

# When the black box meets the white cube: spatial shifts and postdramatic aesthetics in performance art

**Zhihan Ren**

Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, London, UK

lunaren921@gmail.com

---

**Abstract.** This study explores the spatial transformation of contemporary performance art between theater and art museum. By tracing the adaptive changes of performance works in different locations, this article reveals how Black Box Theater and White Cube Gallery foster the transformation of aesthetic expression and creative logic. Combining the perspectives of drama theory and spatial criticism, this article proposes that performance space is not only an artistic container but also a co-creator of meaning generation. Typical cases of traditional theater, contemporary art museum, and remade industrial space are selected to analyze how the site characteristics reconstruct performance relationships, narrative strategies, and institutional discourse. Iconic works such as Marina Abramovich's *The Artist is Present*, along with site-specific creative practices, demonstrate the revolutionary challenge of mixed spaces to theater and visual art paradigms. It is found that different spatial forms can profoundly affect the perceptual intensity, emotional transmission and political metaphor of performing arts, which opens a new possible avenue for interdisciplinary artistic practice.

**Keywords:** postdramatic theatre, performance art, spatial design, black box, white cube

---

## 1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, performance art has gradually moved from traditional theater to museums and atypical spaces. This spatial shift reflects the profound transformation of creative ideas, involving the overall transformation of work production, exhibition mechanisms, and modes of experience. The spatial separation between traditional drama and visual art is merging, giving rise to hybrid forms that transcend existing boundaries and narrative frameworks. This study focuses on the paradigm shift between black box theater and white cube gallery—the former as an immersive dark space and the latter as a decontextualized exhibition container, which are, in fact, the embodiment of different aesthetic concepts. Black box theater relies on time, the dark field, and immersive vision, while white cube space emphasizes institutional neutrality, the open field, and silent aesthetics. When performance art moves into these two spatial paradigms, the relationship between the body, space, and spectator undergoes a fundamental reconstruction [1]. The audience shifts from passive receiver to nomadic participant, and narrative logic gives way to a spatialized physical encounter. Based on post-theatrical theory and a spatial critique perspective, this article reveals how spatial logic influences creative strategies and reception mechanisms through specific cases, including site-specific creations at the Marina Abramovich Museum of Modern Art and immersive installations in industrial sites. The study highlights that spatial negotiation has become a key dimension in understanding the evolution of contemporary performance art, which is deeply intertwined with the contemporary development of visual culture, curatorial discourse, and architectural form.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Postdramatic theatre and aesthetic theory

Post-dramatic theater rewrites the narrative rules of traditional theater. It devalues textual dialogue and characterization, instead placing physical representation, ambient sound, and visual composition on an equal footing. Within this framework, performance is no longer a reproduction of the story, but a process of constructing the physical experience in situ [2]. The presence of the performer, the symbolic meaning of the spatial installation, and the emotional resonance of the sound system weave a

multidimensional web of meaning. Its aesthetic qualities are derived from the accidental collision between the human body and the material environment, rather than from the logic of the script's preconceived plot.

## 2.2. Spatial theory in performance studies

The reconstruction of the performance environment directly affects the audience's perception of time and space. Black Box theater follows the law of linear time and the fixed orientation of vision, and when the performance moves into the open space of the White Cube, the fluid audience disrupts the existing rhythm. The space then becomes a dynamic scenario, and the performance transforms into an improvised choreography of spatial relationships. The artworks are deeply rooted in the fabric of the building [3].

## 2.3. Performance art and institutional contexts

When performance art enters the art museum system, its mode of presentation is necessarily limited by spatial rules and curatorial logic. Compared to theatrical works, performance art in art museums faces different temporal and spatial conditions—the neutral aesthetic of the White Cube space transforms performances into “exhibitions” that can be presented and guided by the audience’s interpretation based on the visual cultural dimension. This transformation not only alters the rhythmic tension and body language of the work, but also triggers a reflection on the mechanism of discourse within the art institution itself.

Marina Abramovich’s “The Artist Is Present” (Figure 1) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is a case in point. The artist and audience sit and gaze at each other in a pure white space, and the minimalist installation of the table and chair transforms this continuous performance into a dynamic sculpture. The institutional nature of the museum not only reinforces the ritualistic meaning of performance but also embeds it within the narrative framework of art history [4]. Figure 1 clearly shows how the White Cube space reshapes the context for the acceptance of performance art through the multiple roles of lighting layout, audience movement, and institutional authority—spectators constantly shift identities between viewing the exhibits and intervening in the scene [5].



**Figure 1.** Marina Abramović’s “The Artist is Present” at MoMA (2010) (source: Museum of Modern Art)

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Theoretical framework

This study constructs a composite analytical framework combining post-dramatic theater theory and spatial curation. Combining visual culture and performance research perspectives, this article focuses on how space mediates the interactive relationship between artists and spectators, and on the shaping effect of museum curatorial mechanisms on the presentation of works [6].

### 3.2. Case study selection criteria

The case study covers Black Box Theater, White Cube Art Museum, and a specific area where the two characteristics blend. The degree of reconstruction of the standard focal space, the interactive mode of the performance, the application of non-narrative elements, and the uniqueness of the venue were selected [7]. Each case provides a prism for observing the adaptation of the performing arts to new spatial paradigms.

### 3.3. Data collection and analytical techniques

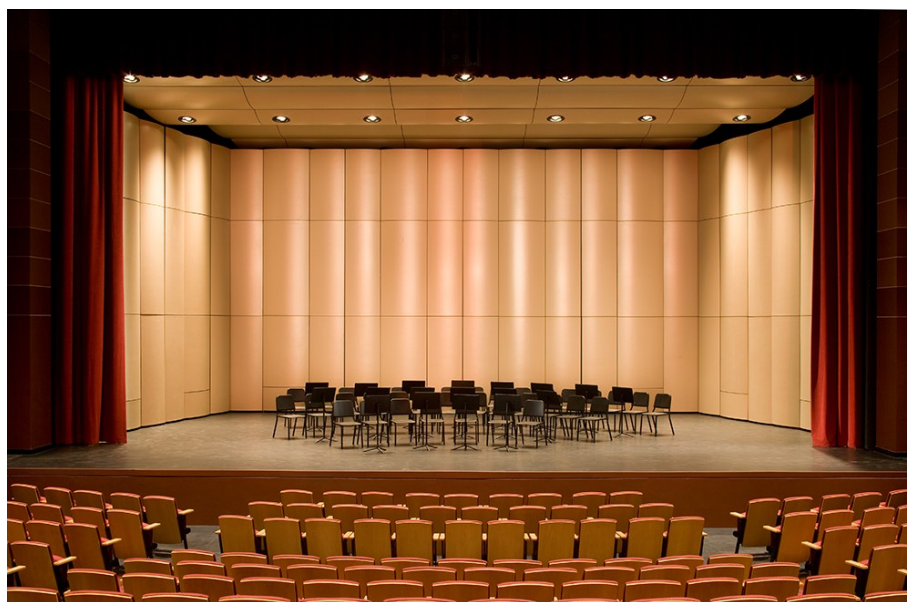
The research method is based on qualitative analysis, and the primary data includes visual analysis of performance images and the reconstruction of spatial line maps. Through interviews with artists, we can gain firsthand insights into the creative intent and focus on exploring the aesthetic considerations behind space selection. Data analysis focuses on the dimensions of viewer behavior, spatial emotional tension, and narrative structure transformation, and extracts common cross-cutting rules [8].

## 4. Case studies and analysis

### 4.1. Black Box: the spatial logic of theatre

Black Box Theatre offers a highly controlled environment for performance practice. In one case study, a minimalist post-theatrical work was chosen: the lights gradually delineate the boundaries of the performers' movements, the dark areas surrounding the stage are transformed into narrative tools, and body movements and sonic details are precisely amplified. The fixed seating arrangement allows spectators to integrate themselves into the rhythm of the performance and follow the immersive field logic of the black box together [9].

Figure 2 shows the structure of the traditional black box theatre setting. The empty stage and controlled set highlight the physical texture of the performers, and the precisely controlled lighting system and sound field design constitute essential experiential elements [10]. This section focuses on analyzing how theater architecture shapes the closed nature of the performance relationship through spatial planning, light and shadow levels, and acoustic treatment, and reinforces the theater space's function as a narrative container.



**Figure 2.** Traditional Black Box theater interior (source: performance.stageright.com)

### 4.2. White Cube: gallery as performance space

The white cube space presents a completely different elastic field. Take an experimental project at the Shanghai Biennale, for example: artists walk among groups of voice-activated devices, and spectators can freely choose their path of movement within the open exhibition space. Due to the absence of a fixed stage and central narrative, each participant's spatial trajectory constitutes

a unique performance scenario [11]. The art museum's lighting system and institutional attributes combine to create a reflective rhythm of experience, giving performance art a materiality similar to installation art.

#### 4.3. Hybridity: collapsing spatial categories

Some works deliberately break the binary opposition between black box and white cube. As part of a specific field project for the renovation of an abandoned factory building, theater-like lighting and immersive sound systems were installed in an art gallery exhibition space. Artists and mobile devices together construct dynamic fields, and spectators often unconsciously become performance nodes as they move through different scenes. This mixed strategy dissipates the traditional boundaries of performance, emphasizing the plasticity of space and the initiative of the audience.

Figure 3 presents a typical case of the transformation of industrial buildings into cultural spaces. The exposed steel structure creates tension with dramatic lighting, and the boundaries between interior and exterior are deliberately blurred. This spatial quality forms the intertextuality with the performance site: not only does it preserve the functional memory of the workshop, but it also superimposes the narrative level of the artistic intervention [12]. The materiality of architectural space collides with the temporality of performance, giving rise to the narrative logic composed of sound, movement and space.



**Figure 3.** Repurposed industrial space for hybrid performance (source: pinterest.co.uk)

## 5. Results and discussion

### 5.1. Spatial affect and audience perception

It is evident that the scope of the performance significantly affects the audience's emotional resonance and cognitive mode. The Black Box theater enhances concentration and immersion, while the White Cube space inspires individual interpretation and speculative distance [13]. The spatial form not only determines the narrative development mode but also contributes to constructing the meaning-generating mechanism—visual lines, physical movement, and emotional response form a chain effect.

### 5.2. Rewriting dramaturgy through space

When performances move to non-traditional venues, linear narrative often gives way to spatial orchestration. The creator conceived the work as a sequential combination of different spatial situations to replace the plot progression of traditional dramas. The transformation from fixed seating to nomadic vision requires the reconstruction of the attention-guiding strategy and the path for generating dramatic tension, which is in line with the pursuit of fragmented perception and atmospheric immersion in post-dramatic theater [14].

### 5.3. The politics of space in performance

The institutional attributes of art museums inject a dimension of power and commercialization possibilities into performance art. Institutional approval not only demonstrates authority, but also defines the group of participants and the mode of acceptance [15]. The shift from theater to art museum reflects the transfer of value from performing arts within the cultural capital system. This kind of duality not only expands the creative boundary but also confronts the disciplinary pressure of market logic and institutional expectations.

## 6. Conclusion

The research proves that the spatial context profoundly shapes the aesthetic form and reception mechanism of contemporary performance art. When the work moves between the Black Box Theater, the White Cube Art Museum, and the mixed field, its creative strategy always forms a profound intercontext with the spatial characteristics: the immersive intensity created by the closed theater, the speculative distance generated by the art museum, and the performance model broken by the mixed space like industrial ruins together expand the expressive dimension of performance art. Marina Abramovich's "The Artist is Present" confirms the process of enabling the meaning of the work by the institutional field, and the transformative space reveals the creative potential stimulated by the ambiguity of the place. These practices reveal that space is not only a performance container, but also an active element that co-constructs meaning with the body and the audience. This study advocates the inclusion of spatial design and curatorial framework as a central dimension of performance analysis, and emphasizes that digital virtual space will become an important direction of future research—its unique field characteristics will continue to deconstruct the existing relationship between art, space, and audience.

## References

- [1] Bishop, C. (2020). Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 64(2), 22–35. [https://doi.org/10.1162/dram\\_a\\_00920](https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00920)
- [2] Hann, R. (2020). *Beyond Scenography*. Routledge (London, UK; New York, NY).
- [3] Goudouna, S. (2021). *Beckett's Breath: Anti-theatricality and the Visual Arts*. Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh, UK).
- [4] Hannah, D. (2020). *Event-Space: Theatre Architecture and the Historical Avant-Garde*. Routledge (London, UK; New York, NY).
- [5] Dirmoser, G. (2020). *Performance Art Kontext*. Transcript Verlag (Bielefeld, Germany).
- [6] Filmer, A. (2020). The Way We Perform Now. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 64(3), 10–25.
- [7] Ernst, W.-D. (2020). *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. Routledge (London, UK; New York, NY).
- [8] Bay-Cheng, S. (2020). Virtual Realisms: Dramatic Forays into the Future. ResearchGate. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/>
- [9] Hassabi, M. (2020). *PLASTIC: Live Installation at MoMA*. Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY).
- [10] Milev, Y. (2020). *A.O.B.B.M.E. – Microtopic Enterprise*. Edition Eigen+Art (Leipzig, Germany).
- [11] Bishop, C. (2020). Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 64(2), 22–35. [https://doi.org/10.1162/dram\\_a\\_00920](https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00920)
- [12] Chukhrov, K. (2021). The Postdramatic Theater's Misadventures in the Age of Contemporary Art. *e-flux Journal*, (120). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/415768/the-postdramatic-theater-s-misadventures-in-the-age-of-contemporary-art/>
- [13] Ho, C. (2022). Black Cube: The Stage for Performance in Singapore, 1995–96. *Theatre Research International*, 47(1), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883321000439>
- [14] Guy, T. J. (2021). Theatre as Installation in the Syndemic Architectures of Rimini Protokoll's "Black Box". *Performance Research*, 26(7), 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2021.1987987>
- [15] Van Baarle, K. (2019). Cally Spooner: Between Language and Body. *The Theatre Times*. <https://thetheatretimes.com/cally-spooner-between-language-and-body/>