

Space of Whiteness:

Physical and Psychological Manifestations of Whiteness

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Introduction

Race is a social construct that projects a myriad of meanings and associations onto persons and, thus, assigns a set of individuals a “space of privilege” to occupy. This space often goes unchallenged since it has been manufactured as the societal norm (Rothenberg 10). Historically, whiteness has privileged white, male, Protestant, affluent, heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied (Meyer 22). Hence, those occupants are not forced to reflect upon either the distribution of these privileges or the ontological constituents of *whiteness*. On the other hand, people of color are marginalized and are forced to comprehend the political, social, and economic restraints of their *otherness*. For this reason, my project is concerned with examining whiteness.

Space of Whiteness is an installation of mixed media objects that deconstructs the notion of a post-racial and equal American society through the exploration of whiteness in its physical and psychological forms. Specifically, the work illuminates whiteness as a system that confers



Figure 1 - *The Installation of the Space of Whiteness.*

privileges and power in various forms, such as social, symbolic, cultural, and economic capital, to a set of individuals. Within the installation, ordinary objects are recontextualized through spatial arrangement and juxtaposition to reveal subtle meanings.

Surrounded by a white picket fence on two sides, the installation is situated in a corner of the gallery. The porcelain pipes extend across the gallery wall and appear as electrical conduits providing power to light the interior of the porcelain eggs via LED lights (figure 1). The lighting reveals phrases that provoke the viewer to reflect upon racial identities as social constructs and to contemplate their designated associations. Holistically, the work engages the viewer in conflicting emotions of uneasiness and tranquility; revulsion and fascination; and unfamiliarity and familiarity. Furthermore, the enclosure of the white picket fence, the spatial arrangement of the porcelain objects, and the sequence of phrases reveal metaphorically how whiteness as a system operates and remains existent in contemporary America.

Binaries within Work

Binaries are established and explored within this installation. One such set is invisibility and visibility. Since privileges are sustained within systemic structures, often invisible, in our culture, whiteness maintains its power through its *invisibility* (Rothenberg 89). Tim Wise, a prominent anti-racist writer and educator, states that to undermine whiteness “as a dispenser of privilege and knowledge” is to expose its various forms and to reveal its physical and psychological manifestations (Wise 5). That is, making the invisible visible is crucial in opposing its existence.



Figure 2 - *Porcelain pipes flowing from electrical box to shelves containing the porcelain eggs.*

The spatial arrangement of the pipes and their relation to the porcelain eggs and fence metaphorically render the latent structures of whiteness and its functionality. Pipes, even though ubiquitous in our modern buildings, exist inconspicuously. That is, even when we notice pipes, it's

usually only a part of a much more complex systematic operation. Mimicking the general layout of electrical conduits and matching the installation's master color, which is porcelain white, the pipes in the installation are positioned as electrical conduits for the lighting sequence of the porcelain eggs as the four rows flow rhythmically from the electrical box to the shelves (figure 2). Thereby, their placement becomes a metonym for the complexity and invisibility of whiteness. Even more, the physical and symbolical connection of the pipes to the eggs reveals another aspect of whiteness's functionality: the construction of difference.

whiteness as a structure created to designate individuals as “white” or as “other” (Stallings 91). Furthermore, in conjunction with the pipes’ position, the industrial-like alignment and the physical form of the eggs depict them as manufactured products of whiteness (figure 4).



Figure 4 – Porcelain eggs without LEDs light switched on via Arduino.

Thereby, the illumination of the interior of the porcelain eggs and the arrangement of the objects viscerally depict race as socially and culturally manufactured.

The physicality of the eggs and pipes explores another binary: fragility and potency.

Whiteness secures its potency “by seeming not to be anything in particular” (Rothenberg 61). That is, “[t]he invisibility of [whiteness] strengthens the power it creates and maintains” (Rothenberg 89). On the other hand, as the system becomes illuminated, it becomes fragile. The usage of porcelain captures the fragility embedded in whiteness when it is no longer invisible: the viewer witnesses the fragile state of existence that the system inherently possesses. Furthermore, the nature of the eggs and their elevated height convey the systemic desire to protect the manufactured inception of racial differences due to the fragility instilled within whiteness’s nature. The protective borders of the white picket fence even further solidify the system’s fragility.

Conjuring up the plethora of associations and meanings attached to a white picket fence, the four-foot-high fence demarcates the space while it seeks to protect the objects within its boundary. With associations and history instilled within the object—such as social mobility, the “American Dream,” white flight, suburbanization, and the orderly family and its values—the fence physically and psychologically creates the demarcation. Alluding to the social impasse that

prevents those designated as the *other* from gaining white privilege, the fence forces the viewer to engage with its inner boundaries from the outside of its gate. Evermore, with each picket boldly pointing upward, the fence exists as reminder of inequality embedded in American society. In its entirety, the space demands the recognition of constructed racial difference and the distribution of privileges.

Contextualization

The nature of the installation utilizes both scholarly research and contemporary art-making to provide a rich opportunity for the viewer to grapple with the intense and serious subject matter: whiteness. The study of *whiteness* appears in a gamut of disciplines ranging from sociology to anthropology (Wilkins 10). Whiteness becomes pertinent in the discussion of race and equality since one gains understanding about those who benefits from such structures and its systematic operations. Invisibility has maintained the hegemony of whiteness on American society (Rothenberg 1 - 2). So, those beneficiaries of such system are incognizant of the

impinging manifestations of the system; thus, “to speak of whiteness is...to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism” (Berger 25).

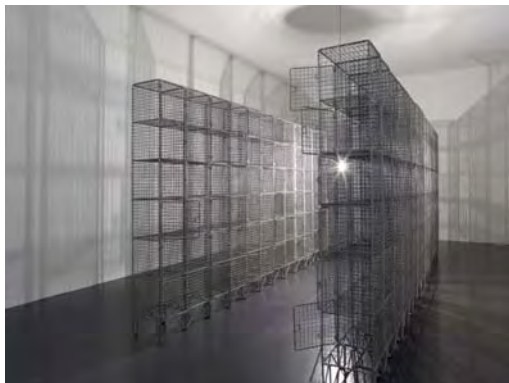


Figure 5 – *Light Sentence* by Mona Hatoum (“*Light*”).

An installation became appropriate to frame such discussion of whiteness since space becomes the vital element in the construction of identity and society (Wilkins 7). An artist who explores space in relation to the self is Mona Hatoum. In her *Light Sentence*,

the space—filled with familiar and safe, yet simultaneously foreign and ominous objects—shifts as the light bulb moves up and down (figure 5). Dealing with discontinuity in space and displacement, she converges space and place (Brett). As Wilkins explains, space becomes essentialized and visible “by the position of points, objects, or bodies” (11). Thus, in *Space of Whiteness*, the sharp line of porcelain paint on the floor and wall and, also, the outline of the picket fence define a *space* and designate the *place* of the viewer outside its boundaries to reveal the system. The objects within that area and their placement play a crucial role in exposing the hidden values of whiteness.



Figure 6 and 7 – Two works from Fred Wilson’s “Mining the Museum”, Maryland Historical Society, 1992 (“Fred

One such conceptual artist who exposes latent values and creates new meanings through the spatial order and juxtaposition of found and common objects is Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson’s installation at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992 involved the reinstalling of items from the historical collection in such a way as to make the viewer reconsider them. With the juxtaposition of objects, such as the handcrafted silver teacups with slave shackles and the handcrafted furniture alongside the a slave whipping post (figure 6 and 7), *Mining the Museum* brought out how African-Americans had been treated, mistreated, and often simply ignored in conventional museum displays of arts. He illuminated a history of oppression that was once out of sight from the attendees of the museum and critiqued the curatorial practice itself of positioning truth and historicity within the museum’s display (“Fred Wilson”).



Figure 8 – *Spine* by Joseph Havel (Stallings 23).

Joseph Havel is also an artist who recontextualizes ordinary objects and elicits a more profound engagement with the mundane. His artwork, *Spine*, vertically suspended white collars from starched white shirts on top of another to position the viewer to rethink about the objects' meaning in the spatial arrangement (figure 8). This arrangement provided an entry to the dialogue around systems of power, such as capitalism, Western hegemony, and whiteness (Takhar).

Similarly, the spatial arrangement of the objects in the *Space of Whiteness* positions the viewer to enter a dialogue around whiteness and its systematic operations.

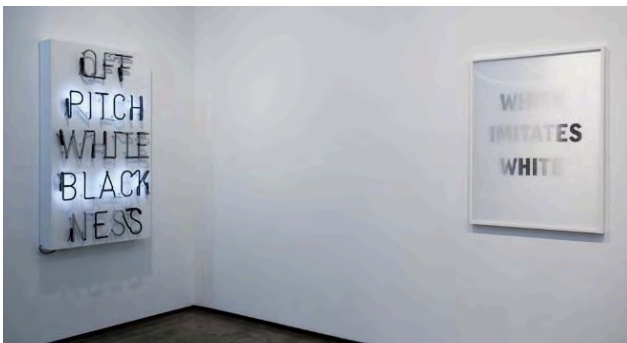


Figure 9 – *Pitch Black, Off White and White Imitates Black, Black Imitates White* by Hank Willis Thomas (Hank Willis Thomas).

The phrases revealed within the illumination of the eggs subvert the systematic usage of language that subjugates individuals and privileges another. Language with the propensity to create a system of categorization is able to contribute to the regeneration of privilege (Rothenberg 89). An artist who reveals the hidden agenda of language is Hank

Willis Thomas. In his *Pitch Black, Off White and White Imitates Black, Black Imitates White*, the text shifts to reveal another phrase as the viewer changes one's view. This shift of text occurs through neon tubes and the lenticular medium, respectively (figure 9). With such ambiguous, yet profound words, he challenges such language of categorization and difference and its latent values (Hank Willis Thomas). Such shift in text and exploration of language are evident in the

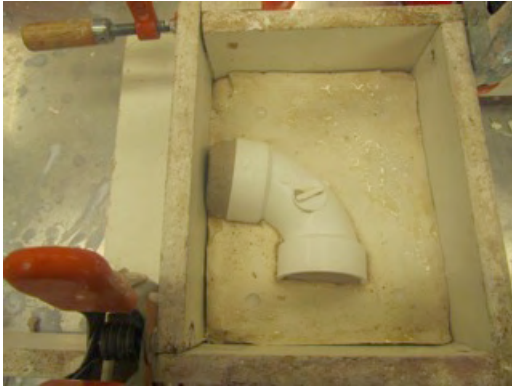


Figure 10- Pipe angler is divided into two segments to create two-part mold. Wood slacks held by clamps surround the object.



Figure 11- Plaster is poured onto the object.



Figure 12 and 13- These are two-part molds of the pipes and eggs.

Space of Whiteness as the viewer is positioned to reexamine the language behind racial differences.

Production

Space of Whiteness utilizes common objects that are either found or produced through mold-making and slip-casting. The first step in creating the porcelain eggs and pipes was mold-making. The process involves dividing the objects into the appropriate segments without undercuts and placing clay to cover all but one segment. The number of undercuts in the form determines the segments needed for pouring. Next, the objects are placed onto a flat surface and surrounded by painted slacks of wood held together by clamps (figure 10). The plaster is mixed with water and poured directly onto the contained object (figure 11). The number of pourings depends on how the object is divided. All the molds to create the objects in *Space of Whiteness* are two-part molds (figure 12 and 13).



Figure 14- Area applied with Shellac will resist water and, thus, not rub away with a wet sponge.



Figure 15- Arduino Uno board (image taken from www.sparkfun.com).

Once the molds are completely dried, then slip-cast—liquid porcelain clay—may be poured into the mold. After the slip-cast is poured into the mold, a certain amount of time must pass for the wall thickness to develop. The waiting time varies greatly, being dependent on the humidity of the air and density of the mold. After drying completely and being adequately sanded, the objects are ready for firing.

The porcelain eggs require more steps before firing in order to add the letter. When the clay body is leather hard yet still malleable, shellac is placed on the area of the letter. Then, the clay body is gently rubbed with a wet sponge or small brush to move away layer of the porcelain. The area that is applied with the shellac resists the water and, thus, is thicker (figure 14).

This creates the phenomenon that allows light to pass more vividly through the area of the object that is less thick. Thus, it reveals the subtleness of the letter carved in the inner egg.

In rows of ten, the eggs are situated on a shelf with LED lights wired through the hidden holes of the shelf into the eggs themselves. With the LED lights connected to an Arduino Uno board (figure 15), the groups of LED lights turn on and off. This lighting provokes the viewer to reflect upon the meanings of the messages being illuminated. Thus, this adds a dense complexity and positions the viewer to become an active participant as the space psychologically explores the individual's mind.



Figure 16- *Back of gate and porcelain paint applied to Tufback stencil paper.*

The master color of the installation is color of the porcelain paint—porcelain white. The porcelain floor enamel is applied to Tufback Stencil paper, which provides a clear and potent demarcation of the space (figure 16). This same color swatch is applied to all the non-porcelain materials in the installation except for the

white picket fence. Thus, this creates a cohesive and pristine space as the colors are uniform.

Conclusion

With the materiality of, the spatial arrangement and juxtaposition of, and the symbolism instilled in all the objects of the installation, *Space of Whiteness* metaphorically represents whiteness as systemic. With its potency embedded in its endeavor to remain invisible, whiteness, once illuminated, becomes fragile, as suggested through the usage of porcelain. The illuminations of the eggs and the phrases revealed convey race as a social and cultural construct that seeks to benefit those who occupy such “space of privilege.” This installation provides a dialogue of how systems of power exist in the contemporary American social and cultural landscape.

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