



Inland Specific

installations by artists of the San Gabriel Valley

Installation: Toward A Non-Definition

Standing in the center of Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, Germany, I was oddly aware that I was experiencing an early form of installation art, a spatial environment, sculptural but not a sculpture. The *Merzbau* (re-creation) does have objects placed within its enveloping architecture and it does read spatially, in certain areas, as two-dimensional. Beginning in 1923, the *Merzbau* was constructed into Schwitters' apartment, starting in one area and traveling up steps and into cabinets like an organic life force until it took over both floors of his home. It was attached to the architecture, fixed, and made permanent; that is, installed. The *Merzbau* was dedicated to its substructure: the walls, floors and ceilings of Schwitters' apartment. It was a room-sized, walk-in work of art. Schwitters' claimed that his *Merzbau* had nothing to do with decoration or making a living space: "I am constructing an abstract sculpture, in which one can come and go...I am building a composition without frontiers, in which each element furnishes the context for its neighbors..."

The *Merzbau* is now widely considered one of the first examples of what is now known as installation art. Although the term "environment" was popular in the 1960s and 1970s, the more recent term "installation" can be expanded upon and refers to various states of materials and spatial conditions. The relationship between "site specific" and "installation" is dynamic and historically rich, but ultimately dependent upon the location and condition of the site. Not everything installed is an installation and not all installations are fixed to their sites. There are numerous discrepancies and contradictions when discussing the qualities of what defines "installation" art. The term is permeable and encompasses a wide variety of artistic forms.

In the early 20th century, Schwitters' *Merzbau* revealed the transformative power of installation, the practice of which can be traced through most of the art movements of the century: Dada, Futurism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *1,200 Bags of Coal* at the "International Exposition of Surrealism" in Paris in 1938, and *Mile of String* in the "First Papers of Surrealism" in New York in 1942 were important milestones because they disrupted the conventional relationships between the gallery space and the viewer. Disorientation and issues of navigation are recurring constituents in installation art. The spatial boundaries between the viewer and the work of art, and between the work of art and its context, are opened up and ruptured in a variety of examples from Brechtian theater to the pseudo-virtual display of spectacle and surveillance. In the 1920s, Lazar El Lissitsky, with his series of *Proun* drawings and room installations, attempted to challenge and escape from the Euclidean laws of spa-

tial constructs. Practices ranging from the Situationist International, Allan Kaprow's "Happenings," Barry Le Va's scatter pieces, and Claes Oldenberg's *Bedroom*, to Barbara Kruger's textual interventions, Fred Wilson's institutional critique, Joseph Beuy's metaphysical debris, and Julia Scher's media-wired galleries are all witness to the ongoing developments that assault the traditional order of the gallery space.

In discussing current installation art, I am not seeking a final definition but am motivated by the process of definition and exploring the schism that lives between what is considered sculpture versus installation. The conditions and concepts of installation art are continually being reinvented by a wide variety of artists. Site dependency is not a new idea and is mostly entrusted to practices that produce dull public art. To make work that is totally dependent upon the conditions of the site may detract from the work itself, leaving a kind of anemic object drained of an essential ability to stand on its own. Work that is produced in a vacuum, on the other hand, may have its own attractive autonomy.

This process of definition is a language game, as in looking at the differences between and conditions of site-specific and location-based intervention. Object installation, tableau, environments, happenings, or performance actions can all be embraced under the umbrella of installation art. What is it that separates these terms? It can be said that installation art tends not to be a single object, if an object at all, but more likely a group of objects or conditions that address the spatial characteristics or parameters of an exhibition. The components may respond to the site but may not be specifically about the site. For example, imagine a living room with a sofa, coffee table, end tables, a cabinet, pictures, side chairs, a mirror and so on. These objects can be set up so that they function as a room of furniture or simply as objects stacked up, emptied of their function within the room. This can be seen as a linguistic issue, a "grammar of objects," or as a spatially syntactical relationship. Installation art and all of its connected extensions live in that relational space which challenges traditional readings of art and its contexts.

I have recently experienced a number of exhibitions or situations that provide a context for a discussion of installation art and some of its practitioners. The 2000 World's Fair in Hannover, Germany, was a massive suburban installation that incorporated a series of curated outdoor projects. *Wonderland*, an exhibit curated by Rochelle Steiner at the St. Louis Art Museum, presents ten connected room-sized installations in a building constructed as part of the 1904 World's Fair. *Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures* is an exhibition curated by Phillipe Vergne at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in which dozens of artists' works were orchestrated into an overall, singularly presented installation. Gambucci's Italian

restaurant in Kansas City represents the extreme and ubiquitous use of thematic installations in consumerist environments.

The *Expo 2000* in Hannover, in addition to hosting pavilions from all over the world, commissioned twelve artists to create outdoor site-responsive installations. *In-Between*, as the *Expo 2000* project was titled, was curated by Kasper Koenig and Wilfried Dickhoff. The project emphasized work installed in locations, gaps or passages between buildings and events, stages and stands: the thresholds, transitional- and non-spaces. Upon entering the fair's promenade, Gabriel Orozco's displaced and poignant work titled *Wheel of Fortune* greets you, though it almost blends in with other giddy displays crowding the fair's entrance. The work is a medium-scaled Ferris wheel from 1920s Mexico that visitors are invited to ride at designated times. Orozco's ironic work is securely installed, half-submerged into the ground, complete with ticket booth and fencing, which provide a complete carnivalesque tableau. The carnivalesque atmosphere of Orozco's participatory installation, in juxtaposition to the rest of the expo, highlights installation art's relationship to entertainment through its dependence on thematic totality.

Bionic Boogie (Ego, Water, Technology) by Albert Oehlen is a vast mosaic environment across which fairgoers are invited to walk. Whereas Orozco's work was in essence an object, Oehlen's installation actually inscribes a territory. This immense, highly colorful mosaic, replete with fountains, is level with the ground. This work is based on superimposing digitally derived images of the artist, an elderly man's passport photo and a vase of flowers. The six million tiles used to produce the elliptical mosaic correspond in a one-to-one ratio to the individual pixels of the computer-generated image. Due to the scale of this monumental work, the collaged images are only legible from an aerial view. Orozco's and Oehlen's works in *Expo 2000* on one hand represent two poles of outdoor installation practice and, on the other, suggest traditional spaces of fairs and plazas. One follows the model of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, the other Robert Smithson's earthworks.

Wonderland comprises ten individual room-size installations that define and transform the spaces and encourage an active physical engagement on the part of the viewer. The exhibition's premise is the inspiration, curiosity, and marvel that may be derived from observation of everyday settings. The entire exhibition space is laid out so that all the installations are viewed one after the other. They are all adjacent with only one entrance and one exit to the exhibition, similar to the layout of a theme-park ride. Viewers move from room to room without the possibility of getting off the track. This "ride-like" museum installation generates an experience that

underlies the similarities between the environments of art and entertainment and highlights the fact that many institutions are looking to art as entertainment to boost attendance and appeal to a wider audience.

Pipilotti Rist's video installation *Ever Is Over All* employs the current practice of using multiple video projections and audio systems to construct an environmental video theater. Her two monumental images meet in a corner. Positioned somewhere between the projector and the moving images on the wall, viewers are forced to see their silhouettes as part of the image. Rist's slow-motion, fairy-tale depiction of a young woman smashing car windows with a cast bronze flower occurs while the other video roves through a garden of the real flowers at close perspective. Rist uses video and music much like a commercial. Video installations like Rist's demonstrate how the video monitor has become almost invisible, replaced by the use of projectors. One significant difference in relation to installation art is the use of the museum's architecture as a window or backdrop for the projections.

Olafur Eliason's *The Drop Factory: A Short Story on Your Self-ref and Rep* responds to the existence and placement of an atrium fountain in the great hall of the 1904 St. Louis Art Museum. His site-responsive installation consists of an architecturally scaled, reflective, geodesic dome that completely envelops the historic fountain. This work responds to an existing condition of the historic site and in the process transforms it. The scaffolding built around the fountain houses industrial strobe lights aimed at the water jets, while the reflective triangular panels of the dome endlessly reflect all of the interior activity. Without the fountain, Eliason's work would not have been conceived; it is dependent upon this feature for its existence. This architectural installation incorporates objects, hardware and a variety of portable devices. It may be dismantled and stored; however, as a whole it is not portable, but rather inextricably linked to its site. Rist's video installation is installed according to the conditions of the site but is not truly dependent upon it as it may travel outside the location.

Less architectural than Eliason's work but of similar scale is Ernesto Neto's surreal installation *It Happens When The Body is The Anatomy of Time*. This work is suspended from the museum's ceiling and is constructed from large, sewn nylon tubes and bag-like forms. The sculptural sacks contain large amounts of various spices. Some of the hanging forms rest on the ground, depositing traces of aromatic spice onto the floor. The fabric acts as a skin, and the interiorizing installation suggests the space as a body with glands, thus anthropomorphizing the institution into an enormous body cavity. Neto's stretched fabric installations are fixed to the

space for support as a tent would be, yet ephemeral and animated. Making an attachment to the actual space so there is a physical connection to the architecture is a significant consideration when defining installation art. The origins of installation in Schwitters' architecturally inscribed *Merzbau* still provide compelling constraints against which artists can push.

Janet Cardiff appropriates the institutional audio guide as her media. *Taking Pictures* is a haunting audio tour that includes four small photographs located in the audio guide caddie. The walk takes visitors outside the museum on a fifteen-minute stroll through wooded grounds nearby. As viewers follow the artist's footsteps, they are softly instructed by Cardiff's voice to notice certain historical, fictional, and fantastical features of the landscape that interface with the series of snapshots. At various intervals during the walk, the history of the park as a World's Fair site is invoked. Cardiff's compelling work is not an installation by traditional definition because the space in which the installation occurs is not altogether physical, but coalesces uniquely in the mind of each viewer. The cinematic experience of this work creates a psychological space that expands the limitations of installation art toward the virtual realm.

The practice of extending definitions between installation art, the carnival or entertainment atmosphere, the virtual, and the thematic, is seen in the work of curators as well as artists. *Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures* is an example of a project in which the curatorial concept merges individual artworks to create an overall atmosphere of installation as spectacle. The exhibition incorporates over fifty artists into a dense environment in which a variety of sounds, videos, sculptures, and images collide. The artists' works seem almost secondary to the curatorial concept of the pleasure spectacle and media culture illustrated by the exhibition. This is an example of how the close proximity of the works to one another in the installation creates a cacophonous assault on the viewer that foregrounds the notion of art as entertainment and the viewing experience as sensory overload.

Installation art originally purported to dismantle the notion of art as commodity, to shift traditional object-viewer hierarchies, and more recently, to critique the institutions of art. Today, installation moves toward issues of authenticity and new levels of spatial realism. The "painting" no longer hangs on the wall, it is projected; the "sculpture" no longer sits on a pedestal or on the floor, but *is* the floor and the pedestal. Current practices of installation suggest a denial or obliteration of differences between the object and its viewer. The construction of pseudo-authenticity as entertainment shares characteristics with the conditions of installation art, especially in association with realism and narrative space. Gambucci's Italian Restaurant, for example, in a newly suburban-

ized part of Kansas City, is a claustrophobic and mind-numbing display of staged authenticity as installation. The Disneyfication of absolutely everything, including world's fairs, museums, curatorial endeavors, and consumer environments seems imminent. The relationship of our body to space and to object has shifted and folded back onto itself so that the "lines between" and the "definitions of" are perpetually fluid and resistant to fixity. The multi-sited series of exhibitions for *Inland Specific* and the curators, artists, and viewers involved will undeniably contribute to an understanding of what the practice of installation art can be and what it may become.

David Schafer
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