

# On the Critical Role of Modern Installation Art

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, people's social life tends to be stable and night economy develops gradually, but the resulting urban light pollution is hidden in the curve of economic rise. Economy and science and technology promote the development of art, installation art was born in this environment. As the crystallization of human technology and art, artists and engineers make it active in today's people's vision, enrich the entertainment of society. What cannot be ignored is that installation art is also quietly shouldering its social responsibilities and criticizing social phenomena and problems through sensory experience.

**Keywords:** Installation Art; Environmental Protection; Criticism

## 1. Origins of installation art

In 1958, the installation artist Allan Kaprow used the term “Environment” to describe his work, a room-sized multimedia work. His works are often the arrangement of stories, allowing participants and performers to experience art [1]. For example, in the works of “Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts”, he allowed participants to experience different elements in the works, such as to be an artist to paint or to be a member of bands to play music [2]. The works aim to create a sensory and immersive experience that challenges predominant understandings.

Going further back in history, installation art can be traced back to 1917, to the work of Marcel Duchamp. His Dadaist style challenged traditional aesthetics because it did not use traditional tools to express art; instead, it was freely combined with ordinary objects in daily life. Dadaism expresses the criticism of old art forms, hoping to create a new art world [3]. In the 1970s, installation space broke out in New York's alternative area, breaking the traditional barriers between audience and art in a new form, and Installation art had been developed in its way of expression. Artists began to use any artistic means and materials they needed, started to create artwork based on the indoor space, and a variety of medium, such as light, video, sound, et al. began to be considered.

“There, for the first time, “Environment (Art)” appeared. The first issue of The Art Index that lists installations is volume 27, November 1978 to October 1979. Under “Installation,” the researcher is advised to “see Environment (Art).” [4] In the next fourteen volumes, “installation” continues to be indexed with no listings other than a cross-reference to Environment. Not until volume 42, November 1993 to October 1994 does “installation” appear with an actual listing of articles. At that point, Environment ceases to be a category” [5].



Figure 1: Fountain (Duchamp)

## 2. Form and function of installation art

Installation art is generally difficult to define, because its forms are extremely malleable and full of various mediums. Installation art is unlike traditional painting or sculpture, which uses a single medium, it could include multiple medium forms such as interaction or lighting object. Generally, after 1960s, installation art is described as a work of art with specific items, such as containing a specific scene or a specific process. Combrink and Allen argue that installation art, like performance or minimalism, represents a process rather than a synonym [6]. Artists aim to bring a complex sensory or emotional experience to viewers through various media or scene in installation art.

Pelowski et al argue that installation art usually does not make aesthetic criticism of traditional things, evaluating whether they are beautiful or ugly [7]. On the contrary, they focus on the audience's thinking and reaction to the elements in the installation art space, including audience's physical and sensory reactions. An interesting example is an installation built on a path in Holland, named "the Van Gogh-Roosegaarde cycle path". The path was painted in blue and green to look like the starry sky at night. The artist used lighting installations to further help people enjoy a dreamy journey or as if they met Van Gogh in their mind in order that arise the viewer's personal memory feelings for Van Gogh [8].

In short, installation art can be regarded as an art that expresses the author's ideas through non-traditional art methods and various technological media. Its purpose is mainly to bring a meaningful experience to the audience or express criticism of social issues.

Video installation art is a combination of video art and installation art. Video installation art first appeared in 1963. German artist Wolf Vostell exhibited his installation work named "6 TV De-Coll/age", six TV set on a wooden box in front of a white canvas. His work firstly broke the traditional relationship between viewers and TV sets and also breaks through the conventional functions of TV sets [9]. Then the latest video installation art could be more colourful and entertaining with the cooperation of sounds and interactive diverse. For example, the work "Funky Forest" uses video and sound medium to create an interactive ecosystem space. The work uses bright colours and cheerful music to attract audience participation. And the visual context includes trees, waterfalls, birds, et al. in the forest. Most of the viewers are children, who can irrigate the trees by interactively touching the waterfalls to make them grow and grow [10].

Interactive installation art combines intelligent technology and new media, and almost most non-traditional techniques contain interactive factors. Therefore, some actors in contemporary art are coming from different fields and with different interests [11]. Historically, "Interactive medium" came up by Dink Hagens in 1960s, artists and engineers applied it at that moment. Roy Ascott was the first artists to call on people to participate in interactive art in the early of 1960s [12]. In the 21st century, interactive methods have become more diverse since temperature, sound, and weight of objects can all be used as interactive methods.

Installation light art is an art form in which light can be a medium and carrier, and light can bring visual experience and sensory stimulation to the audience in a natural way [13]. It is also as the high-tech art, thanks to it combines the technology and artistic charm [14]. Naum Gabo can be regarded as a pioneer in the art of lighting installations. In 1920, his artwork, "Kinetic Construction", made of electric motors and metal rods created a new era of the visual world. Although there is no light element in the works, the light plane formed by the metal rods jitter is considered to be the origin of lighting art.

On May 25, 1963, another notable artist, Dan Flavin, began to create a piece with fluorescent lights. His first work was very simple, named "The Diagonal of May 25, 1963". He hung a fluorescent tube diagonally on the wall producing a Dadaist 'ready-made' form. Since then, the fluorescent tube has become the only element of his works [15]. As a genre of installation art light art plays an important role in modern exhibitions, such as "Breath of light", which has been awarded a Red Dot in 2018.

## 3. Participation after spectatorship

The feeling of immersion is a distinct characteristic of installation (Reiss 2001). Traditional art mostly stays in two-dimensional space. Therefore, most works bring only visual experience, and your brain tells you that you remain in the first world. But the immersive experience provided by installation art is entirely different; you seem to be in another fantastic world. "Infinity Mirror Rooms" was produced by Yayoi Kusama in 1965, she created an endless, infinitely repeated fantasy world by putting various elements into a space surrounded by mirrors. Visitors felt entirely in another world when they were

copied countlessly in the area [16].

Participation is one of the predominant features of installation art. Compared with traditional architecture, in installation art, the audience can also become a part of the work. Scott Snibbe's work, "Shadow Play", which is famous for the fact that participant's body, has been a part of the whole work and constituted the image by the computer. Scott Snibbe as a master of installation art and he always hopes that the audience can participate in his actions in the way of "body first", creating a strong sense of viscera, finally thinking and reflecting. He once explained that his purpose was to extend his concept to interactive experience through human body participation, rather than a one-way delivery of stories and emotions like movies, the traditional art. Besides, there were lots of artists done similar work in the past years.

Another interesting examples is the work of Lozano-Hemmer's work, "Body Movies". This work utilizes between 400 and 1800 square meters of interactive projection, which changes the appearance of buildings and public spaces. The primary method of this design is pre-projecting thousands of portrait photographs onto premises by using automatic control projectors. These images are projected while residents are walking through the area. The intense light source is set on the ground to increase the height and space of the pedestrian shadow. According to the difference of distance between the pedestrian and the light source, the height of the pedestrian's shadow can reach between 2 meters and 25 meters [17]. When all the portrait pictures are displayed, the system will project new portraits on the surface of the building again. This work also expresses criticism of social phenomena, and it can cause residents to consider the importance of distance between persons because people always ignore the gap with their close friends or family members.

Compared with the passive visual artwork, installation works can engage multiple senses, include sight, hearing, touch etc[18]. For example, TeamLab is well-known for their recent digital installation "Light Chords (2017)" which is an installation art made by artists and engineers. Viewers can interact with the device by touching a light created by several colors. People can send instructions to the computer in order to produce specific music by touching the light, so a beautiful sounds can be produced by the cooperation of several participants. Installations such as this are communicative in terms of both bodies and psychological response.

According to (Ro and Kim 2019), installation art not only creates meaning at the aesthetic level, but can also have a moral meaning which engages viewers in an experiential and explorative way. Work that fits this moral dimension comes from Gerry Hofstetter, who in 2003, showed an Arctic polar bear climbing on an Antarctic iceberg. The Arctic polar bear was projected onto ice as a means of raising awareness as to the species' endangerment. Hofstetter wanted to call on people to pay more attention to environmental issues[19] and consider their behaviour.

Installations have an interruptive relationship and can produce emotional conversations about the human condition. One example of this is the recent Marina Abramovic project "7 Deaths of Marica Callas", a video installation art work. She hope to arise the emotional resonance of viewers by the video installation describing her love story[20].

#### **4. The critical function of installation art**

In 1971, Robert Grosvenor launched his work, "Kinetic Ocean Piece"[21]. It was made of yellow metal tubes and put on the blue ocean, it critiqued the disordered relationship between people and nature and urged people to pay more attention to nature. In 1987, David Avalos and other artists made a work, "911-A house Gone Wrong", to expose the absurdity of life in that social age. There was a cross-shaped desktop with four TV sets, and the screens were all up to the ceiling. The structures in the room were as strange as the TV sets and everything looked wired. There are many installations like this that aim to reveal and critique the problems and phenomena in our life, including life, society, religion, nature, psychology, etc. Therefore, criticality can be regarded as one of the most important functions of installation art.

#### **5. Installation art and environmentalism**

The use of installation art to critically comment on environmental matters can increase people's awareness of environmental crises. Therefore, this kind of installation art especially when installed in a public space is a potential breakthrough in raising awareness of environmental pollution. As these

examples show, art can work by promoting people's participation passion and communicative action [22]. According to Sommer (2019), installation art, like 'Pollution Pods', is a significant form of environmental communication because it can affect people's behavior and intentions.

## 6. Summary and suggestions

From a historical point of view, installation art can be regarded as an experiential artform that enriches our understanding of sensory experience and builds a bridge of psychological communication between the artist and the audience in different ways. Consequently, it is feasible and meaningful to use installation art to arouse the audience's thinking about urban light pollution because, in today's society, environmental problems are no longer only solved by science and technology, but also demand the engagement of artists, people's imagination and consciousness [23].

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