

Installations as Theatre

Are All Situations Theatrical?

by Robert Horvitz

(introduction to Trebuchet's special issue on "Installation Art")

Does installation art need to be re-evaluated before art scholarship hardens it into art history? That this hardening has begun is suggested by the steep decrease in texts uploaded to academia.edu containing the phrase 'installation art', from the peak year of 2019 when 689 articles were registered, to just 222 in 2023 – even though this was 'the institutionally approved art form par excellence of the 1990s' as Claire Bishop (2005) put it.

The risk is that this hardening will make permanent the current understanding, which is quite short-sighted. Any artwork which does not originate in the space where it is presented needs to be 'installed'. And yet, as Bishop points out, there is a 'fine line' between 'installation art' and 'the installation of art': the latter is a curatorial activity while the former is a set of elements arranged by an artist in an exhibition space. What they share is a sense of the arrangement as impermanent. Where they differ is in where the impermanence is—among or within individual artworks—and who determines the arrangement.

But there is a complicating factor: the viewing conditions may be unstable even when the artwork is fixed for posterity. This is the case with "the adorned prehistoric cave", which Joseph Nechvatal (1999) proposes as the origin of installation art:

"The painters of Lascaux took into full consideration the environmental characteristics and qualities of the physical cavern, first by utilising both the encasing ceiling and walls, and then by using the physical bulges and bosses of the stone enclosure to meat out the forms of the animals' rumps and bellies... These painted caves were presumably meant to be seen by few human beings under conditions of extreme difficulty and apprehension, as

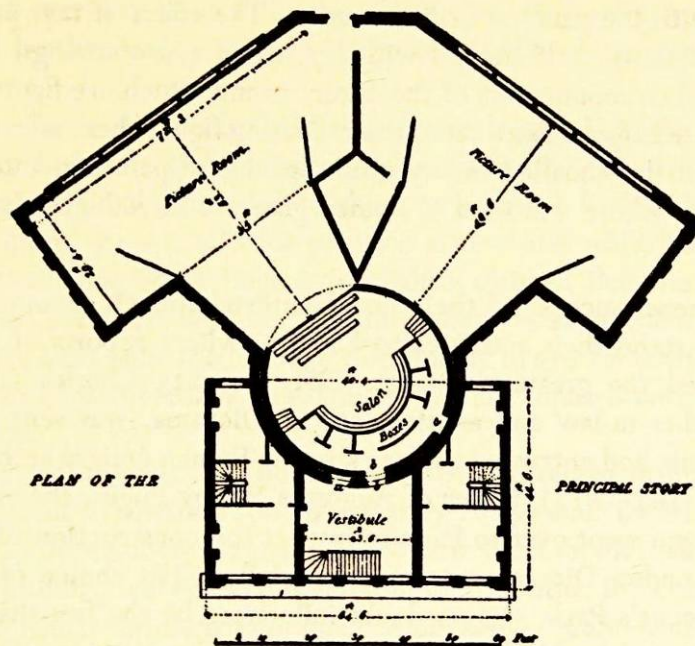
many are entered only by crawling on the belly through a hole in the earth down into dark passages in the earth's womb."

More recent research by Sakamoto and others (2020) attempts to measure our ancient ancestors' use of torch lighting, viewing angle and rock surface irregularities to enhance the magical realism of the images that they secreted in caves:

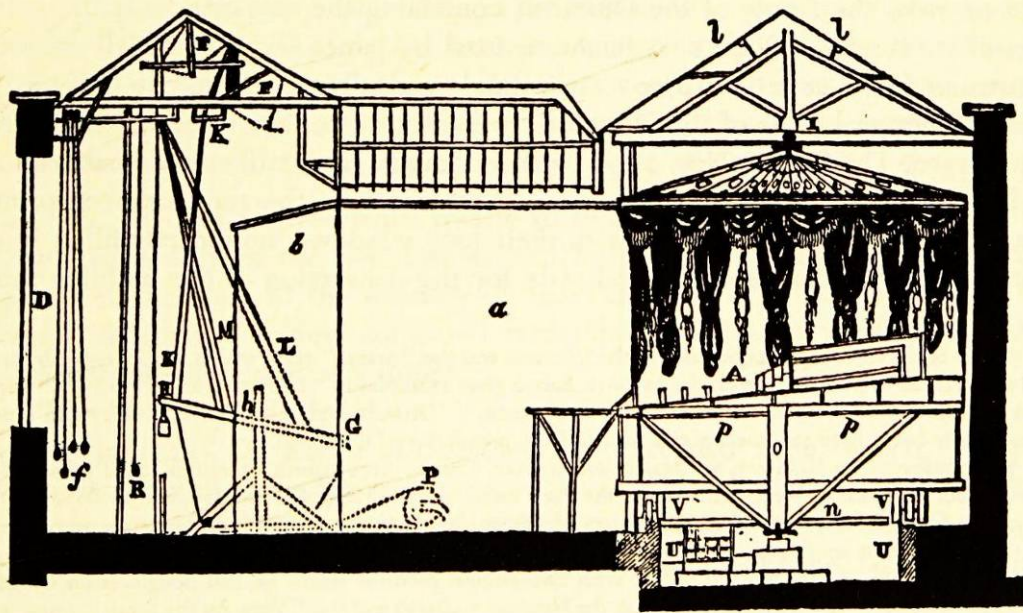
"It seems, therefore, that cave walls often played an integral role in the creation and, in particular, viewing of images, and hence that 'cave art' was actually a system that integrated the artist/viewer and their physical environment in a two-way relationship that was constantly changing... This relationship corresponds to the principles of modern 'installation art'..."

However, the importance of cave art was not fully appreciated until late in the twentieth century. So despite its historical significance it was not a major inspiration for the artists who made installation art a widespread practice. Nevertheless, art history is full of achievements that were unrecognised when they occurred, only to be cited later as pivotal. In the case of installation art, many diverse motivations and strategies converged over a very long period of time, such that diversities of form and purpose survived and grew. Thus, it is more than a style or *-ism*. It is more like an opening into the substrate of presentation impulses which fuel all the arts.

Long after cave art was created and forgotten, a new inspiration appeared: Daguerre's Diorama. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre is remembered now for his role in the invention of photography (his daguerreotype process captured finely detailed monochrome images on metal sheets). But before that, he earned great renown from his dynamic scenic light spectacles, staged in specially constructed auditoriums which could host up to 350 viewers at a time. Daguerre's prior experience painting scenery for theatre and opera had kindled his interest in illusions that could be produced by stage lighting, which must have inspired the Diorama. His first Diorama opened in Paris in July of 1822 and within a year, a second was built in London. A third opened in Berlin in 1827. The success of these venues inspired imitators and attracted competitors. As the novelty wore off, some of Daguerre's rivals added narrators, singers or musicians, blending the illumination shows back into popular theatre.



(a) Ground plan of the Diorama building, London, by A. Pugin and J. Morgan, 1823



THE DIORAMA.

(b) Cross-section of the auditorium and picture emplacement of the Diorama, London

[CAPTION:] Plan and cross section of the Diorama in London, from Barba (1823). The top diagram shows the two stages viewable by the audience from the round turntable. The left half of the lower diagram shows the system of pulleys, shutters and counterweights that formed and aimed beams of light.

Each Diorama had two stage areas. The floor on which the audience stood or sat was actually a turntable that moved to shift attention to the second scene after the first one ended. Huge sheets of thin linen could be lit from the front or back. Hidden mirrors and shutters redirected sun- and lamp-light onto or through the screens in the darkened auditorium, which caused painted elements to appear or disappear as the changes in lighting made the cloth layers transparent or opaque. From 1834 onward, both sides of the linen were painted with complementary motifs to support more complex conceptions, such as gradually transforming a landscape from summer into winter, day into night, a rainbow appearing after a thunderstorm, congregants leaving a church. This was proto-cinema: each scene took 10-15 minutes to unfold and the “effect was so subtle and finely rendered that both critics and the public were astounded, believing they were looking at a natural scene” (*Wikipedia*). Contemporary accounts confirm that response. When the first Diorama opened, a Parisian journal named *Le miroir des spectacles, des lettres, des mœurs et des arts* gushed: “Jamais aucune représentation de la nature ne nous avait frappé si vivement” [Never has a representation of nature so deeply affected us].

If we consider Daguerre’s Diorama pre-modern, the first influential piece of installation art in the modern era is undoubtedly Edgar Degas’ *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. Monet’s painting *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) had been criticised as being no more than a preliminary sketch: Louis Leroy whined in the review that branded this new style as Impressionism, “Le papier peint à l’état embryonnaire est encore plus fait que cette marine-là!” [Wallpaper in the embryonic state is even more done than this seascape!]. Degas was similarly criticised for exhibiting a maquette made of beeswax, a material used to plan a sculpture before it is cast in metal. That the beeswax version was intended as final is demonstrated by Degas’ refusal to approve a metal casting while he was alive. It is tempting to think he insisted on representing her with a malleable material to make the point that the ballerina was still young enough to be malleable. The wax figure was adorned with human hair, ribbons, linen slippers and a tutu made of silk and cotton—real-world materials, a radical innovation that reproduction in metal would obscure. Most importantly, the *Little Dancer* was originally shown in a vitrine, a component usually omitted in reproductions and photographs, even though it “contributed to the figure’s volatile meaning”, according

to the (US) National Gallery of Art's website. It protected her portrait from damage but turned her into a specimen.

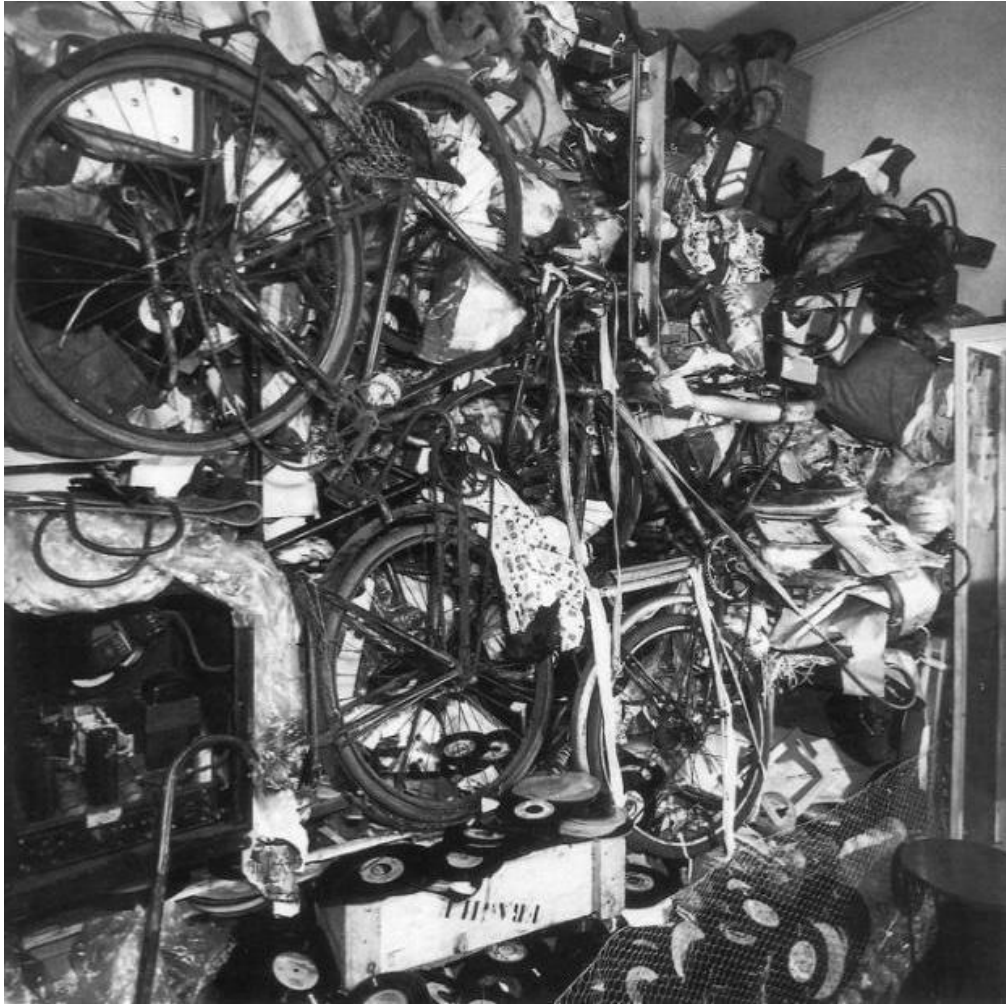


Photo of the *Little Dancer* taken in 1917-1918, without the vitrine.

As with Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, the art historical tide turned and the initially disparaged *Little Dancer* is now described by the NGA as “a groundbreaking work of art. The liberating idea that any medium or technique necessary to convey the desired effect is fair game may be traced back to this sculpture”.

The *Little Dancer* is also significant for another reason: it shows direct presentation beginning to supplant representation in the artist's toolkit, a shift that was subsequently enlarged by Cubist collages' incorporation of wallpapers and newsprint into paintings. The found objects that Duchamp recontextualised as 'readymades' expanded the significance of direct presentation, as did non-representational art (which is often misrepresented as 'abstract'). Complex tableaux by artists like Ed Kienholz and Joseph Beuys would eventually transcend the distinction between presentation and representation.

In the 1960s, Carl Andre, Hans Haacke and Jack Burnham developed new paradigms for three-dimensional works based on the construction of temporary arrangements. They showed how impermanence could be part of the message, accelerating the acceptance of what came to be called installation art.



[CAPTION:] Arman (1960). *Le Plein* [The Fullness]. Paris: The Iris Clert Gallery was filled with garbage so densely packed that no one could enter.



[CAPTION:] Kienholz, E. (1961). *Roxy's*. The photo shows a 2010 reconstruction at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York.



[CAPTION:] Haacke, H. (1964-1965). *Blue Sail*. Chiffon, oscillating fan, fishing weights and thread. Photograph © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



[CAPTION:] Two pieces in Carl Andre's retrospective, 'Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010', at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2017). Photo by Brian Forrest.

Dispensing with what Christopher Caudwell called 'skill-fetishism', from 1965 onward Carl Andre used pre-formed modules (bricks, metal tiles, bales of hay, railroad ties) unmodified in size and shape. These were assembled in simple ways and held in place only by their weight. His sculptures are assembled at the exhibition site and dismantled when the show closes. A self-proclaimed Marxist, Andre's explicitly temporary arrangements were understood as nose-thumbing at art collectors, who necessarily seek collectibles that are unique and durable. Andre's challenge to those preferences is now shared by many others wanting to demonstrate their independence from market values via preference for temporary configurations fitted to specific sites. However, certificates of authenticity soon re-established provenance as a source of value, even when the materials themselves are not unique.

Like Andre, Haacke wanted his work to interact with its surrounding environment, but Haacke proposed "reserving the term 'system' for certain non-static 'sculptures', since only in this category does a transfer of energy, material or information occur":

"Painters, and sculptors of static works, are anxious to prevent their works from being influenced by time and environmental conditions... Although physical changes take place, the intention of these artists is to make something that alters as little as possible. Equally, the viewer hopes to see the

work as it appeared immediately after its execution. Works, however, have been produced with the explicit intention of having their components physically communicate with each other and the whole communicate physically with the environment. It is this type of work which cannot be classified as 'sculpture', whereas it can be described appropriately as a 'system'." (Grasskamp, 2004).

Haacke credits Jack Burnham for bringing the concept of 'system' into discussions of art: "By its use, he was trying to distinguish certain three-dimensional situations which, misleadingly, have been labelled as 'sculpture'." However, while Haacke saw systems as dynamic, changing and evolving, Burnham viewed them (as Haacke said) as 'situations', with interactions among the components mediated by information: change might occur as a result of the interactions, but that was not an essential requirement. As Margaretha Bijvoet explains:

"[Burnham] felt that the western world was changing from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented society. Sculpture's change from *objet d'art* to *systeme d'art* paralleled, as he defined it, the intellectual framework produced by the scientific community... Most controversial, however, was his speculative prediction that the art object, being an inert artefact, would eventually disappear as a cultural expression...

These thoughts were the beginnings of what Burnham was to call a 'systems esthetics'. He proposed this term in opposition to Michael Fried's adjectives theatrical, literalist, and post-formalist esthetics, in his well-known article 'Art and Objecthood', in which Fried had comprised the materialist tendencies in modern sculpture into the one term 'objecthood' (Fried, 1967). Fried thought that contemporary sculpture, being more and more a composition of different kinds of materials, was moving toward theatricality, a tendency he considered dangerous for the independence of art." (Bijvoet, 1997)

It is ironic that Fried was concerned about 'objecthood' promoting 'theatricality' when theatricality is what led Daguerre to develop a profoundly effective post-static-object aesthetic. Whichever way art turns, it seems to run into theatre.

This should come as no surprise since we live in an era where influential theorists as different as Michael Fried and John Cage argue for similarly expansive definitions of theatre. As Fried put it:

“...the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art. Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work... the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation*—one which, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.” (Fried, 1967; his emphasis)

For Cage, the concept of theatre is even more encompassing:

“If you’re in a room and a record is playing and the window is open and there’s some breeze and a curtain blowing, that’s sufficient, it seems to me, to produce a theatrical experience...” (Kostelanetz, 1988)

If installation art is theatrical, it is a peculiar kind of theatre in which the installation and audience are the performers and the artist is the playwright, producer and director. Yet that does seem to fit the most compelling pieces. Take *Samson* by Chris Burden (1985). To see the piece, one must pass through a turnstile, which rotates a step-down gear connected to a powerful mechanical jack that pushes two large timbers against steel plates mounted on opposite walls. Everyone who enters the room thus increases the pressure on the walls by a tiny amount. The implication is that if enough people enter the room, *Samson* will (as in the Bible) push the walls out and cause the building to collapse. Burden had to convince any venue exhibiting this piece that, even if thousands pass through the turnstile, the increase in wall pressure is actually so small that the risk of collapse is negligible. However, the aim of the apparatus is so clear that every visitor has to wonder if their desire to see the piece might be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. They are implicated in its structure even if nothing tragic happens.

Samson is an experience that could never be conveyed by a picture or a static object. Calling it theatrical hardly detracts from its impact and elegance. Fried’s claim that theatre is the negation of art is refuted by the fact that a beholder is always implicit in the experience of art, suggesting that all art, and explicitly installation art, is theatrical.



[CAPTION: Chris Burden, *Samson* (1985), turnstile, winch, worm gear, leather strap, jack, timbers, steel, steel plates. Photo courtesy of: <http://www.zwirnerandwirth.com>

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