

Spatial Formations. Installation Art between Image and Stage.

An English Summary

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Although much has been written about the origins and diversity of installation art as well as its individual practitioners the concept of installation has, with few, but significant exceptions (Juliane Rebentisch and Claire Bishop) remained largely untheorised. Hence, the purpose of *Spatial Formations* is not to map the development of installation art, although its histories are certainly at the core of this study, nor is it to create a system of subgenres with which to classify installations and bring order into the chaos of multiplicity, despite the fact that a whole range of different works are analysed in this book. The main purpose is rather to reflect on the theoretical implications of installation art.

A basic assumption of *Spatial Formations* is that ‘installation’ is several things. The term installation refers to a *system*, that is, installation art understood as a genre that is by now institutionalised and defined discursively by means of a *discourse on installation*. But the term also refers to *praxis*, a certain way of making art projects that often involves several media or disciplines at one and the same time. In other words, installation understood as an artistic strategy or *modus operandi*. Finally, the term can refer to specific works of art created in different regions of the world, that is, to the individual installation as an empirical *phenomenon*. The present study attempts to demonstrate that these aspects of installation art are so inextricably intertwined that it makes no sense to introduce a clear-cut distinction between, for instance, system and praxis or discourse and phenomenon because they are mutually dependent on each other and contribute to defining one another.

In the *Introduction* I outlined three parameters. It is my contention that these three parameters define the constitution of installation art as a generic form: The first parameter says that an installation activates the physical space and the contexts in which it is embedded; the second, that it extends the work of art in time thereby giving it a situational character; and the third, that it emphasises embodied perception. From this it follows that installation art brings the ‘real’,

phenomenological character of the viewer's experience to the centre of attention and attempts to awaken the viewer's awareness of the dependence of bodily perception as well as of subjectivity and the temporal extension of an art experience.

The core argument of Chapter One, *The Discourse on Installation Art*, is that installation art is not established as a genre by means of new artistic working methods alone, but also through changes in the discourses of art theory and art criticism. Chapter One demonstrates how a regular discourse on installation evolves from the existing discourse on sculpture in the course of the 1960s and the 1970s. The thesis of Chapter One is that this new discourse on installation had a double function. Its most obvious function was to redefine the concept of the three-dimensional work of art. In the discourse on installation art the work is no longer 'an object', it has become 'a space'. This redefinition substantially altered the notion of the relationship between the viewer and the work, subject and object. Thus, the discursive articulation of 'installation' or 'environment' as this kind of work was called in the 1960s, took place in interaction with changes in the discourse on reception aesthetics that placed active viewer participation at the forefront of concern. By blending the discourse on installation art with the discourse on reception aesthetics it became possible to define the work of art as a space or three-dimensional environment that also included the viewer and activated the viewer in a bodily way. In this way the discourse on installation acquired yet another function: to participate in the overall theoretical and ideological confrontation with the Modernist concept of the work of art as an autonomous object that is presented to an equally autonomous and detached subject gazing upon it from a centred consciousness. To conclude, the discourse on installation had, and still has, an ideological effect that reaches much further than the definition of an alternative concept of the work of art according to which the work is no longer defined as an 'object' but as a 'space'. The discourse on installation, and installational works, developed new concepts of what 'art' is and what it means to be a 'viewer', concepts that are based on a way of thinking that does not separate the material work from the aesthetic experience of the viewer, but insists that they are mutually connected.

Chapter Two, *Points of View on Installation Art*, subjects selected historical texts on installation art to closer scrutiny. An important line of thought in Chapter Two is the argument that the discourse on installation is based on an underlying conception of the installation work as a *passage-work*. I base my argument on the observation that artists as well as art critics seem to conceive of installation art as situated between the visual arts and something else. I use the term and metaphor 'passage-work' to capture the tendency of installation art to work with and foreground

passages, connections and transitional stages between different disciplines, levels, spheres, discourses and modes of experience. The purpose of Chapter Three, *The Discourse on Performance*, is to demonstrate how a parallel discourse on performance developed concurrently with the discourse on installation art. In a similar way, the discourse on performance defined performance theatre and performance art as overtly interdisciplinary genres.

It is one of the key notions of the present study that it is first and foremost the *spatial* arrangement of the work that distinguishes installation art from other artistic disciplines and genres. Chapter Four, *Installation as a Shaped Space*, substantiates this assumption by examining the spatial constitution of installation art and the way the articulation of space defines the character of installational works. The Chapter demonstrates that installation differs from sculpture because it does not form an object. It is more in line with architecture in that it constructs a physical space and with theatre in that it stages this space for spectators to enter, explore and reflect on. In addition, it engages its audience in a more active and bodily manner than traditional proscenium theatre would do. On this basis I argue that an installation should not be defined as a certain type of aesthetic object, but as a conceptual and phenomenological project that is about the formation of material and symbolic spaces in a way that in most cases engages the perceiving subject more actively and involves the surroundings and contexts in a way that is more direct. As Chapter Four sets out to show, it is possible to describe the 'space' of an installation in more precise terms that has hitherto been the case. After pinpointing the spatial characteristics of installational works, the attention is directed towards their temporal dimensions. Chapter Five, *Installation as a Temporal Situation* sheds light on how Time was put on the agenda of experimenting artists in the 1960s and 1970s, the decades that witnessed the rise of installation art. I argue that the exploration of time and process in the experimental art of the 1960s and 1970s has been of great significance for the development of installation art into a genre that cultivates the denigrated possibilities of the visual arts to represent time. Chapter Five emphasises the ability of an installation to unfold its meaning in such a way that 'the time represented' is stretched out whereby the temporal structure of the viewer's experience, 'the time of reception', is extended as well. It also argues that at an existential and epistemological level, installations can serve as a key to the understanding of the experience of time that human beings have always found so difficult to grasp.

Chapter Six, *Installation Art between Image and Stage*, aims to examine the discursive potential of the terms 'theatricality' and 'performativity' and to explain why they have become core notions of the discourse on installation art. The notion of a performative dimension of the work of

art primarily surfaces in cases where attention is diverted from an understanding of the work as a self-contained object and completed statement to an understanding of the work as a relatively open and incomplete utterance and hence to the way the work ‘performs’ and produces its sensory effects and semiotic meaning in a communicative situation. As installation art generally focuses intensely on the situation in which an actively exploring and bodily engaged viewer-performer encounters the work - and the production of meaning resulting from this encounter - the performative necessarily becomes an important part of the aesthetics of installation art. Chapter Six proposes that the reception aesthetics of installation art is characterised by a kind of realism, or to be more precise, by *factuality*. An installation is not perforce based on a mimetic or iconic realism. However, it is always based on a principle of reception that requires the viewer to engage in the work through his or her actual bodily acts. This is why the realism pertaining to installations can be characterised as a *performative realism*. An installation engages the perceiving subject in a realistic way, exploiting forms of aesthetic experience that are grounded in various kinds of everyday activities familiar to the viewer, e.g. the act of walking, entering, moving through or under something, etc.

Chapter Six also demonstrates that installation art shares with the new dance, performance, and body art the tendency to put the work’s performative function at the centre by making its referential function dependent on it. In the long term the dialogue with the performing arts has especially facilitated the development of an intensified awareness of the viewer’s experience as a motive and aim of installational works of art. In the 1960s and 1970s installation art assimilated elements from dance, performance and body art in order to dissociate itself from painting and sculpture. Conversely, the new performance genres and dance attempted to dissociate themselves from ballet with its emphasis on emotions and story and from the dependence on the textual script that characterised theatre by assimilating elements from the visual arts. Chapter Seven, *Performance Theatre between Stage and Image* examines some of these approaches to art in order to demonstrate how physical space can be used as an active component in visually-oriented performance theatre, and in ways that are very similar to the way installation art constructs spaces.

Chapter Eight, *Navigation, Immersion and Interaction in Video Installation Art*, takes video installation art as its starting point for an examination of the relationship between installation art and digital media. It revolves around the question of how the use of new technology has transformed the viewer’s experience of installations. Chapter Eight demonstrates that since the 1970s video installation art has cultivated a modality of experience characterised by a strong, multisensory feeling of presence ‘here and now’. I distinguish between four primary forms:

reflective ocularcentric perception, navigation, immersion, and interaction (potentially there are more). These four modalities of experience can blend with each other in various ways and, hence, they can also structure the viewer's reception of the work differently. Chapter Eight proposes that video installation art represents a forward-looking approach to the plastic 'moulding' of space, an approach that treats physical space as layer upon layer of variable data and conceives of this space as an environment intertwined with the people in it and the digital technology supporting it.

Chapter Nine, *Site and Context*, takes a closer look at site-specific installation art and site-specific dance and performance-theatre, focusing on the question of how installation art and performance theatre are interrelated with their contexts and 'the site' in the sense of a specific physical space with specific meanings and social functions. On the basis of Chapter Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine the last chapter of the book, *Conclusion and Wider Perspectives: On the Threshold between Art and Culture*, places installation art historically as a continuation of two recurrent avant-garde endeavours: First, to open the work of art towards the surrounding world; second, to open the visual arts towards the other arts. Chapter Ten tries to pinpoint some of the reasons why installation art has gained ground almost worldwide despite the fact that it is a complex and barrier-breaking art form that makes relatively heavy demands on its audience.

Chapter Two proposed that installation art tends to create passages and connections between different levels, spheres, discourses and modes of experience, that is to say, it works intensively with transitional stages between visual, auditive, haptic and kinaesthetic perceptions. Chapter Ten expands on this point and uses anthropological ritual theory to explain how an installation can *function* as a passage, not only on a spatial and structural level, but on an existential level as well. I conclude that it is because installation art approximates visual arts to the performative arts and assimilates some of their performative and scenic elements that installation art is capable of approximating the aesthetic experience to the threshold experience of modern, secular rituals. In anthropological ritual theory it is generally recognised that rituals are efficient instruments of renewal. Thus, installation art's special amalgam of the pictorial, the scenic and performative *and* the ritual dimensions may provide us with an explanation of why installation art has been so successful when it comes to redefining the constitution of the work of art and making the art audience accept the work's transformation from and 'object' into a 'space'.