

Beyond the White Cube: A Study on the Site Specific Curatorial Practice of Kochi Muziris Biennale

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Abstract : Brian O'Doherty's seminal essay, Inside the white Cube theorized and named the dominant mode of display and exhibition of Modern Art museums. Ever since the advent of Biennales and other site-specific public art projects we have seen a departure from the white cube mode of exhibition. The physicality, materiality and context within which an artwork is framed has a role in the production of meaning of public art. Equally, artworks contribute to the meaning and identity of a place. This to and fro relationship between the site and artwork and its influence on the sense of place and production of meaning is being explored in this paper in the context of Kochi Muziris Biennale (KMB). Known as the Peoples biennale with over 5 lakh visitors, it is India's first Biennale and its largest art exhibition of contemporary art. The paper employs place theory and contemporary curatorial theories to present the case. The KMB has an interesting mix of exhibition spaces which includes existing galleries and halls, site-specific projects in public spaces, infill developments and adaptive reuse of heritage and other unused architecture. The biennale was envisioned as an event connecting to the history, socio-political peculiarities of the cultural landscape of Kerala and more specifically Kochi. The paper explains the role of spatial elements in forming a curatorial narrative connected to the above mentioned ambitions. The site-specific nature of exhibition and its use of unused architecture helps in the formation of exhibition spaces unique in type and materiality. The paper argues how this helps in the creation of an 'archeology of the place'. The research elucidates how a composite nature of experience helps connect with the thematic ambitions of the Biennale and how it brings about an aesthetics distinct to KMB.

Keywords : public art, curatorial practice, architecture, place, contemporary art, site specificity

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