

Authenticity of installation art



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“ Artistic value is achieved only when an artwork expresses the authentic values of its maker, especially when those values are shared by the artist’s immediate community” (Tolstoy). In early December 2010 I went to an exhibition of French artist Louise Bourgeois in Hauser & Wirth gallery in London. What fascinated me immensely in that exhibition was the way in which the installation was set up. I knew for a fact that Louise Bourgeois passed away earlier in the year. I wondered, regarding the installations in particular, how it had been possible for the curator and gallery staff to recreate the pieces in such a way that would speak truthfully to the original intention of the artist. It is not an easy task for a curator to bring out in a show authenticity to the audience, however regarding installation art without the artist’s physical presence or mediation, I had to ask myself the question how much can a curator intervene without the art work losing its authenticity? Since the very nature of installation demands dismounting and recreating, does the art work become a duplicate or a replica of the artist’s work, or does it become the curator’s art? Is the work still authentic when copied from its original site into the exhibition space of a museum?

Inevitably, Installation art, being so different in appearance and relation to its audience than ‘ traditional art’, has to challenge old concepts of conservation and authenticity. In this essay, I will investigate whether installation art, without the artist’s presence or intervention, is authentic according to the definition of ‘ authenticity’. Furthermore, this will address whether the notion of authenticity needs to be rethought in order to fit in with more recent methods in contemporary art, such as installation.

A curator encompasses many areas being the interphase between artists, institutions and the public. Whereas, an artist works hard to express and experiment with feelings, emotions and viewpoints through various medium that can influence and enlighten people. Together, both need to work in close proximity when coordinating an art project, event or an exhibition to remain as authentic and truthful as possible to the work of the artist. The task of the curator is challenging - being the intermediate between the artist and the viewer, therefore it is important that the exhibition brings out the artist's originality, intention and authenticity to the viewer. how much can he/she intervene without the art works losing its authenticity? The problem of defining authenticity in the arts has been a controversial topic amongst art critics and experts for decades, especially regarding representation and preservation in art works.

The task of a curator can be challenging - being the interphase between artists, institutions and the public. He needs to work in close proximity to the artist who works hard to express and experiment with feelings, emotions and viewpoints through various medium that can influence and enlighten people. When coordinating an exhibition it is important that the curator ensures that the exhibition brings out the artist's originality, innovation and intention - just as the artist perceives it.- how much can he/she intervene without the art works losing its authenticity? The problem of defining authenticity in the arts has been a controversial topic amongst art critics and experts for decades, especially regarding representation and preservation in art works.

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If one takes the meaning behind authenticity seriously the need to be 'genuine', original, truthful.. etc. is it then possible in an installation to be authentic if it is not the artist himself who has constructed the art work? Is a part of an installation art work not the experience of constructing it itself? In order to become authentic, is it the right for an artist to make the

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installation? Surely the artist has his own right to do so and mind you, some artists even prefer that, but what if it is physically impossible due to the scale of the installation object? And What if the artist no longer exists, such as in the case of Louise Bourgeois. Is it then better not to reconstruct her art installations? Perhaps the notion of authenticity does not apply to installation art, as long as the intention behind the artist work is intact, who cares? Is authenticity in the art dead?

Installation Art - A Change in representing art

What characterizes it?

How is it different to the traditional art form?

By the 1960s the art world flourished with Minimalism, Dada, Happenings and Installation art. Much different to 'traditional art', installation art brought about new complications when dealing with conservation and presentation for museums, galleries and private patrons. The traditional relation between the viewer and the object had shifted where space, time and location became more inherent in the art work (Bishop, 2005, p. 10). Despite the difficulties in exhibiting installation art, it proved to be popular in the succeeding eras and flourished in galleries and museums around the world. However, methods of conservation and presentation are a different story when it comes to installation art.

A quite coherent and clearly represented overview of different models and kinds of installation is given by Claire Bishop in her book Installation Art - A

Critical History, written in 2005. Her book is divided in four chapters, each presenting a different model of installation.

The term ‘ installation’ in conjunction with art and art exhibitions is not new. However, the term was originally used in a slightly different manner. It referred to the exhibition space rather than being an independent art movement, as also indicated by Michael Archer in Installation Art written in 1996, the term installation was traditionally referred to as the process of hanging the exhibited works:

“ In the early 1960 the terms ‘ assemblage’ and ‘ environment’ were most commonly employed to describe work in which the artist had brought together a host of materials in order to fill a given space. At that time, installation referred to nothing more than how an exhibition had been hung” (Archer & Petry & Oliveira & Oxley, 1996, p. 11).

A similar point is made by Julie H. Reiss in her book From Margin to Center – The Spaces of Installation Art, written in 2001. She suggests that the term ‘ Installation art’ is post-enforced on room engulfing installations. She indicates that the term ‘ Installation art’ for room-size multimedia works developed from Allan Kaprow’s ‘ Environments’ that was used for these kinds of works in the 1950’s. Later, it became synonymous for ‘ exhibition’, therefore still referring to the exhibition space rather than a form of art. Only later the meaning of Installation for an independent art movement developed, however hard to pin down:

“ Although the term “ Installation art” has become widely used, it is relatively nonspecific. It refers to a wide range of artistic practices, and at

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times overlaps with other interrelated areas including Fluxus, Earth art, Minimalism, video art, Performance art, Conceptual art and Process art, Site specificity, institutional critique, temporality, and ephemerality are issues shared by many practitioners of these genres” (Reiss, 1999, p. xiii)

According to Bishop, the term ‘ installation’ for an art form that explored the space it is positioned in, came from the photographic documentation of an exhibition; usually referred to as ‘ exhibition shot’. Therefore, the installation of art and Installation art, both, deal with the position of an art object in regard to its space and audience. However, the difference between the old term and the new art is the relation of space and work. Whereas the installation of art is secondary to the piece itself, Installation art and its site become a symbiosis, in other words they become an inseparable unity. (Bishop, 2005). Also because of this blurring in terminology and the wide span of different art objects, a correct definition of Installation art is somewhat hard to provide. Nevertheless, the next paragraphs will give deeper insights into the features and core characteristics of Installation art.

The first kind of Installations art as described by Claire Bishop (2005) is the total installation. Here, the viewer is able to physically enter the artwork. Instead of using paint on canvas in order to create an illusion of three dimensional spaces, the viewer is, one could almost say, able to step into the painting, experiencing it from the inside:

“ Installation art therefore differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a liberal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of

disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are heightened their sense of vision” (Bishop, 2005, p. 6).

As indicated in the quote above, one of the most profound innovations of Installation art was a new relation between object viewer and space. This new perception of artworks are connected to Freud’s psychoanalytical method of interpreting dreams; the free association method. According to Freud, the interpretation, the making sense of our dreams, so to speak, consists of three steps: the visual images and sometimes auditory fragments (the dream itself), the analysis by free association and the expression in words or syllables. Citing the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov, Bishop suggests:

“ These three features – the sensory immediacy of conscious perception, a composite structure, and the elucidation of meaning through free-association – precisely correspond to a model of viewing experience found in the ‘ total installation’ as described by Kabakov. We imaginatively project ourselves into an immersive ‘ scene’ that requires creative free association in order to articulate its meaning; in order to do this, the installation’s assemblage elements are taken one by one and read ‘ symbolically’ – as metonymic part of a narrative” (Bishop, 2005, p. 16).

The work of art becomes a kaleidoscope, consisting of many paintings. By absorbing the viewer into the artwork it challenged the old fixed and traditional perspective of the viewer, suggesting that multiple perspectives are possible. “[...] various forms of institutional critique and conceptual art developed a different model of site-specificity that implicitly challenged the “

innocence” of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal viewing subject[...]” (Kwon, 2002, p. 13). Also, this first theatrical form of installation art posed severe problems and difficulties to the traditional treatment of art and seemed somewhat hostile towards popular cultural institutions. The size that expanded common exhibition space and use of seemingly useless components suggested a critical position towards the assumption that all objects in a museum have to be considered art. (Bishop 2005, p. 33-34).

Another form of Installation art was inspired and resolved from the movement of Minimalism in the 1960s; even though minimalist sculptures were different in their relation to the exhibition space itself: “[...] the fact that the exhibition comprised several sculptures did not mean that it was an environment, because “ there are seven separate pieces” (Judd in Bishop, 2005, p. 55). However, it took over core characteristics of this movement, by stressing the awareness of the relationship between artwork and the space in which it is exhibited as much as the viewer’s perception of it. The piece of work and the perceiving individual became inseparable. Although similar in their appearance, installations, different than minimalistic works, attempt to focus on the relationship between light and space; taking the space they are exhibited in into consideration:

“ Like Minimalist sculpture, Asher’s installation focused attention on the viewer, and on how he received and perceive any given space. Unlike Minimalism, it also showed how the white gallery space was not a timeless constant but subject to contingent flux: the installation was accessible day

and night, so that the ' exterior light, sound and air became a permanent part of the exhibition" (Bishop, 2005, p. 60).

By focusing on flux and other constantly changing factors; daylight for example, the artists suggest that the perception of an object depends and is determined by the position and the period of time the perceiver observes the object; indicating our partial perception and questioning the objectivity of our perception of reality. This visitor's heightened awareness of the work within its exhibition space and awareness that perception is bound to many different factors was taken to another level by involving the viewer directly with the artwork by recording or monitoring them.

" In the installations of Dan Graham (b. 1942) made in the 1970s, mirrors and video feedback are used to stage perceptual experiments for the viewer that demonstrated how our awareness of the world is dependent on interaction with others. Graham's work is therefore a crucial consideration for this type of installation art, since the status of the viewer preoccupies his thinking throughout his decade" (Bischof, 2005, p. 72)

This new awareness of perception also plays a crucial part in the next category of Installation art. However, it deals with this perception in a different, if not oppositional manner. With the help of different devices, engulfing darkness or colours, mirrors, sounds or assimilating environment artists tried to dislodge or annihilate the perception of the viewer. Even though done in a different oppositional way (dislodging instead of heightening the viewers perception), the visitor is forced to reflect on once position within society and history. " The installations [...] do not seek to

increase perceptual awareness of the body but rather to reduce it, by assimilating the viewer in various ways to the surrounding space[...]" (Bishop, 2005, p. 101).

The last of Bishop's categories of different installation addresses and activates the viewer in a totally different and new manner. This last form of installation activates the spectator in opposition to most other installation because he actively participates. This form could be described as a Happening, an installation where artist and visitors act together upon a specific situation.

" The audience of this work is therefore envisaged as plural: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situation in which viewer are addressed as a collective, social mass; moreover, in many of these works we are given the structure to create a community, however temporary and utopian this might be" (Bishop, 2005, 116).

One of the most precursor and representative for these action or life installations are, so Bishop, the German artist Joseph Beuys and the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija born in South America to Thai parents. Beuys works were quite political constituting a mixture of installation and performance. On group exhibitions or art fairs, such as the Documenta in Kassel, he put forward political campaigns in the form of art (' The Bureau for Direct Democracy', 1972), where everybody could discuss about issues, such as democracy. Tiravanija, as another example for this category of installations organized collective cooking session in a museum or gallery; conveying a

communion between individuals. In his installation 'Untitled (tomorrow is another day)' from 1996 he rebuilt his apartment at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne so visitors could cook in his kitchen or socialize in his living room. (Bishop, 2005, p. 102-199).

Though, it is hard to give a full overview of Installation art because to many different works can be included into the notion of Installation art, the short overview above intends to give a rough outline of the major categories of installation art. As it became apparent from the examples already, the new appearance of Installation art gave rise to a couple of difficulties, especially concerning conservation and reinstallation of the works. In contrary to traditional forms of art, Installation art changed the perception and position or point of view of the viewer. Because of their disarming character the works disperse or decentre the traditional or fixed point of view by either heightening or dissolute the viewer's perception. Most importantly, however for the further chapters if this paper is the caducity or time and place specificity seemingly inherent to this new form of art. They all rely on the literal presence of the viewer in that particular moment of being and demanding the viewer's first hand experience. "[...the art work] articulate and define itself through properties, qualities or meaning produced in specific relationships between and ' object' or ' event' and a position it occupies" (Kaye, 2000, p. 1). All of them seem to be linked to their time and place that makes a reconstruction at another place (another museum or gallery for example) impossible without loosing its original meaning.

This or a similar point is also made by Miwon Kwon in her book *One Place after Another – Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, written in 2004 as <https://assignbuster.com/authenticity-of-installation-art/>

much as in her article ' One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity' published by Erika Suderburg (2000) in *Space, Site Intervention, Situating Installation Art*. In her writings on installations, she stresses the importance and influence of the site and location the work was intended for by the artist. Because of this site-specificity the first-hand experience of the viewer remains, also for her, a crucial point in the acquaintance of Installation Art:

“ The (neo-avant-garde) aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like paintings and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience [...] all these imperatives came together in art's new attachments to the actuality of site” (Suderburg, 2000, p. 39)

Therefore, Installation art, being another step within the development or the search of art for its limits, led to a type of art that took its environment into consideration, to an extent that the actual presence of the viewer was of crucial importance. Moreover, Kwon suggests that the new kind of art inherent another characteristic that gave rise to difficulties for cultural institutions, such as museums. Maybe influenced by Conceptual art, as well the artists of installations increasingly blurred the borderline between art and non-art. This came to the fore when the installations were accompanied by debates and discussions (like the works of Joseph Beuys and Rirkrit Tiravanija presented above). This way, the first-hand experience became even more crucial because the bases of art became increasingly fluid and virtual. (Suderburg, 2004, Ch. 2).

Since some of the works could not be moved from its original site, either because they were too big or they emerged with the site (like wall paintings, for example, Richard Serra *Splashing*, installation at Catelli Warehouse, 1968), reproduction became a common means to transfer the art objects into institutionalized exhibition space. “[...] the re-creations come to coexist with or replace the old, functioning as new originals (some even finding homes in permanent collections of museums)” (Kwon, 2004, p. 48). Clearly, there are a multitude of problems concerning Installation art. Most of the works seem as if they could not be preserved for future generations at all. Should these objects that are so much bound to a time and place art all be exhibited? How can one possibly exhibit an action that took place at a certain time and place performed by a certain group of people? Without doubt there are and have been exhibitions of artist such as Joseph Beuys in museums all around the world? How can his works be preserved or ‘re-experienced’ in a totally different place by totally different people? However, the next chapters of this paper will focus on the problems of authenticity and authorship regarding the conservation and re-building of installations. If an installations has to be re-installed or material has to be protected from decline conservators, curators and sometimes even the artist are confronted with the question in how far they are allowed to engage into the original artwork without losing its meaning or originality. Much of the materials used are subject to enormous change and mortality, such as media technology, natural products or other time bound devices. What kind of problems of authenticity evolve and how are these problems solved and recognized in every-day practice?