modern, with its spectacular vistas from the mezzanine – but a place of witnessing, relating and participating. However, what the Palais de Tokyo has done is not to overturn the culture of the white cube but rather to turn it *inside out*, creating a kind of 'behind the scenes' at the white cube. This, in my opinion, is not a new model but a variation of the white cube culture. The Palais de Tokyo also subsumes every project or event to its economy and has also created an important local culture. What is at the centre of this economy for the Tate is the finished work of art in a pristine and timeless, monumental space; for the Palais de Tokyo it is the work in progress, the ephemeral event and environment existing in a space marked by temporal vicissitudes. And these differences have a common face and it is that of the orchestrating curator, a crucial figure in how the politics of the white cube play out.

12. For an interesting critique of relational aesthetics, its proponents and practitioners, the notion

of the laboratory and its political implications, see Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" in *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 51-79. In Montréal an important publication on the subject is Patrice Loubier and Anne-Marie Ninacs (eds.), *Les commensaux: When Art Becomes Circumstances*, Montréal, Centre des arts actuels Skol, 2001.

13. Literature abounds on the subject. For a discussion among practitioners, theorists and curators, see "Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art" in *October* 104 (Spring 2003), pp. 71-96.

14. In Montreal, the Galerie de l'UQAM is a good example of a successful attempt at working creatively with the specific parameters of that space. Until recently Jay Jopling's White Cube gallery in central London (England) offered an interested and very literal take on the white cube. It consisted of a tiny white cubic room that required artists create specific works for it. Unfortunately its owner moved on to bigger things and opened a space whose vastness is at the opposite end of the scale of his original white cube.

15. For a fascinating investigation on the discourse of whiteness in architecture see Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, MIT Press, 1995.