Recognizing Installation Art Today

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The art world is currently plagued with an overly amorphous conception of what constitutes installation art. It labels anything that cannot easily be otherwise classified or is not a freestanding solid form as an installation. In fact, as most of the work that is labeled installation is “expanded sculpture.”¹ As does contemporary sculpture and other art forms today, installation art follows the “horizontal” conception of art, an idea conceived by American critic Hal Foster. Unlike Western art previous to the 1960s, in which artists explore one form of art “vertically,” now “art activity is conceived of as a kind of terrain on which various areas of discourse are brought together.”²

Considering that the installation art movement is colored by social implications and was derived from the modernist and conceptual movements, it is easy to see why one might inappropriately label a work as an “installation” if it includes connotations that reflect these origins. However, multiple components must come into play in order for a work of art to be categorized as an installation. Simply reflecting one of these does not suffice in achieving this definition. Installation art has “evolved from the fields of architecture, sculpture, and performance,”³ and must be recognized as the sum of these parts.

Beginning in the most basic sense, to “install” implies an active purposeful decision-making process for use in building and positioning something. Thus, the result of this process is an “installation,” which innately expresses something special simply from its implicit arrangement. To distinguish this creation from a sculpture, the artwork at hand must possess a compelling relationship with its environment and also with its viewer. This immersion is the

¹ Coulter-Smith, ch. 1, pg. 1.
² Hopkins, 229.
³ Wands, 98.
defining element of the genre. Consequently, the distinguishing factor of installation art is that it constructs or alters an environment in which meaning would not exist without viewing inhabitants.

As art historian Frances Spalding notes, “the anti-intellectual, emotional and intuitive processes of art-making characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s, had given way to an almost exclusive emphasis on the thinking process: ‘matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept.’” In the 1960s, British artist Anthony Caro became one of the first sculptors to display his work without a pedestal, placing “the work directly on the ground, in the spectator’s own space.” This brought rise to a new revolutionary generation of sculpture, which allowed a more intimate connection with its audience. Installation art grew out of this generation, appearing in the 1970s and employing this idea of directly connecting the work with its surroundings and spectators. The shape on the now abolished pedestal did not matter as much as the sensation of the experience of the art and concepts that were subsequently drawn from it. It is for this reason that medium or material is not one of the distinguishing factors in defining installation art, as it “is not medium-specific.” It is the artistic genre’s ability to include diverse modes of expression that makes it entirely unique.

The importance lies in the concept produced by the installation. Installation art rises out of conceptual art, and like its predecessor, stresses the importance of the idea. “The sole condition of conceptual art is that the ‘art’ be the creative experience of conceptualizing, thus

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4 Coulter-Smith, ch. 1, pg. 1.
5 Spalding, 214.
6 Spalding, 205-6.
7 Spalding, 205-6.
10 Manglicmot, 31.
making conceptual art its ‘idea’ and in turn, specifically anti-aesthetic,”¹¹ notes Anthony Manglicmot. Although sculpture is “viewed from the outside as a self-contained arrangement of forms,” the installation will “envelop the spectator in the space of the work.”¹² The “space” becomes a “real place.”¹³

In the most basic sense, this “place” is created by physically modifying the environment in which the art exists by “installing” something. Since this art is “defined by spatial location rather than by the materials that constitute it,”¹⁴ this physical modification possesses “low intrinsic value.”¹⁵ The “real value” is created from the artistic effect achieved from the addition of an audience and their experience in the space.¹⁶ Necessary to the very idea of the installation is the added acceptance of the psychological to the physical within the “art experience.”¹⁷ Installation art is site specific in that it must by definition be attached to and modify a site to exist. However, reproductions or installations displayed in more than one exhibition over time can still be considered site specific: every separate presentation of the work is a separate experience.

One of the best examples of modifying space is Indian artist Anish Kapoor’s “Svayambh.” The installation is on display as part of Kapoor’s solo retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts Gallery in London. First created in 2007, the work debuted in this exhibition on September 26, 2009. A forty-ton solid block of bright red wax mixed with paint and vaseline moves along a track through three rooms in the gallery at a speed so slow it is

¹¹ Manglicmot, 20.
¹³ Kwon, 86.
¹⁴ Hopkins, 229.
¹⁷ Manglicmot, 29.
barely noticeable to the human eye.\textsuperscript{18} As the block squeezes through each doorway, it leaves parts of itself behind, sticking to the walls and collecting on the floor. The historical Palladian style interior of the gallery makes for an initial shock, when the viewer sees an object defacing it with red substance. This stark contrast causes the block to stand out in the environment it is modifying. By staining the walls with wax and placing this impending red figure in the rooms, the installation seeks to “restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site.”\textsuperscript{19} This particular installation does so constantly.

The overall theme of this installation is impermanence. Its dimensions are ever changing and cannot be determined. The block moves continuously and creates new changes to its

\textsuperscript{18} Anderson, 14-15.
\textsuperscript{19} Kwon, 86.
environment with every passing second, allowing it to remain constantly in a state of change.

“As it moves through, it sort of sculpts itself,” says Kapoor. “The implications of that are that it’s making itself.”20 The title of the work reflects this idea: in Sanskrit “Svayambh” means auto-generated or self-made.21 This creation implies notions of life and death. The slow speed of the moving figure has a dead quality to it, while the fact that it is moving makes it seem alive. The red substance resembles blood and brings associated ideas to mind. The wax collected at the end of the track and at each doorway can appear to be bloody waste or parts of the body, leaving its audience in awe, both disturbed and entertained. Kapoor simply refers to the red substance as “stuff.”22

“I chose the red, I made the process, but then I try and leave it alone. The process reveals all that’s needed to be revealed,” says Kapoor. “In a way, I feel like I’m not trying to say something, but to let it occur.”23 The installation is an occurrence, which must be viewed in person to gain the full effect. Kapoor stresses that the point of creating this “process” is to allow “engagement” and “let the viewer find that space in themselves.”24

Installation art is not just distinguished by its unique spatial relationship, but also by its dialogue with the viewer. As Miwon Kwon notes, “The ‘work’ no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewers’ critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of that viewing.”25 Unlike sculpture, an installation is a “verb.” It is concerned with form only as functioning to create a relationship. Without an inhabitant that becomes immersed within the environment created by the installation, the work

25 Kwon, 91.
ceases to definitively exist. In other words, it is not self-sufficient. This fact forces the artist, or “constructor of the narrative,” to consider his/her audience since the success of the art is “dependent upon the author taking the reader into consideration.”

The viewer, in turn, must be there in person to experience the art. Photos or reproductions will not suffice in presenting the original meaning derived from the art and can only present it in a diluted form, objectified to be much like a sculpture, which only “requires optical contemplation.” The art object or event in this context was to be singularly experienced in the here-and-now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject, in a sensorial immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as theatricality), rather than instantaneously ‘perceived’ in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye, notes Kwon. Installation art achieves an intimacy with its viewer, actively engaging he/she.

Polish artist Miroslaw Balka’s “How It Is” provides an excellent example of this relationship. Unveiled on October 13th, 2009, it currently stands in the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, which houses installations by different artists every year with its Unilever Series. At 13 meters high and 30 meters long, the immense box stands on multiple two meter-tall stilts. It is made of dark, unpolished steel and its exterior walls are divided into sections, giving it a purely industrial demeanor. It reflects the interior of the Turbine Hall itself, which once contained generators in the building’s previous life as a power plant. The hall’s interior was preserved and along with it, its mechanical nature, which is continuously echoed with the hum of the industrial-strength lights overhead.

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26 Coulter-Smith, ch. 1, pg. 4.
27 Coulter-Smith, ch. 3, pg. 2.
28 Kwon, 86.
29 “The Unilever Series: Miroslaw Balka.” Tate Modern Current Exhibitions.
Upon first sight, “How It Is” blends in with the hall. Once the viewer recognizes its mysterious presence, the large object permeates the space and gives rise to curiosity. The box’s sheer magnitude severely diminishes the physical space of the Turbine Hall, altering this environment in which it is installed. Balka’s message is then culminated through the experience of its visitors, who inspect it and enter it. People enter the box by walking up a ramp that descends from an entirely open side of the rectangular structure. Inside as people continue to walk into the interior of the box, darkness surrounds them. The only light available disappears and the rectangular entrance is the only shape visible.

“The darkness will hold the function of purgatory,” Balka says about his creation. “You will come to the border where you have to say if you want to go farther or not.”

The constructed darkness envelops its inhabitant to the point of virtual disappearance: he/she

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becomes deindividualized in the darkness and eventually merges with the installation’s created atmosphere. For the brave who walk to the back wall, the interior is lined in velvet, which contrasts with the cold steel of the rest of the interior, creating a soft and welcoming touch. The only other sense of comfort is the recognition that any others also in the box are sharing the same (often frightening) experience, creating a humane sense of unity in an increasingly industrialized, cold world.

“How It Is” is a memorial to the 8000 Jews transported in trains from Otwock, Poland, Balka’s hometown, to death camps during the Holocaust. Preserving their memory through the installation is important to Balka. “There are still some traces that are still alive. This box is not closed yet,” he says. Presumably, the memory and possibly experience of the prisoners is translated through the encounter of the visitor with the altered space. By achieving this direct dialogue between space and person, Balka creates meaning only available through the actual experience of the artwork as an “unrepeatable and fleeting situation.” After a person leaves “How It Is,” this first exposure to the work will remain the only true genuinely unbiased connection.

Since installation art naturally depends upon human interaction, it is impossible to ignore the social context surrounding a work, a combination of current time (ex. year, period), attitudes (ex. cultural factors, movements), and place (ex. country, region, type of gallery). It is entirely public in the sense its audience makes it a work of art to begin with, becomes immersed in it, and connects to it. In the 1990s, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term, “relational art,” which he describes as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social

33 Kwon, 91.
context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”34 This new post-modern form of art is judged by its relationships, not solely on its aesthetic merits. The entire idea that installation art is a type of relational art creates a cultural revolution in itself, ignoring the aesthetic merits by which previous art was held critically.35 It is installation art’s innate social context that causes an “intervention,” which is “designed to make us rethink our lives and values.”36

The overwhelming sense of humanity and mortality felt by the viewer contrasted with the machine-like Turbine Hall and its mirrored installation produce a commentary on the present state of the world. By forcing a conversation in a world now full of machines, which Bourriaud argues that all contemporary art achieves in itself, Balka begs his audience to question the possibility of the presence of human traces and memory in inanimate objects.37 Without the conversation between the inhabitants and their new environment, the box remains a meaningless form.

Bourriaud praises this conversation produced by art and believes that it draws people together. Inside Balka’s steel box, people become united, finding a sense of comfort through their shared experience of the darkness. “The exhibition is the special place where such momentary groupings may occur,” he writes.38 Treasuring the exhibition as a human experience, Bourriaud notes art’s important place in society. Due to its transient quality, installation art is has the ability to compete with other forms of entertainment in modern society. As Stallabrass notes,

34 Bourriaud, 14.
35 Bourriaud, 14.
37 Bourriaud
38 Bourriaud, 17.
it rivals “mass culture.”\textsuperscript{39} It is difficult to draw people to a museum for a painting if a photo is available online, whereas a piece of installation art can only truly be experienced in person.

Installation art is built on these interactions. It can be thought of as the ultimate collaborative genre of art, combining artist, space, manipulation, and viewer to achieve the work. Instead of a simple “material form,” it is a “linking element, a principles of dynamic agglutination.”\textsuperscript{40} Since this collaboration is different with every viewer, an installation’s meaning is fleeting and changes with every encounter. “Art is a state of encounter,”\textsuperscript{41} writes Bourriaud. If this is so, the ideas utilized by this new art genre were already instilled within us.

\textsuperscript{40} Bourriaud, 21.
\textsuperscript{41} Bourriaud, 18.
Works Consulted


List of Illustrations

Balka, Miroslaw. “How It Is.” 2009. Steel, 30 meters long x 13 meters high. Photo credit:

http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Observer/Pix/pictures/2009/10/16/1255693448075/
Miroslaw-Balks-How-It-Is-001.jpg.

Kapoor, Anish. “Svayambh.” 2007. Wax and oil-based paint, dimensions variable. Photo credit:

Nov5LondonUK_AKapoor.jpg.