

Installation Art: A New Relationship to Audience

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Ever since Marcel Duchamp first began challenging the concept of modern aesthetics, there have been artists willing to re-engage artmaking and question the recognized language of the visual arts. Aspects of what is today called installation art can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s as artwork began to shift from product to process. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Allan Kaprow, and Claes Oldenburg produced artwork that required the art audience to relate to conceptual issues such as time and space. Installation artists desire their work to be an extension of real life, and for that reason it is most important that it be experienced and not just observed. This new relationship to artwork has brought a vitality to museums, galleries, and even the artists themselves by allowing viewers a different kind of personal experience and an ability to control interpretation.

Installation art can be defined as site-specific artwork that completely surrounds the viewer. Michael Archer gives a good description of what goes into the making of an installation:

Each artist uses the whole room the same way you might use a sheet of paper or canvas. He or she might cut into the floor, add a new wall, connect shapes to the ceiling, use music or other sounds, paint certain things but not others, change the lighting, or add a particular smell. Then when you walk into the room, it is like walking into a painting. (30)

What makes installation unique is that every detail is directed toward how it will be perceived and experienced by the audience. Installation artists want the viewer to become a co-participant and relate to the artwork in ways other than mere observation. In galleries which specialize in installation art, such as The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh or The Capp Street Project in San Francisco, audiences are promised “a unique experience, both sensory and

thought provoking,” as well as “a great opportunity to determine how contemporary art can resonate with—or offer alternatives to—your experience of the world.” (Installation)

Marcel Duchamp was one of the first to recognize that the audience is much more important to a work of art than an artist might want to acknowledge. He said:

The work of art is always based on the two poles of the onlooker and the maker, and the spark that comes from that bipolar action gives birth to something—like electricity. But the onlooker has the last word, and it is always posterity that makes the masterpiece. The artist should not concern himself with this, because it has nothing to do with him. (qtd. in Tompkins 171)

Archer explains that it was important to Duchamp that his own work amuse or fascinate, and “it is this quality of being interested in or fascinated by things rather than struck or absorbed by their beauty that characterizes installation” (30).

Duchamp tried to do away with aesthetic issues altogether and forced the viewer to relate to art as a concept, by hanging everyday objects such as a comb, snow shovel, or urinal on the gallery wall (fig. 1). Archer adds that these “readymades” not only “defied the idea that the artist’s touch, as a sign of a unique expressive act, was essential to art,” but they also “demonstrated that it is the context in which we encounter things that largely determines how we behave towards them” (30). It can no longer be assumed that meaning is to be found inherently within an object in a gallery setting. Appreciation and understanding can come directly out of the quality of one’s experience. Ronald Onorato supports this idea when he states, “the aesthetic power of installation art does not reside in the singular, commodified object but in its ability to become, rather than merely represent, the continuum of real experience” for the art audience (Blurring 13).

Jackson Pollock was also instrumental in changing the way that an audience views artwork (fig. 2). When he began recording his movements in space onto the monumental canvas he provided a visual roadmap to be followed. Johnathan Fineberg says:

Intuitively the viewer can feel the process by which Pollock made the drip

compositions and imagine the sensation of moving freely across the canvas along with the gestures of paint . . . Pollock's drip paintings demand that the viewer surrender intellectual control while freely empathizing with the energetic color and movement. (93)

Pollock was personally influenced by the work and writings of Kandinsky, such as the Text Arista, where he talked about the importance of learning, "not to look at a picture only from the outside, but to 'enter' it, to move around in it, and mingle with its very life" (qtd. in Fineberg 96). Through Pollock, this statement by Kandinsky continues to breathe life into the art and audience of installation.

In the 1960s, artists such as Alan Kaprow, Claes Oldenberg, and Red Grooms started including the audience as participants along with other artists, musicians and actors in their active, environmental, multimedia events that eventually became known as Happenings.

Dick Higgins suggests that the origin of Happenings may be linked back to . . .

a Black Mountain event in 1953 at which a Franz Kline painting was displayed, Cunningham danced, Cage performed music, and so on. The innovative urge which underlay this experiment, "Happening" or not, certainly was a sign of a restlessness in the arts that wanted to go beyond simply the abstract vision of the official art of the time and in to some new form of realism—new interpretations with reality, not just an art reflecting the subjective vision of an artist but an art of interaction with external reality which could therefore perpetually renew itself. (Higgins)

Kaprow was instrumental in transforming action painting into an art form of complete and total action. He described happenings as "utilizing the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things" (qtd. Fineberg 189). Just as with current installation work, spectators were encouraged to use their own analytical and interpretive skills. Not only did this establish a

new level of viewer participation but it encouraged the continued disappearance of the art object as creative responsibility was transferred from the artist to the public. Frank Popper says that there was a clear passage of audience participation from “contemplative behavior to active participant, ludic activity, autonomous behavior and finally true creativity” (24).

Environmental constructions, such as the tableaux of George Segal and Edward Kienholz, required less participation from the audience but made up for the passivity with in-your-face content that the viewer couldn't ignore. Reagan Upshaw describes his experience as a viewer of Kienholz's work The Portable War Memorial (fig. 3):

While I looked at the Pop art and other works in the Ludwig Collection, I became faintly aware of music playing in another room. As I got closer, the tune fell into place: “God Bless America,” sung by Kate Smith. I finally entered the room from which the music emanated and was confronted by a wall-filling installation. . . Five faceless mannequins dressed in combat gear, posed as in the famous World War II photograph of the marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima, were attempting to plant a flag pole in the umbrella hole of a patio table. The music came from an upside-down garbage can bearing Kate Smith's likeness, while to the right of the marines were a Coke machine and a reproduction of the service window for a hot dog stand. The entire installation was colored in the tones of galvanized steel, except for a menu board bearing the legend “V-Day.” Underneath, in chalk, were names of hundreds of nations that no longer existed because of wars, while the blank next to the “V” awaited the initial of whomever we were to celebrate beating this time. With its conflation of patriotism and the turning of a capitalist buck, The Portable War Memorial at once evoked a past war in Asia and stood as a rebuke to the one currently raging.

But then the thing wouldn't leave me alone. I went on to other rooms, to look at other art, and that damned, scratchy recording with its soaring end-

ing ("My home [pause] sweet [pause] HO-O-O-OME! [and the band joins in]) kept following me, like a tiresome drunk on the next stool who won't stop plucking at your sleeve. It was an epiphany of Kienholz at his best (that's to say, most irritating), with dead-on satire, inspired use of iconography and an in-your-face attitude. (98)

Kienholz's ability to deal with the human condition in all its ugliness, is being imitated by many of the more political installation artists of today, such as Kay Hassan, who deals with horrors in South Africa such as the constant displacement of families, or Kcho (Alexa Leyva), who details perilous raft escapes from his homeland Cuba.

Site-specific artwork took on an even grander scale when artists such as Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson explored vast landscapes as part of their earth-works. Fineberg describes how the audiences experienced the almost inaccessible work...

the pilgrimage through the lost landscape to the site was an important aspect of the experience of the work itself...by setting the work so far out in the middle of nowhere, these artists made visitors feel acutely vulnerable to the elements. If your car broke down, you might die of dehydration before anyone could find you. (325)

It was De Maria who reversed the idea of earthwork when he filled the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich with 3 feet of dirt (fig. 4). Many installation artists today still utilize the power and vitality of the multi-sensory effects that De Maria achieved in his Earth Room. Fineberg speaks of the importance the senses play in experiencing this work in person...

...one cannot successfully reproduce it in pictures or by description. As visitors ascend the stairs, they slowly begin to feel the moisture and smell the rich humus. The soil also has a distinctive muting effect on the sounds in the space. (325)

Dan Flavin began using industrial fluorescent tubes and lighting fixtures to paint the gallery walls with color. By flooding the environment with colored light he challenged the

viewer to respond to a visual and spatial phenomena that consisted only of light, color, and composition such as in Untitled, 1963 (fig. 5). Sometimes the fixtures remained hidden, but most of the time they were used in a sculptural or linear way to capture the viewer.

Artists Bruce Nauman and Mowry Baden also dealt with visual phenomena within the gallery setting but required much more of their audience in terms of participation and interpretation. Nauman started out successfully doing performance and conceptual artwork and became increasingly interested in playing mind-games with his audience. In the 1970s, he created a series of Corridor installations which enticed the viewer to navigate small, difficult, and smothering passageways (see fig. 6). The presentation of his work has remained wide and varied, but consistently uncomfortable for the audience. Peter Schjeldahl speaks of the frustrating experience of being a participant in Nauman's artwork:

He gives me a sullen sense of knowing less than I thought I knew and a sinking feeling that what I do may depend on flawed, perhaps sentimental assumptions. I come away from his work with less confidence of all kinds than I bring to it, but with a whetted appetite for whatever in the world may be genuine. (90)

Baden was interested in physical sculpture that demanded an active role be played by the viewer. Like Nauman, the audience was encouraged to participate, but with much more positive end results. Mary Johnson describes what the viewer experience with Nauman's construction I Walk the Line (fig. 7):

The participant—straddling a curved wooden rail—is offered a brief trip down the central aisle of the sculpture. The viewer's initial visual assumption is that it will be impossible to negotiate the rise at the center of the rail. The visitor soon discovers, however, that a corresponding ramp hidden within the structure provides the necessary clearance. By participating in the completion of the work, the viewer is forced to rely on tactile and kinesthetic senses and is led to question the accuracy of what is seen, accentuating one of Baden's

central concerns: that vision is unduly emphasized in art. (Blurring 36)

Chris Burden was famous in the 1970s for outrageous self-mutilating body art where he shot himself with a gun, had himself dragged through broken glass and was literally nailed to the top of a volkswagen. The painful mutilations stopped as he moved into more socio-political themes. In The Reason for the Neutron Bomb, Burden methodically installs 50,000 nickels that have matchsticks glued on one side to represent the Cold War Russian army of 50,000 tanks (fig. 8). For the viewer, the sea of nickels in the gallery is powerful and impressive. When the accompanying text is read, the magnitude of the Eastern European buildup is reinforced.

In the 1970s, Alice Aycock began creating wooden mazelike structures that were intended to create multiple psychological sensations for the audience, ranging from claustrophobia to euphoria. Many of these works forced the viewer into a state of sheer terror. She describes The Machine That Makes the World as, “a fenced-in wooden maze that leads the viewer under a series of heavy steel guillotines into a confining circular labyrinth... a monument of absolute panic, when the only thing that mattered was to get out ” (qtd. Fienberg 390). In a 1995 exhibit The Starry Night, Donald Lipski mimics Aycock’s desire for multiple psychological sensations (fig. 9). Lipski paid homage to Van Gogh’s artwork by recreating the swirls directly onto the clean white gallery walls. The patterns created on the wall collect light and shimmer, eventually calling attention to the fact that flowing curves are made up of thousands of two-edged razorblades stuck into the wall. The audience takes with them a visual reminder that in the midst of beauty lies the possibility of great pain.

Installation artists in the 1990s are connecting to audiences through a renewed sense of personal reflection. Michael Rush says that the possibilities of form and content are as varied as the artists themselves and adds:

These works push the personalization of art perhaps to an endpoint. By using at times their own bodies, clothes, or hair, by incorporating objects that have no meaning beyond the personal (diaries, childhood toys), or by seizing their

place in the world by proclaiming race, gender, or sexual identity, these artists are creating personal narratives that are as close to the self as any form of expression can be. (24)

By personalizing the work, the artist has a greater chance of connecting with his or her audience and tapping into things that they might recognize as their own.

As an artist, I first recognized this audience connection with the completion of my first installation piece. The work consisted of what I thought to be a very personal expression of my family—a day's worth of laundry (created out of wire) that was hung out on a line to dry. I covered the gallery floor with actual turf, which created a natural humidity and aroma, and by adding the repetitive sound of a backyard sprinkler, a real-time element occurred. The first time I saw someone lying down on the grass in the gallery I knew the response to this type of art was different. Audiences responded to this installation piece in ways that I had never experienced with any of my more traditional, two-dimensional art. I found myself engaged in dialogue with people about issues that went beyond the work. When people spoke of it, they spoke in terms of personal life experiences and childhood memories rather than about aesthetic issues. After the installation was over, I continued to encounter people who shared poems or clippings that reminded them of their experience with this piece. For the first time in my experience as an artist, I was being touched by the audiences' experiences and interpretations.

I began searching to see if this experience was common among other installation artists and discovered that it occurs whenever the viewer experiences "an inner trust toward the exhibited space and things" (Kabakov 277). When asked about audience responses to her installation work, Judy Pfaff said:

There's something about it that sets people free from their preconceptions. I see students walking in, and other people, and they all start talking about things in ways I know they don't at other times. You'll see eyes open, or people will go into the past, and they'll tell you all kinds of stories. The most intimate things! I

think it really still does touch people, and in ways that still surprise me.

When Pfaff finishes a piece, her desire is “to get somewhere, to be able to learn something.” She feels that as artists we too easily forget that through this kind of commitment, we can “tap into a place” that people “know and crave for.” (Whittaker)

It’s not uncommon for people to find it hard to leave an installation. It’s quite similar to the sadness one feels toward the end of a good book or movie, having identified closely with the characters. Ilya Kabakov says the viewer of an installation . . .

should feel like a person who accidentally, for some unknown reason, has dropped into a stranger’s room, has peered into another person’s life, and not through the window or door, but that he has entered it, touching things and objects that do not concern him at all. [It is only then that the viewer] dives easily into this everydayness, and he encounters it like his own personal, highly familiar past. It begins to seem to him that he has already seen this installation world at some time, somewhere. He recognizes it, he finds it in his memories. Familiar circumstances and the contrived illusion carry the one who is wandering inside the installation away into his personal corridor of memory and evoke from that memory an approaching wave of associations which until this point had slept peacefully in its depths. The installation has merely bumped, awakened, touched his “depths,” this “deep memory”, and the recollections rushed up out of these depths, seizing the consciousness of the installation viewer from within. (278)

The element of time has been lost from most forms of art. For installation art, not only is the work itself temporal, but the audience experience itself is based on time. Suvan Geer says “It’s a kind of ongoing *deja vu* that knocks the work from real-time into recollection as the viewer confronts the representation as well as their memory of it in an awareness that seems to stretch into infinity but finds no immediate location in space” (Geer). The viewer arrives, wanders, examines, thinks, remembers, and contemplates what is before him

in an experience that can be considered almost spiritual.

Perhaps it is the desire for something spiritual that connects the artist and audience in installation art. One of the best and earliest examples of installation would be the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, where everything was designed and choreographed to focus those in attendance on worship. The tools that are used today in installation art are the same tools used for centuries: a specific site with visuals, smells, sounds, lighting, atmosphere, words, and even performance—all to bring vitality to the spiritual aspect of life. If artists, museums and galleries are to maintain a vital role in the community, they must continue to break down barriers and let audiences know that art can speak to them. Installation art can provide that link by bringing vitality to human experience. Frederick Buechner speaks of the spiritual impact of art:

Literature, painting, music—The most basic lesson that all art teaches us is to stop, look, listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it ever occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot. In a world that for the most part steers clear of the whole idea of holiness, art is one of the few places left where we can speak to each other of holy things. (16)

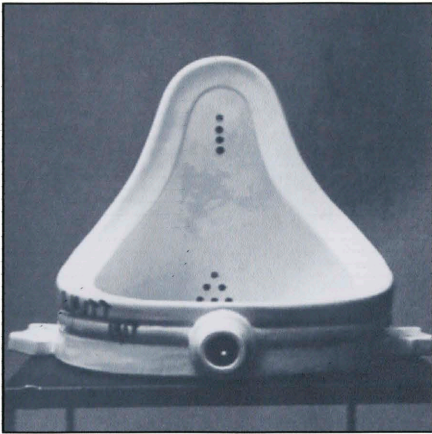


Fig #1, Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917, Porcelain.

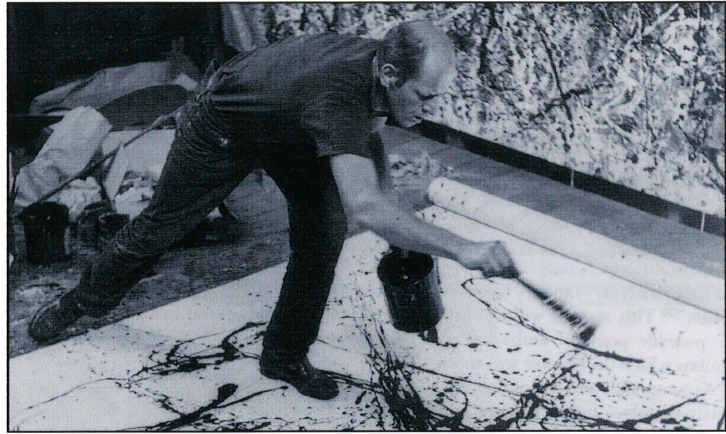


Fig #2, Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock at work, 1950.



Fig #3, Edward Kienholz, The Portable War Memorial, 1968, Tableau.



Fig #4, Walter De Maria, The New York Earth Room, 1977, 250 cu. yd. of black soil in a 3,600 sq. ft. loft.

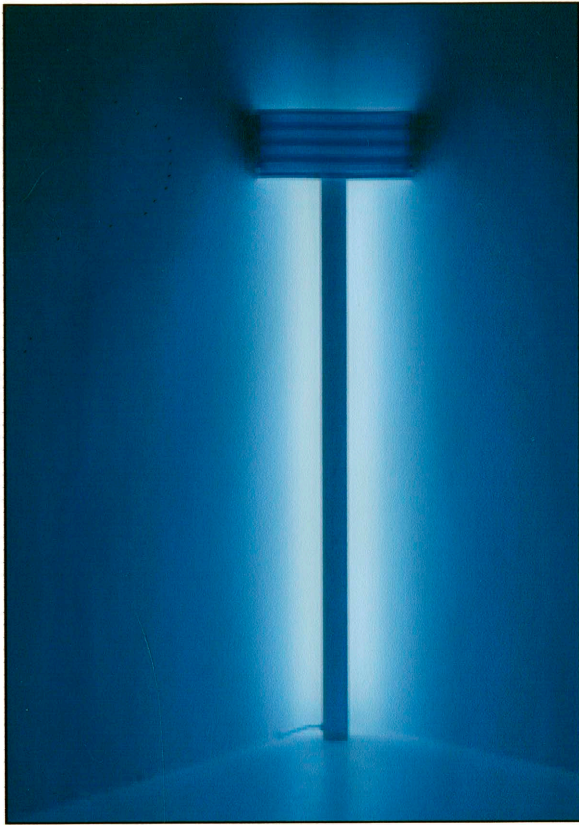


Fig #5, Dan Flavin, Untitled (for Prudence and her new baby), 1992, cool white fluorescent light.



Fig #6, Bruce Nauman, Green Light Corridor, 1970-71.

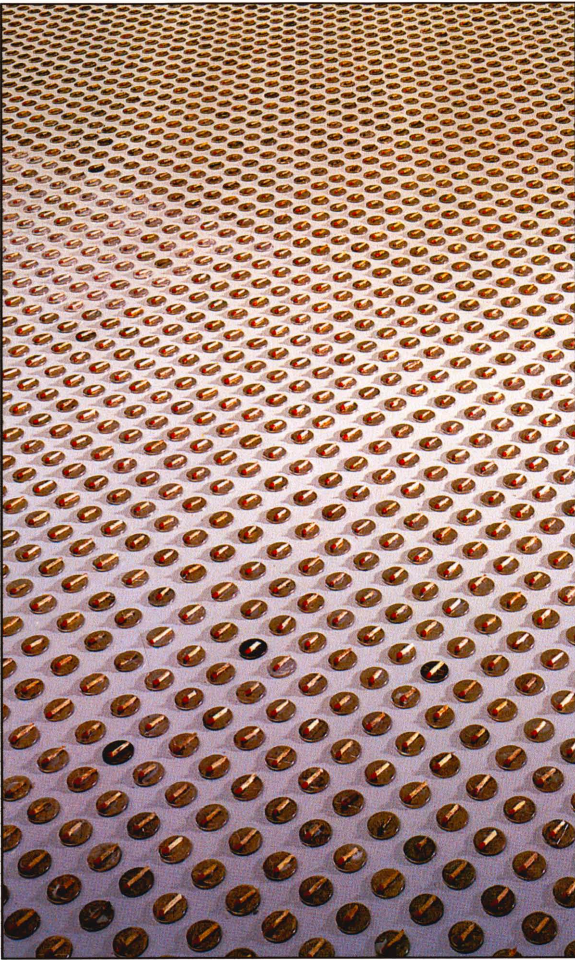


Fig #7, Chris Burden,
The Reason for the Neutron Bomb, 1979,
50,000 nickles and matchsticks.

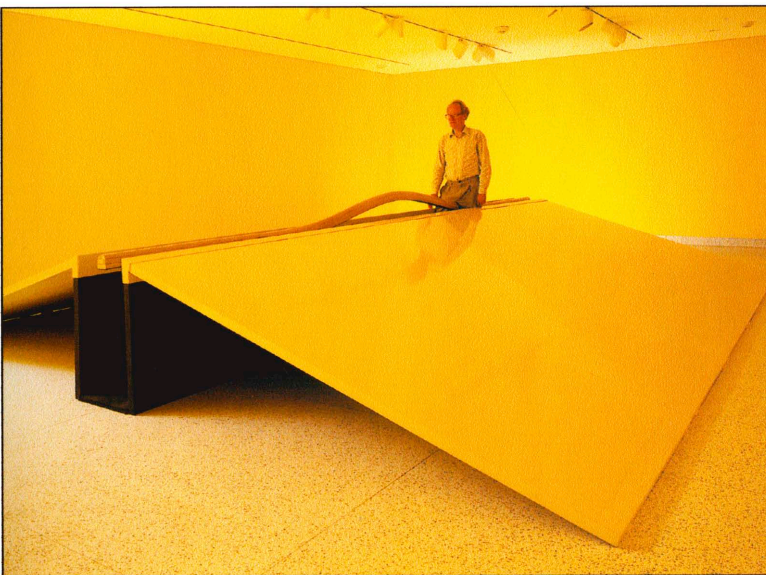


Fig #8, Bruce Nauman,
Green Light Corridor, 1970-71.



Fig #9, Donald Lipski,
The Starry Night, 1995,
Razorblades.

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