

ON INSTALLATION ART

As an inherently heterogeneous practice, installation is difficult to define. With every new publication on installation or site-specific art, the limits of the genre are redrawn. Most critics and historians of the genre have acknowledged that they struggle with their definitions because, for every seemingly common feature, there are myriad exceptions. Installation's intellectual genealogy is probably as heterogeneous as the genre itself. As Julie Reiss notes, the term "installation" did not appear in *Art Index* until 1978.¹ Writing on installation as such did not appear until the mid-1970s. But there is a consistent canon of texts and artworks cited by modern authors. Despite the difficulty in defining the term, many installations share common features:

- 1) Installation includes and activates the viewer's and the artwork's space.

Instead of being a discrete object on a pedestal, the work engages both the "situation" of the exhibition space and the viewer's body in some way.

- 2) As the viewer's body and the exhibition space are included in the experience of the work, the viewer is guided to reflect on the process of perception or experience.

Robert Morris' 1966 articles in *Artforum* titled *Notes on Sculpture* describe this relationship clearly:

The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic..²

¹ Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. xii.

² Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture 1-3," *Art in Theory 1900-1990 An Anthology of Changing Ideas* Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1992), p. 818.

3) The focus on perception and experience means that the work is preoccupied with space and time.³ The inclusion of time within the art-viewing experience prompted Michael Fried to evaluate minimalism as theatrical. Critics frequently describe installations as literally theatrical or with theatrical terms. Some installations mimic open stage sets.⁴

Finally, many critics have noted the heterogeneity of installation and of installation artists' interdisciplinary education and research practices.⁵ Installation developed in the turn from medium-specificity in the 1960s, and it coincides, as Krauss notes, with the introduction of poststructuralist literary theory, which both critiqued the notion of essences and encouraged interdisciplinarity.⁶ The more recent variation on this aspect of installation includes the incorporation of other academic and scientific disciplines into its content.⁷ Installation has no content that is specific to it. For this reason, installation artists have used it to explore a wide variety of themes, ranging from the formal concerns of color, light, and space to the history of genocides and political crimes. It is installation's flexibility that makes it attractive to artists as a practice but also a challenge for historians.

³ Nicholas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry *Installation Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 10; Nicholas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry, *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), pp. 132-166; Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2003), p. 27; Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. xiii; Erika Suderburg, "Introduction," *Space, Site, Installation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 3-5.

⁴ Both De Oliveira et al and Rosenthal site Hamilton's work for its theatricality.

⁵ Note James Meyers' artist-researcher and Hal Foster's artist as ethnographer; James Meyer, organizer *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?* American Fine Arts Co. Colin de Land Fine Art New York, New York, September 11-October 2, 1993, pp. 24-27; Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 171-203; Ellen Handy, "Installations and History," *Arts Magazine* February 1989, p. 62.

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), pp. 32-33.

⁷ Hal Foster, "Ethnographer," p. 180; James Meyer, "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity" in *Space, Site, Installation*, p. 27; Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," in *Space, Site, Installation*, p. 44.

NOT GREENBERGIAN MODERNISM

Julie Reiss argues that, because of its ephemerality, installation art has been marginalized in art history. It is difficult to establish obvious lines of formal development, which is the organizing structure of Greenbergian modernism and that of traditional art history, because installation lacks strict formal limits. For instance, Brian O'Doherty defines "project" art in opposition to the modernist white cube of the gallery space.⁸ In his work, installation or site-specific work comes to be art that contradicts everything that defines the modernist exhibition practices of the white cube. If the white cube excludes time, decay, and the body and its experiences, then installation brings them into the gallery space.⁹ By using modernism as a foil, O'Doherty is able to historicize the exhibition space and, in so doing, both define the practice of installation and derive its genealogy.

O'Doherty and Rosalind Krauss also regard installation as a rupture within the historical category of modernist sculpture.¹⁰ According to Peter Burger, the desire to merge art and life was the critical practice of the modernist avant-garde movements.¹¹ Many critics have connected this goal of avant-garde art to the contemporary practice of installation. In this sense, installation, positioned against the autonomy of the art object, finds its origins in avant-garde art practices that sought to merge art with life, such as Dada and Surrealism.¹²

GENEALOGIES OF INSTALLATION

⁸ O'Doherty, "Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space, Part 1," *Artforum* vol. 14 no. 7 March 1976, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 Spring 1979, pp. 31-44.

¹¹ Jack Spector, "Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde," *Art Criticism* vol. 2 no.1 1985, pp. 70-76.

¹² De Oliveira, 1994, p. 7; Rosenthal, pp. 27-28.

Two divergent definitions of installation emerge from the subject's literature. One approach regards it as strictly an art practice. These historians believe installation to be meaningful only in the context of the modern gallery and museum system.¹³ The other approach regards installation as a cross-disciplinary "function" whose context extends beyond the art world. The first looks strictly at modern art historical precedents for installation.¹⁴ The other includes both non-modernist and non-art world practices. For instance, Germano Celant and Erika Suderberg include things like early Christian mausoleums, folk art buildings, follies, and Baroque architecture as precedents for installation.

I believe it is most appropriate to attribute to installation art a historically specific genealogy that begins in the twentieth century. The ideology of installation, as some authors point out, requires both the modern gallery space, understood as the "white cube" and the conceptual distinction between art and life to be meaningful. Following the authors I have cited I argue that installation is rooted in two basic modern ideas. One is the nineteenth-century aesthetic form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that synthesized many different media into a total artwork.¹⁵ The genre merged opera, theater, painting, sculpture, and music. The second is the viewer as a co-creator with the artist, another nineteenth-century Romantic idea. The viewer in his encounter with the work generates its meaning and, in a sense, completes it.¹⁶ The interaction of viewer and artwork transforms both.¹⁷ Both Dada practices and Surrealism drew on these concepts.

¹³ These historians include Nicholas de Oliveira et al. and Krauss.

¹⁴ O'Doherty, Reiss, Gonzalez, and De Oliveira et al. (1994)

¹⁵ De Oliveira 1994, p. 15.

¹⁶ Hugh Honour notes the emphasis placed on the sketch. It is the Romantic notion that the incompleteness of an object allows a viewer to become involved by mentally completing it. Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 17.

¹⁷ Germano Celant, "ArtSpaces" *Studio International* 190 no. 977 September-October 1975, pp. 122.

GENEALOGIES

I will outline two brief genealogies of installation art. The first derives loosely from Surrealism and involves the investment of the body in the space of the artwork. The second derives more directly from Duchamp's work and involves the reflection on perceptions and art institutional critique.

Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1919-1936), a construction in his house formed around personal objects charged with erotic and psychological meaning, is an important precedent for installation.¹⁸ The *Merzbau*, an environment of grottoes for his fetishes, grew from Schwitters' practice of wandering and collecting significant bits of trash. On these walks, Schwitters sought out trinkets and strange objects to include in his construction. The Surrealist concept of objective chance, which Hal Foster defines as the uncanny confusion of interior and exterior, past and present, is important for this work.¹⁹ In this story, an object encountered on a walk through the city brings together in a disturbing or pleasurable way, past and present, psychological interior and material world. In Foster's account, this aspect of Surrealism also evokes the marvelous, the appearance of a startling or contradictory element in the everyday order of things. The avant-garde practice of collage, sculpture, and large-scale sculptural installation involved both objective chance and the notion of the marvelous. Installation influenced by Surrealism thus can include the incorporation of the body into the art object, the themes of sexuality and death, the use of natural materials, or cast-off objects, and the emphasis on enveloping environments. The artists in this genealogy seek to merge art and life by using found objects, cast-off and organic materials, and their own bodies in their work.

¹⁸ O'Doherty, "Part II," p.27.

¹⁹ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), p. xii.

They also broke artistic convention by including the audience in the construction and performance of the work.

The International Exposition of Surrealism was held at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938. It included Duchamp's *1200 Coal Bags*, a hallway lined with mannequins altered by each of the participating artists, and an exhibition space that included a floor covered with leaves, sand, and actual ponds of water surrounded with plants. It even included multi-sensory elements such as the smell of roasting coffee beans and coal dust, which fell from the ceiling on to visitors' clothes.²⁰ This first exhibition included elements that came to be important in later installations, such as the use of organic materials, multi-sensory elements, arrangements of objects in tableaux, obsessive accumulations of material, and a space marked off from the everyday world into which the viewer is immersed.

Projects after World War II that were influenced by Surrealism often involved an investment of the libidinal, the psychological, or the organic into the surfaces and spaces of the site or exhibition space. For instance, the Situationist International, officially formed in 1958, developed the *dérive*, in which members of the SI would choose a route through a city, taking note of events, strange sights, and their emotions as they walked. In this way, they turned their subjective experiences of the city into a work of art that they believed would undercut the capitalist manipulation inherent in the "society of the spectacle." At the same time the SI was active in Europe, John Cage was teaching music at Black Mountain College. He adopted the radical notion that the audience and the outside world should be included in a work of art. The artist's job was to produce a

²⁰ Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), pp. 20-88.

frame that would focus the audience's attention. His ideas as well as Robert Motherwell's book on Dada, specifically Kurt Schwitters' essay on the *Merzbau*, was influential in the development of environments made by Allan Kaprow, Lucas Samaras, and Carolee Schneemann. Allan Kaprow's environments were also inspired by the large-scale paintings of American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock. According to Kaprow, Pollock destroyed painting by pushing the beyond the limits of the canvas into real life. Kaprow saw the 1960s as the time when Pollock,

...left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch.²¹

The artists in Womanhouse, constructed in 1971 in California by the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, adopted this idea in an effort to criticize sexism and to produce a work of art about the experience of being a woman. The artists in this project literally embedded signs of femininity into the structure and furnishings of each room. In her *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)* (1972), Faith Wilding crocheted a series of screens with round openings of various sizes, using a 'feminine' craft to produce vaginal forms, and filled the room with them. This project is similar to Yayoi Kusama's obsessive practice of covering objects and environments with phallus-like objects. Her work sexualizes the art space, rendering it surreal and uncanny. In Kusama's work, the artist's psychological fetish is fused to the surfaces of the space in which she works. In the 1980s and 1990s, artists have continued to explore the possibility of merging bodies and spaces. For instance, Ann Hamilton's large-scale installations include large accumulations of organic materials, sounds, and smells in an

²¹ Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *ArtNews* vol. 57 no. 6, 1958, p. 56.

effort to connect the viewer's body and the space. In her sensual, saturated video installations, Pipilotti Rist uses her own body as an element in her work, projecting it onto the surfaces of the exhibition space using digital projectors.

The installation-type practices in the second genealogical line emphasize critical viewing and reflection in works that trace the ideological and conceptual limits of the exhibition space. The second genealogy derives from Duchamp's work, which, in this reading, is not so much about personal obsessions as much as about institutional critique. In *Mile of String*, installed at the exhibition *The First Papers of Surrealism* in 1942, Duchamp entangled the exhibition space in twine.²² The work forced viewers to move carefully to see the other pieces in the exhibition and served as an absurd contrast to the opulent surroundings of the old mansion. In this way, Duchamp separated visual experience from corporeal experience in the space. It is this self-conscious viewing and attention to the space of exhibition that characterizes the second genealogy of installation.

Minimalism, in a different way, does the same sort of work. Michael Fried's work and Robert Morris' three essays *Notes on Sculpture* make important claims about the relationship between the viewer, the object, and the space. Morris' description of Minimal work that took the interest out of the art object itself and shifted it to the viewer's own interaction and perception of the artwork crystallized the notion of experiencing experience in contemporary installation. Minimalist time is specific to the experience of the artwork, and is in a certain sense, materialized. The concern with time and process is elaborated in Postminimalism. Works such as Richard Serra's lead casting pieces, or Barry LeVa's scatter pieces point more directly to the gallery space as an active

²² *Marvelous*, p. 166.

participant in the construction and reading of the work.²³ Robert Smithson's conceptual categories of site and non-site set up a dialectical relation between the site, located outside the gallery space in the "world," and the non-site within the gallery. In this way, Smithson draws attention to the gallery not only as a generic space with phenomenological qualities but to the gallery as an institution. This type of work has come to be known as site-specific. In the 1990s, James Meyer and Miwon Kwon expanded the definition of site-specific work to include the work of artists that explore not merely fixed, architectural sites but also sites as conceptual categories. James Meyer includes the work of artists such as Andrea Fraser, Christian Philip Müller, Mark Dion and Renée Green in this category.

This work derives from that of Marcel Broodthaers whose fictional museum, by parodying the institution, invited viewers' critical reflection upon it.²⁴ Hans Haacke's work performed the same sort of critique, but rather than using fiction, Haacke connected the museum to the real world of power, commerce, and class privilege. For instance, Haacke's controversial *Shapolsky et al., Manhattan Real Estate Holdings A Real Time Social System* (1971) exposed the unethical business dealings of a well-connected New York businessman with ties to the Guggenheim Museum board of trustees. The work, which utilized photo-documentation and text panels installed as if they were paintings, was removed from a planned exhibition at the Guggenheim in 1971.

It is in the work of African-American and other artists of color, who look at images of African-Americans found in fine art and popular culture, such as Carrie Mae

²³ Marcia Tucker and James Monte, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), p. 9, pp. 46-47.

²⁴ Rondeau, James. "The Artist in the Museum: Infiltrating the Collection," *Sculpture* vol. 18 no. 6 July-August 1999, p. 25.

Weems, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Adrian Piper, and others, that history was included in representational and institutional critique.²⁵ Fred Wilson's work of the 1990s and 2000s involves similar elements of collaboration and critique. These practices, focused on social systems and institutions, make room for examinations of identity and history in the 1980s and 1990s. At Dartmouth College (2005), Fred Wilson gathered together dozens of busts, paintings and statues of Daniel Webster, one of New Hampshire's historic icons, into a small exhibition space, thereby contrasting the surplus of images of the famous politician with the few of people of color in the Hood Museum collection. In simple juxtapositions within the installation format, Wilson criticizes racist and Eurocentric museum exhibition and collecting practices. In *Import/Export Funkoffice* (1993) Green used the installation format as archive to explore the exchange of cultural ideas between Germany and the United States in the form of hip/hop music. The work allowed viewers to hang out in and enjoy listening to music and reading books, while encouraging them at the same time to question identity.

Since the mid-1970s, when temporary and site-specific work was finally articulated as a genre and several exhibition venues devoted solely to it were opened, critics have attempted to define it in material, conceptual, and historical terms.²⁶ The project for historians and critics of installation art has been to delineate the boundaries of this heterogeneous practice and to create categories within those boundaries. This is another way to bring installation more firmly into the institution of art. And by now, installation art is no longer a new way of thinking about art but a regular part of gallery

²⁵ Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 190-191, 201-202.

²⁶ Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. xi-xii.

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exhibition practices. Rosalind Krauss has argued that installation can no longer be regarded as avant-garde or effectively critical of the institution of art because it lacks any distinction from “life.” Recouped as art history by the museum and traded as a commodity on the international art market, the practice retains none of the critical power it had in the late 1960s. It simply circulates as another form of exchange in the international art world. Artists, however, continue to use the installation format to tell stories, to engage viewers in an immersive bodily experience, and to criticize art institutions, contemporary culture, and political situations. Because of its flexibility, installation art will undoubtedly continue to be an attractive means for engaging viewers directly in an exploration of artistic ideas and cultural issues.