

What is Installation Art?

(And why has it become so important)

The Museum and the Art Market

In looking at installation Art it is quite useful to look at the kind of art that came before it. Art in the west before the Renaissance was inextricably linked to the church. During and after the Renaissance this link weakened, although many of the most ambitious projects were undertaken for the Vatican eg. Sistine Chapel, St Peters. The system of patronage that emerged with wealthy merchants, bankers etc *as well as* clergy and nobility commissioning and supporting the work of artists survived until relatively recently.

The idea of the gallery/museum that we have today developed as a way of showing the large accumulations of paintings the most powerful rulers of the 17th Century had amassed. Museums like the Prado in Madrid and the Louvre in Paris were the results. The way that paintings and sculptures were exhibited was fixed fairly early on, typically big gold frames for the paintings and plinths for the sculptures.

The Royal Academy in London and its notorious floor to ceiling hanging for the Summer Exhibition are a glimpse back in time to when the aim of the gallery was to include as much work as possible on the walls.

Alongside the growth of great national collections was the development of complex networks related to the buying and selling of art - what we currently call the Art Market. Art has and probably always will be one of the most expensive commodities in the world, and the business of art is very big business. The history of Installation is inextricably linked to the idea of the museum and the workings of the art market.

Dada and Duchamp

When Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp challenged the status quo by presenting the piece Fountain 1917 (a urinal which he christened a ready made sculpture) for an exhibition he was challenging not only notions of skill and the nature of art but also how we use art as viewers and consumers. When artists began to use the "ready made" they were using the gallery space as part of the work. Duchamps Urinal would not be shocking in a builder's yard – it is only when it is put in the context of an art gallery and displayed on a plinth that it gains its power to shock and bemuse.

The idea of using found objects in a space was developed by Kurt Schwitters with his Merzbau project. In the aftermath of WW1 he turned rooms of his house into walk in artworks by covering every surface with Found collage elements from the everyday world. In creating a kind of modern metropolitan Grotto, he created

an environment which would have a powerful effect on anyone entering into it- they would in effect become part of the work by entering the room.

Art such as this was a total rejection of the Art Market. The only way Schwitters could sell Merzbau as a piece of art would be to sell the whole house that contained it. In this sense the use of the found object and these early experiments with installation represent a decisive break from the established workings of the market and the museum

Early Installations/environments

Constructivist' artists such as El Lissitzky used the idea of walking into a whole environment to explore ideas about pure form and abstraction. His ideas were developed by artists working alongside Piet Mondrian in the De Stijl movement and later by the Bauhaus Art School which aimed to create the perfect artwork in the form of a house and all the things within it such as paintings, furniture, products textiles etc

In 1956 the exhibition 'This is Tomorrow' at the ICA in London featured complex arrangements of what was to be later called Pop art in arrangements that echoed Dada and Constructivist ideas. Installation as it is today could be said to have developed from the idea of the Environment which was developed by Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg in the late 1950s and early sixties . His dense miscellanies of objects strewn around galleries were accompanied by experimental music, elements of performance and the use of lighting and



Floating World, Installation, 2006

conventions about audience interaction more usually associated with the theatre.

The 1960s to the present day

In the 60s and 70s as the language of installation developed artists took ever more extreme positions. Artists such as Joseph Beuys and Jannis Kounellis used animals and humans as parts of their installations. These pieces often blurred the boundaries between installation and performance.

Towards the end of the 1990s it could be said that the projected image in the form of video installation became the dominant form in the field of contemporary art., e.g. large and complex works by artists such as Bill Viola and Douglas Gordon.

Juan Munoz or Olafur Eliassen Cornelia Parker and Mona Hatoum have created richly theatrical pieces often using light as a key component. Parker was trained in theatre design and carries that through to her complex installations such as "Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View" 1991.

James Turrel pioneered the use of light as the sole component in his light installations, recently in his piece the Weather Project Olafur Eliassen used a huge glowing light to mimic a giant sun setting in the vast turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

Artists such as Kara Walker and Dan Perjovschi have experimented with the idea of drawing as installation. Recently Chris Ofili has experimented with controlling the whole environment where his paintings have been exhibited, painting the walls and using theatrically positioned spotlights. Similarly in photography Wolfgang Tillmans has experimented widely with the way his photographs are positioned on gallery walls further taking away any sense of hierarchy within the disparate images that are his trademark.

A lecture by Andy Parsons , 2007.