

Jo-Anne Balcaen, Any Gallery, Anywhere

Edwin Janzen

Number 123, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/92430ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Janzen, E. (2019). Review of [Jo-Anne Balcaen, Any Gallery, Anywhere]. *Espace*, (123), 93–95.

Benita Koch-Otte et Gunta Stölzl, et de leur approche respective de la (dé)construction du textile. Motivée par leur cheminement, Godin se consacre à la manufacture de textiles et réactualise ainsi des techniques mises en péril par la montée perpétuelle du capitalisme et du consumérisme, comme la tapisserie ou le tissage notamment. Visant une réappropriation du savoir-faire, elle s'engage dans un processus créatif de façon signifiante par le prolongement de procédés du passé soustraits de la logique productiviste devenue la norme.

Dans l'espace, le journal de bord qui atteste de l'élaboration de l'exposition est présenté, sans artifice, sur l'un des murs en une travée de pages blanches. La disposition linéaire de celles-ci mène à l'arrangement théâtral que propose Marie-Andrée Godin. Le tapis de différentes teintes de gris clair est partiellement encadré d'un rideau opaque qui couvre deux des murs de la galerie. Cette tapisserie bleu foncé, ponctuée de formes arrondies à la palette pastel, enveloppe les visiteurs et agit directement sur l'expérience spectatorielle. Le rideau incite à prendre place sur le tapis qui accapare la majorité du sol de la galerie et le recompose en une aire de décontraction et, de surcroît, de réflexion et de discussion. Il est la jonction entre l'espace privé et public d'après son statut d'objet domestique qui, toutefois, s'avère ici démesuré. Durant les événements de la programmation de Diagonale, les visiteurs se rassemblent et, instinctivement, s'assoient en rond, les uns devant les autres, comme lors d'un rituel ou d'une cérémonie de magie — de sorcellerie. Au-delà de leurs utilités respectives, le tapis et le rideau deviennent des objets d'évocation avec de nouvelles significations et fonctions symboliques. Dès lors, l'espace est un théâtre d'objets dans lequel les visiteurs sont simultanément acteurs et spectateurs.

(*Im*)possible Labor contribue à des considérations novatrices relatives à la place des femmes et aspire à une distanciation des principes capitalistes au moyen d'une série d'interventions qui édifient un espace entièrement investi du savoir-faire de Marie-Andrée Godin. Par l'utilisation occulte de son corps comme instrument de conception et de transmission, l'artiste représente ses valeurs féministes et le dur labeur de pratiques artisanales invisibles. Elle exerce le pouvoir de son imagination qui agit à l'instar de la « magie de la nécessité » que décrit le philosophe italien Federico Campagna dans son livre *Technic and Magic: the Reconstruction of Reality* (Bloomsbury, Londres, 2018). Allégories matérielles, les pièces de textiles relèvent, au final, d'un travail ardu, mais possible; tout comme celui de faire valoir la parité des sexes au sein de la société actuelle.

Jean-Michel Quirion, détenteur d'une maîtrise en muséologie à l'Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO), est auteur et commissaire indépendant. Il travaille actuellement au Centre d'artistes AXENÉO7, situé à Gatineau, à titre de coordonnateur artistique. À Montréal, Quirion s'investit également au sein du groupe de recherche et réflexion CIÉCO (Collections et impératif évènementiel/The Convulsive collections). En tant qu'auteur, il contribue régulièrement à *ESPACE art actuel*, *Inter art actuel*, ainsi qu'à *Ciel variable*.

Jo-Anne Balcaen, *Any Gallery, Anywhere*

Edwin Janzen

DYNAMIQUE INTERNE/INTERNAL DYNAMICS

OPTICA

MONTRÉAL

APRIL 13 –

JUNE 15, 2019

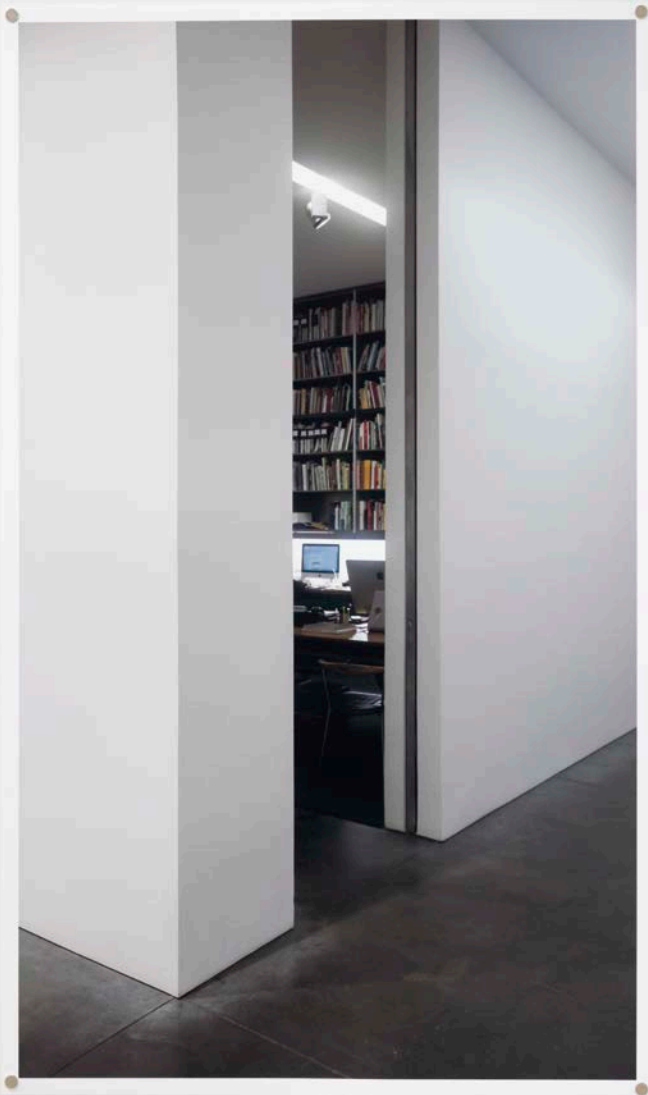
Much ink has been spilled over the “white cube” since Brian O’Doherty’s 1976 essay in *Artforum* gave a name to a mode of exhibiting art that was by then decades old. But while the white cube as exhibition space has been argued to death, comparatively little has been said about the white cube as workspace. With her latest exhibition *Internal Dynamics*, at *Optica*, Jo-Anne Balcaen seeks to ameliorate this dearth. Having supported her artistic practice as an exhibition coordinator for various art institutions, this is familiar ground for Balcaen.

Internal Dynamics consists of sixteen digital prints, photographs she shot at galleries in New York’s Chelsea district such as Zwirner, Cooper, Gagosian, and others. A voiceover in French and English completes the installation.

The spaces depicted in Balcaen’s photos comprise variations on the white cube, but portray not exhibition areas but workspaces. A white woman is visible behind a reception desk, while in the chamber beyond is a white man in a blue suit jacket, his back to us. The apparent normalcy or orderliness of the scene rests, perhaps, on our assumptions about art spaces: the paradigmatic female cultural worker, the male gallerist, and the overall whiteness—in the racial sense—of the “neutral” white cube.

Mostly, though, the workers remain unseen. Standing open a crack, stainless steel doors simultaneously beckon the visitor and turn her away. Pale light glows beyond one sliding door left slightly open behind a thin yet somehow imperious stanchion. Here and there, an aluminum iMac exoskeleton. Despite a focus on detail (fixtures, furniture, lighting and so on), what is most remarkable is the apparent normalness, sameness, of the spaces depicted.

It is a world of white and stainless steel, bathed in luminous monitor blues and the track light’s astringent glare. In one image, an open glass door reveals a large black-and-white painting on an office wall above a low bookshelf. Opposite, reflected in the glass, the figure of a short-haired worker perches over a monitor’s glow. Above, a framed image of a shirtless, tattooed young man sporting a trucker cap returns the visitor’s gaze. In such scenes, it is striking how the white cube’s power—to isolate a work from other objects, thereby coalescing the viewer’s focus—operates equally well in the offices as in exhibition spaces. One high-relief wall piece in gaudy yellows, pinks, and oranges, for example, practically jumps out at the viewer. So, with some humour, do stacks of colourful art books, a candy-shelf of Taschen, Phaidon and the MIT Press.



Balcaen's images revel in detail even as they pinpoint the sameness of these spaces. As such, the viewer's attention turns rather naturally to Optica's gallery space, which suddenly presents itself anew. Details previously unnoticed assert themselves, newly in focus: its white "cube," approximately 24 by 36 feet, its 11 electrical-outlet boxes, its 28 track lights installed upon a 13-foot ceiling amidst heating ducts, air returns, sprinklers, audio speakers and baffles. Doors have stainless-steel handles and boot guards. The remarkable concrete floor in warm and cool greys, is diversely accented with pebble forms, blotches, swipes. Mid-room, of course, the white bench. Like those in Balcaen's images, the space is intriguing, even remarkable—yet it could be any gallery, anywhere.

In the voiceover, a woman's gentle, sonorous voice (the artist's) invites the visitor to reflect on the meaning of the work: a means to an end ... victory over others ... excellence in your field.

"On a piece of paper," we are instructed, "list everything that comes to mind that contributes to stress for you at work. Don't worry if the list becomes quite long."

Then consider "what kind of role art might play in your life if it were free of any sense of pressure or criticism."

"Imagine how pleasure, or even joy, might re-enter your practice."

Inspired by instructional books on meditation, the voiceover shifts between self-help, professional development and visualization—genres and practices with which the neoliberal-era artist must be familiar: the artist as self-made, as entrepreneur. This is familiar terrain for Balcaen, whose practice attends to the artist's ambivalent emotional world. Her video *Mount Rundle* (2014), for example, explored the stress-inducing, often competitive world of the artist residency. In her book project *Survey for Cultural Workers* (2015), Balcaen polled individual art workers, taking stock of their expectations and motivations.

With *Internal Dynamics*, Balcaen goes a step further, pushing past the artist's experience and even the socio-political conditions of the art workspace. Indeed, just as architecture and society relate to and act upon each other along a reflexive, two-way artery, the central resonance of *Internal Dynamics* is how its logic not only addresses the installation and host gallery but reaches further, to the building Optica now calls home, and even to the systems, institutional and theoretical, within which installation, gallery and building were conceived and function today.

In 2014, Optica moved from the storied Belgo Building, an old former garment factory downtown on St. Catherine Street, into a ground-floor suite at 5445 De Gaspé, a newer but much larger former garment factory in Montreal's Mile End quarter—glib as it may seem to say, from an old sweatshop to a newer one. Indeed, while the building's upper reaches house not only artist studios (like this reviewer's) and art organizations, no less than two floors are leased to the videogame giant Ubisoft. Now as then, 5445 is a creative engine fed by the efforts, masterless or corporate, of a small army, mostly labourers in the precarious economy, beneath a roof owned by Allied Properties, a massive real-estate conglomerate that advances, sometimes notoriously, its unique, tech-sector-meets-arts-sector brand of gentrification.

For Optica, and for other artist-run centres (ARCs) that likewise moved to 5445, this was a step forward, offering newer, more professional, and frankly swankier premises. Here, and perhaps in contradiction to their diverse visions and mandates, these centres' spaces have come to resemble one another more closely than before. More surprising, however, is how these spaces—despite their visionary, even radical origins in the early ARC movement of the seventies and eighties—have become virtually indistinguishable from the elite private galleries in Balcaen's photos. In *Internal Dynamics*, we may observe that it is no longer sufficient to think of galleries as individual spaces but as access points to a gallery "realm," which, while attractive and professional, also comprises an attendant homogenizing or "flattening" effect. (How this came to be and what might or should be done about it—pertinent questions—are directions for other articles.)

Balcaen's voiceover concludes with some timely existential advice: "As you move through your day, use doorways consciously. When you come upon that in-between space, feel your feet against the floor, your hand on the doorknob. Touch the doorway as you pass through."

Against an increasingly flattened backdrop of technocratic governance, "best practices," and white walls, art workers and artists work harder and shoot higher while earning less and stressing more. We can and often do imagine better—but who has the time to realize such visions? Practice mindfulness, develop yourself professionally, and be happy. If you wake up tomorrow and find yourself still a part of the art world, surely you are one of the lucky ones?

Edwin Janzen is a visual artist living in Montreal and working in installation, digital printmaking, video, drawing, artist books and other media. He completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa in 2010. Also a contract editor and writer, Janzen has had his work published in *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings*, and other publications, and has written or edited articles for dozens of individual and institutional clients. He is currently working on an admittedly obsessive fan-writing project focused on *The Wire*, HBO's classic critical drama on the neoliberal American city.

Anicka Yi : un temps et un monde affranchis

Yoann Van Parys

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN INDIVIDUAL
GLADSTONE GALLERY
BRUXELLES
23 AVRIL -
15 JUIN 2019

Le travail de l'artiste sud-coréenne Anicka Yi bénéficie, depuis quelques années, d'une grande visibilité. L'année 2019 ne fait pas exception avec des participations à la Biennale de Venise et à une importante exposition de groupe organisée par le MoMA et intitulée *New Order: Art and Technology in the Twenty-First Century*. Au printemps, l'artiste fait étape à Bruxelles dans l'antenne belge de la galerie new-yorkaise de Barbara Gladstone, où elle inaugure une exposition plus intimiste que ses propositions muséales, mais pas moins frappante, ayant pour titre *We Have Never Been Individual*.

Anicka Yi. *The scientists* (centre). *Living and Digging In The Bacteriocene* (droite). 2019. Vue partielle de l'exposition. Avec l'aimable permission de l'artiste et de la Gladstone Gallery, New York et Bruxelles. Photo : David Regen.

