

## INSTALLATION ART

### INSTALLATION ART - THEORETICAL IDEA

#### Objective/Goals and Desired Results

The purpose of this lesson is for students to understand two approaches of understanding the vast scope and short history of Installation Art. Students will learn and articulate in a comparative analysis between two Art History writers, Claire Bishop and Mark Rosenthal. Both writers establish a framework and taxonomy towards investigating the different ways to understand this ambiguous and developing art form upon which students will explore, understand and master.

This lesson is structured by providing a published definition of Installation art, its brief history, the two different approaches to understanding Installation Art, pertinent vocabulary, a writing assignment to make comparisons and explore other installation artists and a long term hands-on project. Each writer has four components, which students can use, as a start up for Understanding Installation Art. These key perspectives are taken from:

**Claire Bishop –**

***Installation Art: A Critical History***

**Viewers Experience – see below**

**Mark Rosenthal**

***Understanding Installation Art***

**Medium – see below**

### LESSON CONTENT/UNDERSTANDINGS - DEFINITION

#### Installation, Installation Art

An art form that had its origins in the *Happenings*, *Assemblages*, and *Performance Art* of the 1960's. Installations re constructions of ensembles of objects and effects which engage with and dominate their surroundings. They are usually displayed for a temporary period in a gallery or a non-art context. The "immersive" nature of many installations encourages the viewer to physically enter into the work, to interact through all the senses and to explore different meanings (Lucie-Smith, 2003).

#### BRIEF HISTORY of Installation Art

One can say that Installation Art started its history, with the notion of conceptualization of spatiality perhaps 4BC in Ise, Japan (Ely) and the Caves in Alsace (Rosenthal, 2003). Ise is the location of the Shinto religion that contains the two components of the grand shrine (Ely) Ely suggests that this shrine incorporates a spatial metaphor and poetic processes which are precedents for the methodology of, many installation artists. However, in brief it has been publicized that Installation Art, being a hybrid entity came to prominence in the 1970 's. Its roots can be traced to the Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades" and Kurt Schwitters to the Italian **Arte Povera**, to **Fluxus** to the **Happenings** and **Environments** of the 1960's to what is called the hybrid art form it has become today. Indicated below are the writers and their views that include their framework for looking at installation art. There is a sampling of artists for each view – there are more artists that are illustrated in the texts.

#### Claire Bishop – *Viewers Experience* (Bishop, 2005)

According to Claire Bishop, (2005) the definition of Installation Art suggests it is an ambiguous developing art form upon which she refers a "Genre" in contemporary art and not a "medium" because the word medium from her perspective would not make any sense. Because of the different types of viewing experience, she infers that a different approach to the history of installation art be necessary; one that does not focus on theme or materials but on the *viewers experience*.

#### THE DREAM SCENE

This view is defined as a Freudian perspective in which the viewer is psychoanalytically absorbed or who encounters a dream-like environment (Bishop, 2005).

#### **Allan Kaprow** *Words* 1962 (fig. #1)

Kaprow created an environment that was to be a physically active one that included light and sounds. Kaprow didn't want to install something to be viewed, instead, he created a work "to be played in" thus creating an interactive role of the viewer when the viewer engages in rearranging the words in the installation.

#### **Kurt Schwitters** - *Merzbau, 1919-1937* (fig. #2)

The Merzbau is often cited as a precursor of installation art. Schwitters's environmental work consisted of assemblages made from found materials (newspaper, old furniture, broken wheel tires...) reflecting a symbolic status that also included a 4 hour guided tour conducted by the artist himself.

#### HEIGHTENED PERCEPTION

This type of installation art is organized around a phenomenological model of viewing the object and is based on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Ponty's theory was crucial to the Minimalist sculptures in the 1960's and has emphasized the viewer's bodily experience to the work.

**Carsten Holler – Lichtwand (Light Wall), 2000** (fig. #3)

*Lichtwand* consisted of several thousand intensely bright flashing bulbs that exposed the viewer to a harsh retinal experience that also induced visual hallucinations. This work was designed to disorient and dislocate but needed the participation of the viewer to generate its effect.

**Bruce Nauman – Green Light Corridor – 1970** (fig. #4)

Nauman's work of the 1970's created a tension between the viewer's anticipated and actual experience. This installation uses formal elements of scale and color to generate physical unease. Viewers must enter this installation sideways because the entrance is too narrow and the green fluorescent light affects the retina creating a magenta after-vision when leaving the installation space.

### **MIMETIC ENGULFMENT**

This type of installation reflects the notion of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and returns to the late Freudian libidinal withdrawal and subjective disintegration.

**Lucas Samaras – Room No. 2 or Mirror Room, 1966** (fig. #5)

These dark installations suggest our dissolution and seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self temporarily by plunging the viewer into darkness, saturated color or refracting our image into infinity of mirror reflections (Bishop, 2005).

**James Turrell – Wedgework IV, 1974** (fig. #6)

Turrell's works are known for the calmness and stillness they engulf which penetrates the viewer because of the viewer's perception of 'over-identification' from the sense of spirituality and absoluteness that is portrayed. "Turrell's installations are spaces of withdrawal that suspend time and orphan us from the world" (Bishop, 2005, pg. 85).

### **ACTIVATED SPECTATORSHIP**

This type of installation explores the notion of activated spectatorship as a "politicized aesthetic experience" (Bishop, 2005, pg. 102).

**Collective Group Material – Americana, 1985** (Fig. #7)

This group of artists is known for blurring the edges between installation art and exhibit making. They believe in actively participating in the political system by not losing to conformity. Their work exhibits political criticism and improvements.

**Thomas Hirschhorn – Bastille Monument, 2002** (fig. #8)

Social sculpture would best represent the work of Hirschhorn. He rejects the word of installation art to the word of display. He claims that installation reduces its concept to a medium that he finds misleading. Hirschhorn is known for his not making political art but makes art politically – "to make art politically means to choose materials that don't intimidate, a format that doesn't dominate or a device that doesn't seduce... reflection is an activity." (Bishop, 2005, pg. 127)

**Mark Rosenthal – Medium (Rosenthal, 2003)**

Rosenthal states that the character of installation art has yet to be fully grasped. He suggests that first and foremost, it must be understood and recognized as a *medium* because the definition offers the broadest possibilities for investigation and expression – a very different viewpoint from Bishop. Below are his descriptions of Space Filled and Site-Specific Installations (2003).

**FILLED-SPACE INSTALLATION** – refers to an installation that can be easily redone at other locations "because there is coherence between the parts of each, rather than the part cohering with the whole space in a significant way... To describe the composition of a filled-space installation is not likely to include the surroundings... Space filled is usually more literary or psychologically inclined – concerned with artifice, private reality, and enchantment of idealization." (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 28).

#### **FILLED-SPACE INSTALLATION: ENCHANTMENTS**

This refers to an overall environment with little if no escape route; the enchantment draws heavily on theatrical roots with the suspension of disbelief.

**Kurt Schwitters – Merzbau 1919-1937** (same as fig. #2)

A prototypical example of enhancement is *Merzbau*. He wanted to nuance the psychological dimension through his walk through environment that was manifested with linear and biomorphic plaster forms. "Like a cathedral, an installation can transport its viewer into a state of awe or 'contemplative immersion of the self in art.'" (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 330)

**Marcel Duchamp – 1,200 Bags of Coal, 1938** (fig. #9)

In the first International Dada fair in Berlin which represented a politicized version of enchantment. Duchamp made an installation that included twelve hundred sacks of coal that hung over the exhibition space that was loaded with paintings and artwork from other artists creating a confusion of aesthetics between the paintings and sacks of coal.

#### **FILLED-SPACE INSTALLATION: IMPERSONATIONS**

Impersonations will leave the viewer unable even recognize a presence of a work of art. An impersonation renders the artist reaches self-effacing anti-elitist whose dream are rooted in a sense of everyday life. (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 47).

**Claes Oldenburg – The Store, 1961** (fig. #10)

The artist rented a storefront on the lower East Side of NYC that consisted of papier-mâché representation of various objects that were found in a commercial establishment. These objects were portrayed through the expressive eyes of an artist and not portrayed as real.

**Scott Burton** – *Equitable Center, South Plaza, 1986* (fig. #11)

Often commissioned to make furniture for public spaces, Burton enhanced life a bit more is art is still camouflaged. “I want to get some social meaning back into art...I think that the moral, the ethical dimension of art is mostly gone, and only in a newly significant relationship with a non art audience can any ethical dimension can come back to art.” – Burton (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 57).

**SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION**- refers to installations “that are linked to locale: the parts relate to one another and they relate to the larger space. The site-specific artist will have spent considerable to me exploring the location of the work hence, the composition of this type of installation must include locale because it derives its very form and physical substance, and meaning from its context. Site-specific work has a hardheaded rootedness to the world and is usually plastic and perceptual in character.” (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 28).

**SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION: INTERVENTION**

Rosenthal states that Intervention is “type of installation that uses a tool of inquiry or even attack’ (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 61). This type of art does not coincide with convention, it make itself a challenge of thought.

**Marcel Duchamp** – *Mile of String, 1942* (fig. #12)

Duchamp continues to create confusion about the nature of space and played a behavioral game with the viewer’s physical movements by make it virtually impossible to view the other pieces of artwork in the exhibit. The composition and content of the string is juxtaposed to the convention art.

**Bruce Nauman** - *Clown Torture, 1987* (fig. #13)

Rosenthal (2003, pg. 64) states “Nauman’s installation is deliberately aggressive toward the viewer, insisting in an uncomfortable and unwanted participation and are transgressive with regard to the particular art sites.”

**SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION: RAPPROCHMENT**

The installation is the subject, content and shaping influence of the work of art...the physical context is preeminent. The work of art is often more formal than cultural character...If enchantments are best compared to theater, rapprochements should be related to architecture. (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 77).

**Robert Smithson** – *Spiral Jetty, 1970* (fig. #14)

Smithson combined the interventionist and rapprochement attitudes. He marked the lake with in a dramatic and transgressive way, in which the work is also integrated at that site but can be seen and imagined elsewhere.

**Christo and Jeanne-Claude** – *Wrapped Raeschttag, Berlin (1977-95)* (fig. #15)

This work paid close attention to every aspect of the building features plus exhibited their amazing skill in their original expression and style.

**VOCABULARY LIST**

**Installation Art, The Dream Scene, Heightened Perception, Mimetic Engulfment, Activated Spectatorship, Space Installation: Enchantments, Filled-Space Installation: Impersonations, Site-Specific Installation: Interventions, Site-Specific Installation: Rapprochements**

**AND:**

1. **Arte Povera** - An Italian term for Art produced in minimal formats with deliberately humble and commonly available materials, such as sand, wood, stones and newspaper.
2. **Environmental Art** – term used from the late 1950’s for a 3-d work of art, often of a temporary nature that the viewer can enter.
3. **Fluxus** – Name taken by an international art movement founded in 1962 to unite members of the extreme Avant-garde in Europe and later in America. The group had no stylistic identity, but its activities were in many respects a revival of the spirit of Dada.
4. **Happenings** – an art event typical of the 1960’s and 1970’s which synthesized both planned and improvised theatrical activity, the visual arts and found materials. Audience participation was also often invited.
5. **Ready-made** – Term coined by Marcel Duchamp for an everyday object isolated from its normal context and treated as a work of art.

**LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

**I–Written Assignment**

Research different artwork from two artists you have just learned of or choose from the list below, or select an installation artist from your own repertoire and write a typed, two page comparative, contextual and formal analysis using one concept from each of the writers’ frameworks – “viewers experiences” and “medium.”

You are to:

1. Use Henrich Wolfflin's Pairs of Concepts from his *Formal Analysis*
2. Use the new vocabulary and *Descriptive Words*

**Installation Artists:** Jenny Holier, Ann Hamilton, Nam June Paik, Tony Courser, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Yayoi Kusama, Bill Viola

## **II – Project**

You will create your own installation influenced by an artist or framework that you have learned. You can work individually or work in a team with no more than three people. You can experiment with concepts, interactivity or not, technology and other materials. You have two months to prepare and one month to execute.

You are to:

1. Write a plan of action
2. Make sure your installation is doable

## **ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE**

### **Rubric for Written Assignment, Project and Critique**

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