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# installation art in the new millennium

## the empire of the senses

TEXTS BY NICOLAS DE OLIVEIRA

*with 317 illustrations, 269 in color*

# author and institution

The relationship between art and the institutions in which art is displayed, such as museums, came to play an increasingly important role in the production and reception of art from the 1960s onwards. By the early 1980s, the questioning of the relationships of power between authorship and institutions was seen by many critics as necessary for a postmodern practice, as argued by Hal Foster: '...just as the conceptual artists extended the minimalist analysis of the art object, so too...later artists have opened up the conceptual critique of the art institution in order to intervene in ideological representations and languages of everyday life.' Progressively, artists have come to resist the centrality of the institution in their work. They now tend to move away from projects displayed inside museums, even when given license to critique internal power structures, thus showing their reluctance to participate in arguments formulated by and for museum professionals.

Although artists acknowledge the importance of the gallery space as a means of disseminating their work, the idea of fusing the exhibition with the concept of the gallery has gained ground. In so doing, installation artists are able to circumvent the agenda of the institution, albeit by appropriating its language and organizational structures. An ironic example of this appropriation strategy can be seen at the Leytonstone Center for Contemporary Art. This

organization, launched in 2001, is run by the British artist Bob & Roberta Smith and the American artist and curator Jessica Voorsanger. Leytonstone, a London suburb, houses no significant arts venues. The grandly named Center contains a single skylit exhibition space in a purpose-built shed at the end of the artist's garden. The space may be viewed as a complete artwork or as an art centre in name only, which parodies existing modes of display. It follows that the 'white cube', synonymous with the idea of display, may be removed from the museum or the gallery and reappear in the context of an artist's suburban garden. The Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul provided an alternative to the standard gallery. His *I [love] TAXI* (2001) was an exhibition space in which the emphasis was on its reduced scale and portable nature. Artists were invited to create installations in the back of the cab for future passengers. Thus, the audience was reduced to small numbers of individuals who hailed the taxi for the purpose of transport while witnessing an art event.

Though alternative display spaces have been instrumental in the presentation of new and challenging works, their strategies have also been adopted by mainstream galleries. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, from Denmark and Norway, installed Modernist white cubes in galleries, museums and public spaces. These architectural interventions

betray an ironic return to Modernist, functional design principles and simultaneously act as spaces for 'cruising', that is for sexual encounters. Their exhibit *Taking Place* (2001–2002) at the Kunsthalle in Zurich, on the other hand, literally tore down the walls of the galleries, disrupting the workings of the institution. Nothing was completed, rather, it was the upheaval generated by destruction and rebuilding that constituted the work. Elmgreen & Dragset's installation echoed the ideas of the architect and urbanist Cedric Price who proposed that buildings should not be long-lasting, but should disintegrate after a few years. Price also argued that the 21st-century museum should use uncertainty and incompleteness as a catalyst for change.

However, according to Maria Lind, curator at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the museum continues to be 'thought of as a place of display, a showroom, and exhibitions are taken for granted as the natural way of dealing with art.' Lind goes on to describe a type of work that 'is oriented towards the everyday. It generally wants to avoid the solemnity and the static quality that often embody institutions, when it is not downright critical of them.' Lind argues that the institution is not dismissed or rejected by these projects, but is 'problematized'. The Swiss-born curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has suggested a shift in the culture of museums, to transform them into 'laboratories'. He states that 'the idea of embracing contradictions is very important.... The laboratory is

about leaving the museum, is against the museum.' Obrist is known for innovative exhibitions and concepts which have travelled to cities worldwide. These include *Cities on the Move* (with the Chinese curator Hou Hanru) in London, Bordeaux, Humblebæk, Helsinki, Vienna and Bangkok (1997–99), *Unbuilt Roads* (1997) with Guy Tortosa and *Do It* (1994–2001), an exhibition format presented in numerous different cities. Obrist advocates flexible exchange with artists, curators and architects. Influenced by Obrist's working methodology, a group of 105 artists, working under the rubric *Morphing Systems* took over a former hospital in Zurich (1998) and began to intervene and interact with each other's works over a period of six months. The hospital site provided in the first place a point of reference for the artists, only to be replaced as the focus for subsequent interventions.

It remains significant that these projects are always accompanied by a publication. Once simply described as 'exhibition catalogues' which complemented the exhibitions, these publications have come to alter, add to, and indeed challenge the perception of the work. The photograph, as a means of documenting a work of art, has had an important role in preserving temporary installations. Indeed, it might be argued that the photograph (in books, magazines and on the internet) has become a major means of viewing Installation art, and that it has superseded witnessing the actual work in situ. Walter Benjamin and André Malraux wrote extensively about the

photograph's power to change our perception of art. The result of this technique of reproduction was a waning of uniqueness. While Installation art, through its temporal nature and reliance on place, does not require uniqueness per se, it nonetheless depends on the viewer's experience. The photograph may serve as an aide-mémoire, but it can only offer a view, without transmitting the experience of the work. The display of an installation via a photograph certainly alters its reception as we move from the position of the viewer to that of the reader or browser.

The art theorist Brian O'Doherty refers to the perception of the viewer by stating: 'Avant-garde gestures have two audiences: one which was there and one – most of us – which wasn't.' O'Doherty goes on to argue that the original audience completes the work through memory after seeing the work. 'We from a distance know better. The photographs of the event restore to us the original moment, but with much ambiguity.' Ilya Kabakov, who arguably wrote the most detailed 'manual' in existence for Installation art, argues that 'any installation is incredibly, impossibly sensitive to the place where it is constructed.' To Kabakov, firsthand experience of the work remains crucial. Although we have become used to the documentary value of the photograph (and video) in communicating installations to wider audiences, rarely do we question how our experience is altered by the shift from presence to reproduction. By placing the work in the context of a

publication, the viewer's perception of the work is irrevocably altered. The publication is not simply a means of extending the exhibition's visibility, but it allows curators, artists and designers to rework the context in which the work is shown. This has resulted in innovative ways of displaying installation projects, while allowing the artistic and curatorial processes involved in the work to become revealed. Salient published examples include Rem Koolhaas/Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Mutations* (2001), *Morphing Systems'* eponymous catalogue, Damien Hirst's *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now* (1997). The key difference between the traditional catalogue and these examples, is that the more innovative publication extends the possibilities for dialogue and the remit of the installation itself. The publication has thus replaced the importance of site to become the place and meaning of the work. Countless catalogues and magazines have aspired to present 'exhibitions' on the printed page, as predicted by Malraux, in his *Musée Imaginaire*: 'A museum without walls has been opened to us, and it will carry infinitely farther that limited revelation of the world of art which the real museums offer us within their walls: in answer to their appeal the plastic arts have produced their printing press.'

The 're-presentation' of Installation art through a range of different formats confirms its position as a versatile and even unpredictable activity. In his book

*From Subject to Project* (1994), the Czech cultural critic Vilém Flusser suggested that the notion of the 'project' defined our identity, as it is engagement in some activity that gives us our place in the world. Similarly, installations have come to be increasingly referred to as 'projects', suggesting a greater emphasis on a work's process, while keeping the production of a work more flexible and open-ended as well as stressing its collaborative nature. Such works now require a range of skills, significant financial input and negotiations to secure a location. Thus the project begins as a collaboration, that is to say that 'interaction' is built into the work from the very start. Funding agencies and institutions need to be secured from the outset, rather than solicited later on out of necessity. Such partnerships are not without their problems and they do impact on the work. As Kasper König, director of the Museum Ludwig in Frankfurt suggests: 'The art museum can act as a producer concerning contemporary art...I think this is an important task.' On the other hand, Jérôme Sans, co-curator of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, continues

to question whether the 'museum is really a place for experimentation'. Sans's position is echoed by a growing number of innovative arts organizations which attempt to elude the grasp of the institution. Locus+, founded in 1993, is an organization with networks of artistic centres in the UK and Canada. Its commissioning policy is centred on the artist instead of the institution, 'thus opposing the norm accepted on the UK art scene,' writes Agnes Ivacs. While artists struggle for acknowledgment of their authorial credentials, institutions have moved away from being solely collectors to being also producers of new works. However, conflicts of ownership may arise between artists and commissioning institutions. 'The work is indivisible from the persona of the artist,' argues Miwon Kwon, 'the intricate orchestration of literal and discursive sites that make up a nomadic narrative requires the artist as a narrator-protagonist.' Having built up the artist's voice, as a means of reaching new and active audiences, the institution will not benefit from its silence.