

## INHABITING SPACE

Michèle Thériault

(From the publication: *3 Paintings, 1 Sculpture, 3 Spaces: Claude Tousignant*. Ed. Michèle Thériault. Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2005. **Published in conjunction with the exhibition *3 Paintings, 1 Sculpture, 3 Spaces. Claude Tousignant. Black Grey White.***)



*View of empty gallery.* Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Luigi Discenza.

To inhabit a new space is to assimilate its “physiognomy” and the history of its occupation. When I was given the directorship of this gallery I wanted to *re-view*

its exhibition space: a space that plays a determining role in how one experiences art. One knows that a gallery has the power to transform a work of art and vice versa. It is a medium that shapes and is shaped by what it holds. It was therefore with these points in mind that I invited Claude Tousignant to exhibit at the Gallery. In my proposal I asked him to present one work for each of three spaces. On the one hand, I wanted to give the public a rare opportunity to see and experience recent work by Claude Tousignant while highlighting one of the most rigorous practices in geometric abstraction today. On the other hand, I was interested in probing the space of the Gallery – the white cube – using these works as a starting point. It was necessary to ask the question of the white cube's relevance today in relation to the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

This questioning was realized by way of a body of work whose habitat is the white volumes of the gallery or museum. In fact, one can say that there exists a symbiosis between that type of space and a kind of painting devoted to large expanses of color within carefully delineated planes. This alliance held together by a discourse of neutrality and versatility, both on the cultural and political levels at the heart of the white cube's existence, has been the subject of much debate over the last decades. My aim in this essay and exhibition is not to reinvest the white cube with an aura it no longer can claim since it is common knowledge that art occurs and is presented in a multiplicity of places. Nevertheless it would be false to deny the role that institutionalized versions of the white space still play in the machinations of the art the market and in the canonization of the artist.

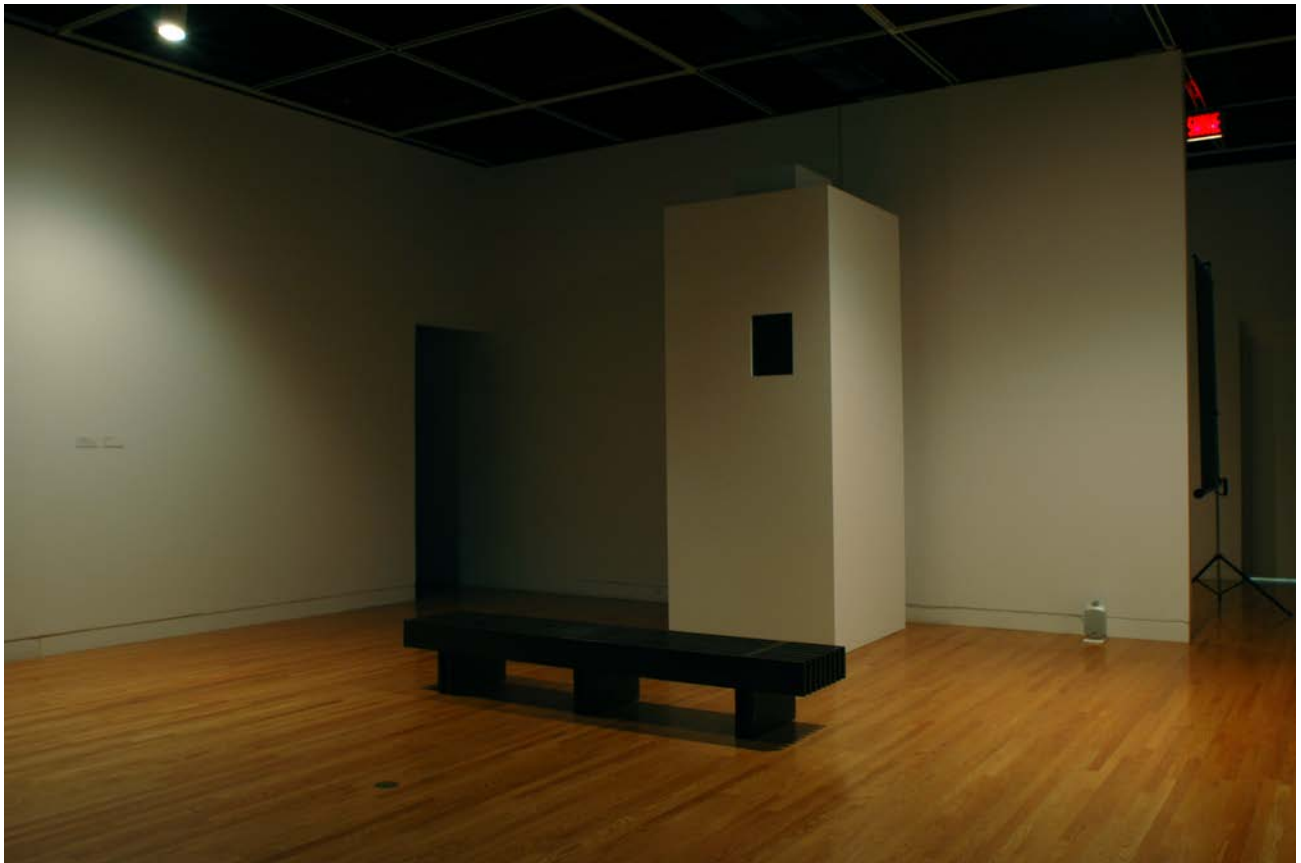
However, the field of inquiry for this project is much more circumscribed linked as it is to the existence of a particular site of exhibition within a specific city. It also concerns the work of an artist whose history is embedded in this city. I wanted to examine how a few recent works by Claude Tousignant, strategically placed in the space of the Gallery, inflect the space of their habitation and its constituent elements. This thinking through of a space was done by way of a

practice of painting that progressively revealed itself to be profoundly spatial. Not a practice that seeks to paint space, but a painting that comes to be in space as it takes possession of it. Thus the profound contingency of the exhibiting place is revealed. Once again the seemingly spare and white space of the Gallery becomes the space where specific and singular interactions between openings, floor, ceiling, walls, textures, movement and works of art occur. It is by this singular means that we are drawn to this place and to the specificities of this exhibition; to the relevance of an event here and now in a construction of space that is the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

My interest in spatial strategies in Tousignant's work led me to rediscover *Sculptures*, an exhibition (and its catalogue), curated by Normand Thériault at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1982. The spatial and intellectual framing of Tousignant's practice by this curator led the visitor to experience his work in its spatial deployment and thus not solely, as was usual, in relation to *plasticien* dictates. *Sculptures* also presented two major installations by the artist who was finally given the opportunity to create two large pictorial and sculptural environments that radically transformed two rooms of the museum.

To reflect upon the spatial framing of an artist's work through the thought of another curator and writer opens the ground to an archeology of the spatialization of an exhibition that takes place at the interface of curatorial and artistic practice. This archeology has only just begun in Québec and the inscription of Normand Thériault's contribution within it has yet to be made. One of the most incisive curators of his generation, he profoundly marked the exhibition of Québécois art in the 1960s and 1970s through his writings and activities by defining the parameters of a second awakening for art in Québec, one that would open it up to plurality in practice. This essay and exhibition are a modest contribution to this area of research.

Finally I would like to underline the links that this project entertains with the Gallery's new programming which began last fall with *Timelength*, an exhibition featuring film and video works that meditated, through their durational qualities, on the transformation of the white cube into the black box. *3 Paintings, 1 Sculpture, 3 Spaces* functions like a counter-balance. It brings us back to the side of the Gallery's white expanse, and in its subtle insights makes us inhabit it differently.



Rijke de Rooij, Projector for *Bantar Gebandg*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University.  
Photo Luigi Discenza.