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## Theatricality in Installation Artworks: An Overview

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**Abstract.** The article is an investigation into theatricality from various standpoints (among others those of Michael Fried, Claire Bishop, Juliane Rebentisch and Samuel Weber) in order to focus on different views on *theatricality* considered as partially emancipated from *theatre* and to verify if and to what extent each of them can apply to installation artworks as environments and intermedial devices. Ultimately the article propounds the idea of a paradoxical anti-theatrical theatricality of installation art, grasped in its very connection to site-specificity, critically engaging Martin Heidegger's insights regarding the «Gestell» and the «work-being» of the work of art, as a general theoretical basis through which a particular focus of 'specificity' of installation is endorsed.

**Keywords.** Aesthetics, theatricality, installation art, Heidegger, site-specificity.

### 1. INSTALL AND PUNISH

For several decades now performance art in general has been bathed in a masochistic atmosphere. Sometimes displaying living sculptures (Josef Beyus, Marina Abramovic), filling the space with mixtures of deteriorated materials evoking torture chambers or killing fields – sometimes outlining an «offertorium», a «neutral social space» created by performance or installations, where implements and objects of some apparent sacred ritual are simply put on display, given to contemplation.

In a recent essay Hans Giesbrecht highlighted the “offertorial” character of the installation, its ritual structure and the potential cathartic effect: the Offertorium he maintains, is here conceptualized «by analogy to the feature of traditional Christian Mass»: “offertory” is the moment of ritual sequence before consecration of the host, which becomes metaphor for the encounter with contemporary art. Therefore art «becomes an energetic point of contact in which the narcissistic condition is momentarily reconstituted, [...] rejoined with what it has disavowed through projective identification with the aggressor: its abjection» (Giesbrecht [2012]: IX, 51).

The offertorial scene persists, often much diluted, even when it does not involve restoring a contemplative moment of spectatorship, and the work instead requires an interactive response from the audience. The circumscribed territory of the work remains a 'field' in which the opposition of sacred and profane remains suspended. In the first case, as in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present* (MoMa 2010), the contemplative moment proves to be equipped with an action force that is ritually very powerful – and is used as such by the artist. But also in the case of interactive performances where there is a prevalence of the element of distraction together with curiosity and playfulness at the moment of entering the magic circle of the installation, the rituality and the reiteration, with few generally prescribed variants, of the same gestures or actions on everyone's part, ends up by seriously satisfying the game of the installation that in the visitors finds, insatiably, its living material. In this too the installation seems to fall into, albeit more weakly and with much more 'noise' compared to the happening's communication, the category of the *offertorium*, in the sense described above.

Although being realized these days in many ways as practices that have metabolized the fluid and performative character of twentieth-century happenings and site-specific works, the multimedia installations of the last fifteen years tend nevertheless to emphasize their nature as construction of sites (Rachel Whiteread, Do-Ho Suh) and to draw a new ambit of values and spatial and aesthetic potentialities, in the perceptive and evaluative sense (Tavani [2018]: 136-144). At the same time, alongside the persistent process-based and non 'objectual' character of the installation, the technical challenge should also be recorded. This last sees the logic of the virtual-digital rebound onto technical devices of a mechanical type, as a further sounding board – and no longer neither primary nor exclusive – of the overall logic of the installation as a setup composed of heterogeneous aggregated materials.

There is no doubt we must bear in mind that since it forms part of events inserted in the circuit

of a widespread cultural tourism, the latest frontier of the «culture industry»<sup>1</sup>, the artistic installation too, as with other performing arts and as with architecture, must «create an experience» and must give way to a «sense of place» for «its increasingly demanding audience», becoming a bearer of «intangible values» that allow the artistic event to compete with home entertainment in the market of culture-entertainment (Hammond [2006]: 25). It seems, however, that the installation appears to be equipped not just to draw on – and to nourish – a specific symbolic capital and thus to participate also in its accumulation and its profits, but also to highlight the ambiguities linked to the particular anti-theatre 'theatricality' of a work that one wishes to be open and which, nevertheless, as we shall see, does not present itself in a total transparency.

## 2. WHAT DOES «THEATRICALITY» MEAN?

Discussions on 'theatricality' are mainly referred to critic Michael Fried's 1967 article «Art and Objecthood». In this context Fried was able to trace a new category, the Minimalist art (which he called «literalist art»), studying artists like Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Robert Morris. He points out that minimalist sculptures give way to «a kind of stage presence» similar to «the silent presence of another person» (Fried [1998]: 155). Fried introduces the term 'theatricality' as a characteristic that emerges from the setups of Minimalist sculptors. The question arises in these terms:

*What is it about objecthood as projected and hypostatized by the literalists that makes it [...] antithetical to art? The answer I want to propose is this: 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 literal-*

<sup>1</sup> The term was famously introduced in 1947 by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer, Adorno [1947]: 94 f.).

*ist work. Morris makes it explicit. Whereas in previous art “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]” the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation. One that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder. (Fried [1998]: 153)*

It appears evident that this approach to theatricality regards not so much the strategy of the setting up, but rather the generation of an effect on the visitors. Claire Bishop correctly notes that for Fried «theatricality does not refer to the scenographic aspect of installation, but rather to the way in which we selfconsciously “perform” around it» (Bishop [2005]: 136).

In his 1980 essay on *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* Fried introduces the term “absorption” as opposed to theatricality. He considers the pictorial portrayal of “absorbed” actions as the outcome of an anti-theatrical concern, as a truthful alternative to theatricality, which obviously equals falsehood, insincerity (Fried [1980]). The study is concerned with French painting and art criticism from the early 1750s to the emergence of Jacques-Louis David with his *Bélisaire* in the Salon of 1781. His argument is that during this period narrative paintings, genre scenes and portraits showed figures completely absorbed in what they were doing to the exclusion of the spectator – an absorption offered frequently, in Fried’s descriptions, as tied to a ‘state of sleep’ or to blindness – reflecting a deliberate choice by the artist, who unlike the baroque painter did not want to appeal directly to the beholder and involve him in the action (Scott [1981]: 135-136). Referring for instance to Delacroix Salon paintings of the 1830s, he describes them as «manifestly stage orientated», with too obvious an appeal to the beholder. Interestingly, Fried’s analysis points out also the new problematic affinity of theatricality to the increasingly performing nature of modern society: «If one asks why beholding or spectatorship emerged as problematic and specifically as theatrical in France around the middle of the eighteenth century, one cannot expect an answer in terms of painting alone [...]. The ultimate sources of the-

atricalization of beholding must be sought in the social, political and economic reality of the age in all what bears on the history of the self» (Fried [1990]). There is no doubt that «the central challenge» of what Fried calls «the French antitheatrical tradition» was first theorized by Diderot (Grudin [2016]: 38). In 1762, relating to Van Dick’s gravure *Belisarius Receiving Alms*, Diderot argued: «Si quand on fait un tableau, on suppose des spectateurs, tout est perdu. Le peintre sort de sa toile, comme l’acteur qui parle au parterre sort de la scene. En supposant qu’il n’y a personne au monde que les personnages du tableau, celui de Vandick est sublime» (Diderot [1958]: 57)<sup>2</sup>. To him however, the statement «if, when one makes a painting one supposes beholders, everything is lost» entails a focus on a variety of strategies for facing this problem. Fried, on the contrary, synthesizes the antitheatrical strategy as «absorptive closure, the walling out or curtaining off of the beholder standing before the picture» (Fried [1996]: 262).

Bodily pantomime, the rhetorical acting style, with measured movements and a set of emotions embodied by the performer, was in any case fashionable in eighteenth-century France and Diderot resolutely criticized it as a false embodiment of sensations and emotions and for its tendency to result empty and opaque. Fried points out the importance of this critique. However, in his reading of Diderot’s position, Fried goes on looking for absorbed gestures, considered as expression of a “natural” language of the portrayed characters (Smyth [2014]), even if something different, and more interesting for our focus on installation art, could be grasped from Diderot’s art criticism and theory of spectatorship.

Fried does not conceal the ambiguity of Diderot’s position: «The fiction of physically entering a painting or group of paintings plays a much larger role in the Salon de 1767 than in the two previous ones» and «it is in the long and famous section on Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), unanimously regarded by French critics of the 1750s

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Fried [1980]: 148.

and 1760s as the greatest landscape and marine painter of the age, that the fiction of physically entering a group of paintings receives its fullest, most intensive development» (Fried [1988]: 122).

Diderot writes actually in the same salon both that «une scene représenté sur la toile, ou sur les planches, ne suppose pas des témoins» (Salon 1767, *Promenade Vernet*)<sup>3</sup>, maintaining the fiction that the beholder does not exist, and that landscape and ruin painters should by their truth to nature «force» the spectator to enter the canvas. Fried registers, so to say, the anti-theatricality of the double behavior prescribed by Diderot to the beholder: absence from the scene *as* a witness, presence in the scene *as* part of it, “absorbed” in it, but does not seem to be willing to grasp the new meaning of the term absorption in Diderot’s fiction. Now the scene has freed itself from canvas and salon and is presented in its full *liveness* as an environmental situation asking for perceptive and emotional responses. In his commentaries to Diderot, Fried does not seem to be perfectly aware of how Diderot’s idea of theatricality is brought to come to terms with the performance of the beholder, through a sort of aesthetic assimilation of the beholder him/herself in an absorbed attitude. Surprisingly, he also describes as moments of absorption the affective and aesthetic results of the imaginative projections of the beholder *into* the depicted scene. When for instance Diderot urges his companion (the abbot who, in the fiction of the storytelling, takes a walk with him inside the picture) to mimically lie down next to some animals in the middle of an arcadian environment – with a shepherd, a peasant woman, in the midst of «the rustic sounds of the cowherd» (Diderot [1975])<sup>4</sup> – what strikes us is first of all *the movement* of the viewer changing his condition of viewer with the condition of an actor: a character sharing the same scene of the depicted characters.

Fried ignores the cause (the artificial means of the painting inducing immersion into it) and insists just on the effect (the absorption of the

viewer) demonstrating no interest in the technical and artistic device from which arises the *sensorial alarm* perceived by Diderot during his “immersions” in Vernet’s landscapes and seascapes.

Can we obtain from this some useful clue in order to focus attention on theatricality as specifically related to installation art? Of course we should be rather cautious in outlining the terrain and the surroundings of our question. A sort of about turn here may appear to be a not particularly new strategy, even perhaps obsolete given the object under analysis (distinguishing a territory from that which remains at its edges) with regard to the generally accepted and irreversible tendency towards a collapse of the barriers between the various forms of art, which is evidenced uninterruptedly not only from the beginning of the 1960s, but which has more recently been insistently attributed to a performative turn. It seems difficult to put forward any doubts regarding this turn and at the most it is possible to re-evaluate its nature as an epochal turn, considered as such even in Fried’s above-mentioned notes in respect of the “performative nature of modern society”, with which however, according to Fried, individual arts have to engage in hostilities, if they want to preserve «quality and value», against the «illusion» that the barriers between the arts are «in a process of crumbling» (Fried [1998]: 164).

Let us therefore seek to focus, drawing freely on some issues from the authors taken into consideration up to now, on the possible character of *mise en scène* of the artistic installation and its eventual anti-theatricality.

Fried’s attempt remains unsatisfactory because his antagonism proves itself unable to come to terms with modern artistic phenomena (like minimalism) *not* showing what he calls “modernist sensibility”. His main claim is that modernist art (including Brecht’s and Artaud’s theatre) can «defeat» theatricality such as the *stage presence* of minimalist artworks, «by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness» (Fried [1998]: 167). Whereas “presentness” is supposed to reveal the absolute presence and autonomy of the artwork, “instantaneousness” has to convey the idea of

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Scott [1981]: 136.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Fried [1980]: 120.

immediate grasp, intuition of a symbolic meaning. Summarizing, Fried's antagonism «is directed against an art that is offered to the viewer not in the mode of aesthetic representation, but, on the contrary, by virtue of its literalness or mere objecthood» (Rebentisch [2003]: 69). With Artaud and Brecht in mind he contends «Theater and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such and – to the extent that the different arts can be described as modernist – with modernist sensibility as such» (Fried [1998]: 163). Evidently all the reiterated attempts by modern theatre to rethink and reactivate the relationship with the audience in a different and performative way find an echo in what Fried calls «inclusion of the beholder» in minimal art, an outcome that he rejects because he considers it to be linked to the grammar of the work as object, as something «existing in order to be looked at». (Rebentisch [2003]: 40-41) In Fried's view therefore all modern theatre's efforts to find ways either to reduce the «distance» of the beholder or to integrate him/her in the stage situation, cannot avoid introducing a type of theatrical relationship. The very antidote to and weapon of choice against this destination of the work that keeps it in a condition of theatricality, of «structural existence for an audience» (Fried [1998]: 140) and in a relationship of dependency on the 'perspectives' assumed by the observer, is what Fried defines as «continuous and entire *presentness*» (Fried [1998]: 167, italics mine).

For Fried, theatricality is associated not with representation, but with the literal use of the objects and with a "literalist sensibility" which proves reluctant to convey meaning: «like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything; they are what they are and nothing more» (Fried [1998]: 165). To some extent Fried's descriptions demonstrate that his critique of the literalness of Minimal art «is based on the uncritical adoption» of a quasi positivist «self-misunderstanding on the part of certain Minimal artists» (Rebentisch [2012]: 69). But first of all they demonstrate his attempt to oppose to a presumed "literalist sensibility" (Fried [1998]:

166) a modernist sensibility, «concerned with the conventions that constitute individual arts' respective essences» (Fried [1998]: 164) and able to offer artworks as wholly meaningful in their quality, value and symbolism. Unlike literalist artworks, modernist artworks do not happen to be *double legible* (as thing and as sign) or to be experienced in their «endlessness or inexhaustibility», caused either by the indeterminacy of their own meaning or by the «complicity» extorted from the beholder, accepting the «uncanny presence» (Fried [1998]: 155) and enigmatic nature of the artistic object, its ambiguity, «the look of nonart» (Greenberg [1993]: 256).

Paradoxically enough, however, *presentness*, for Fried «the depth and fullness» of artwork's presentation, considered as antagonist with regard to the "theatricality" of those works which are fundamentally rooted in their «*double presence* as things and signs» (Fried [1998]: 143), has constituted for many years through the 1900s the guiding thread of the New Theatre's search for a theatricality that often by concentrating on *presence* and *presentation* as values opposed to interpretation and representation has played an anti-theatrical game.

My claim is that Fried's wish for a «future survival» of modernist arts – depending on the ability of individual works «to overcome the theatrical [...], to suspend or defeat their own objecthood» (Fried [1998]: 196) – should more usefully have been addressed to individual artworks and to anti-work positions as such, insofar as they can establish their specificity (instead of their «identity» as painting, poetry etc.) – eventually, not necessarily however, even suspending their objecthood, their theatricality, or also their identity or formalized meaningfulness.

We can say that much of anti-theatrical research in Modern theatre, which takes as its point of departure the theatricalization of any site (Craig [1911]) and comes to the theorization of the theatrical space as *environment* (Schechner [2006]) has to be understood as an intense inquiry into spectatorship, creative writing and designing of a space, migrated or flowed towards the whole questioning engaged by installation art, whose

experimental nature, in both “objective” and “subjective” aesthetic discourse, aims at the construction of a “site” whose final form remains that of a steadily boundary-crossing spaced-situation.

This sort of genealogy can be traced, it seems to me, not only and not principally for that genre of installation that envisages a happening, as in the case of Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist Is Present*. Indeed, also in site-specific and transmedial installations a theatricality is readable both in the sense of the setup, in the overall and dynamic “placement” of objects and devices, able to present its own specific environmental or atmospheric quality, and in the sense of «the inclusion of the beholder», of the “contract” arranged with the visitors, in terms of mutual supply of performance inside the exhibition venue of the installation. In synthesis, we can say that a theatricality referable to installation art will regard prevalently the aspect of the setup/*mise en scène* and the aspect of the execution. It is quite evident indeed that while in happenings and in all cases of temporal arts «there is a need for an executant» or mediating artist supposed to be his/her own interpreter in performance (Urmson [2018]: 351-2), in installation artworks the need for “execution” passes to the audience who become, so to say, executant-visiting audience. But the passage cannot rely on a «recipe or set of instructions for performing or executant» audience, because of the twofold classification of installation artwork: a nontemporal art containing suggestions for temporal-spatial execution. The single visitors occupy physically the installation’s delimited space standing or moving across the space available: they interpret and witness the installation and in both these activities the beholder-participants *mediate* between the proposal of the artist and its realization exhibited as a sort of «instructed situation». I cannot discuss here the question of whether participants are co-producer of the installation as situation<sup>5</sup>. I

think I can say, however, as an initial approximation, that the performance of visitors in an artistic installation is more culturally revealing than enabling: though we cannot refer to it as a «restored behaviour» (Schechner [1985]), as in real theatrical or ritual circumstances, actions and reactions of the beholder in the installation environment can to some extent be referred to as *an execution* (of the program of the device) which is not just behaviour, but also a performance as a series of *performative deeds* – in the wake of the linguistic performative acts described by John Austin, which make things happen (Austin [1962]). In any case the debate focused around performative and performance studies is still open and I refer to it here in a much abbreviated manner<sup>6</sup>.

Thus wishing to circumscribe the question in these pages to *the* theatricality referable specifically to the art of installation, the fundamental question becomes: does the artistic installation owe its value and power of presence principally to the exhibition setup in the sense of the *mise en scène*? But again, wishing to reduce to a minimum the obscurity of the terms used, it will be necessary to indicate what can *mise en scène* mean in the environmental space of the installation.

In a piece dedicated to opera, Theodor Adorno has remarked that the stage coincides with the dramatic form: «According to its own logic, dramatic form implies the audience. It would be absurd to conceive of a stage in itself the same way in which one can conceive of poetry in itself, or of music in itself» (Adorno [1955]: 20). Here he is eager above all to bring out the distinction between the musical work, clearly “theatrical”, and its components taken in isolation and not yet *dealt with* in light of a theatrical setup, the text of the libretto and the music. For us this is only one note among many to try to understand if each *mise en scène* proves ultimately to be oriented to the dramatic form (according to the etymon *drán*

<sup>5</sup> This is, according to Claire Bishop, a consequence of the artistic orientation towards the social in the 1990s, whose “hallmark” has been «a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the

artist and the audience» (Bishop [2012]: 2).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview on this subject see Schechner [2013], Davies [2018], Deriu [2013], Mersch [2002], Summa [2018].

= action) and to theatricality intended in this sense, extendable to the eventual participation or co-authorality of the spectators, or whether it can manifest on a different plane, more linked to its character as *constructed situation*, a term that clearly is borrowed from the lexis of the Situationists. In other words, not dealing with a setup of a scenographic type, useful in delimiting and qualifying a scene variously, the installation planning of an art installation needs, it would seem, to be read trying to investigate from more nearby *what* is actually installed and thus what comes out of its exposition and its exhibition. A stage “in itself” is nonsense, Adorno claims. From this starting point we can begin to understand the installation as a setting arranging itself in the form of a self-placement and virtually framing and foreseeing a set of interobjective and intersubjective engagements to be produced in the time of the exhibition by virtue of the presence of the audience.

### 3. INSTALLATION AS PERFORMING VENUE

Artist Ilya Kabakov observed that although there is no «comprehensive answer to the question of what an installation is», it would nevertheless be possible «to explain that type of installation that we can call “total” as that installation that is made in such a way that the observer (together with various components that accompany the observer) who arrives within it is taken by it» (Kabakov [1995]: 13).

A characteristic of Kabakov’s installations is that of not proposing any «formal reduction to simple base elements dealt with in a minimalist form» (Hinkes [2017]: 277). On the contrary the artist works with quasi-realistic means, integrating everyday objects within the installations, so as to render them “interieurs” – whether they are single rooms or apartments or buildings. Juliane Reben-tisch has called «dramatization» the way Kabakov’s work, particularly his multi-room installations, direct the viewer, «explicitly incorporating the viewer’s *trajectory* into the artistic calculation» (Reben-tisch [2012]: 159). Yet, there is another

theatrical horizon characterizing the productive moment of Kabakov’s work. Kabakov has defined the total installation «site of an interrupted action. A place in which an event has taken place, is taking place or can take place» (Kabakov [1995]: 16). This mention of the event is not a chance one: it is a precise reference to a «dramaturgy of the total installation» that intends to bring the installation work closer to the area of film and above all the theatre. It is indeed possible «to present all the objects in the installation as theatre actors, according to a typology of roles well known to anyone at the theatre: the soloist, the chorus, the extras» all of these roles that evidently can be filled also by ordinary everyday objects (Kabakov [1995]: 61). This involves a meticulous attention for the presence of objects in an installation also described in terms of stage. A stage without actors. I believe there is a certain relevance to our theme in understanding the meaning of this absence. Kabakov provides a key (it is an «action in a state of peacefulness») that however presents many margins of ambiguity. Nevertheless, and perhaps precisely due to the ambiguity of the formula proposed by the artist, «an action in a state of peacefulness», other interpretations have been given, which however do not seem to acknowledge the real point of the question, which regards the setting up and the functions (the roles) with which each object introduced must be able to be charged with in light of the reciprocal relationships that come to operate within the setup. For example, Juliane Reben-tisch provides an interpretation, doubtless plausible, in which Kabakov’s installations recall theatre stages that the observer inspects during the interval, stage sets that are momentarily deserted. On the one hand then they are “inszenierte Räume”, spaces belonging to a *mise en scène* within the museum space, which due to a precise desire of the artist must not dissimulate their artificial character; on the other hand they are scenic spaces abandoned by the actors and because of this at the mercy of the visitors (Reben-tisch [2012]: 156). While the first type of theatricality is doubtless to be attributed to the artist’s installations, it is only by forcing the matter somewhat that we can

talk of an absent action *because of* the absence of actors, also for the reason that in this case the first point would be refused, i.e. the artificiality of the entire installation operation: the scene, the stage, is not a scene in the literal sense and that is why we must not imagine it as abandoned by flesh and blood actors, as the effect of an illusion. It is a fact, however, that it is the very artist who encourages this type of reading. This happens when Kabakov posits that in the environment of the installation the viewer should have the feeling that «the place where he finds himself has been inhabited for a long time already, that people lived and live in it, furthermore, that they have just left and will return any minute now» (Kabakov [1995]: 276-277). A fundamental character of the setup is its having already been *inhabited* and its remaining inhabitable in future; this confers an atmospheric density to the site that «overcomes» the viewer, who nevertheless must be able to feel him-/herself within the total installation, completely free to examine and judge the environment and the single objects present (Kabakov [1995]: 245). For this same reason Kabakov considers the «social recognisability» of the spaces and their arrangement (rooms, corridors, etc.) to be of extreme importance for the “total installation”. These must operate in such a way as to present themselves as «social milieu», linked to life and to all its fundamental problems.

The agency therefore that is to be attributed to the installations cannot but be the reciprocal reference to the elements and the assumption of roles within the installation, bearing in mind the hierarchy (between main and minor roles) inscribed in the score that structures the presence of the objects. This is, in other terms, an agency that consists of the activation of a dynamic of the elements that is however already fundamentally inscribed in the device of their presentation and only in part can be activated by the visitors and give rise to an event, be it past, present or future. In this sense, I believe, and therefore not on the basis of a literal reference to the theatre as temporal art, the installation presents «the character of a time-based art» (Kabakov [1995]: 311). In other

words, the reference to the agency is not literally referred to the actions carried out by other subjects that are no longer present, but still to the setup in its revealing a lived character, as place and environment set up so as to testify to previous passages.

Kabakov seems to put forward a field of action of the installation that keeps itself in balance between tradition and innovation; on the one hand the idea of total installation seems rooted in the conviction of a “totalizing” capacity of technique (which for the artist is translated into a construction that envisages an almost total “government” of the visitors’ reactions) and on the other elicits a perception of the space-time of the installation in the direction of «plastic sensations» linked to the forms of the objects, to the roles that they play in the entirety of the installation and to what we might call their character as ruins, their capacity for storing history. How does late installation art relate to (over the last fifty years) the growing intertwining of artforms and the growing surpassing of the distinction between art and non-art? And how does its inter-mediality relate with the idea of the «total work» as famously proposed by Wagner? Wagner maintained that the individual arts, in particular dance, music, poetry, should meet in their respective capacities for directing themselves to «Leibesmensch», to «Gefühlsmensch» and to «Verstandesmensch», leading to the expression of the fundamental aspects of being human, so as to restore body, feeling and intellect to the entire man (see Fischer-Lichte [2010]: 20).

According to Fischer-Lichte it is possible to read the theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an “inter-art” aesthetic, but only if we do not accept the organicistic solution provided by Wagner and we return rather to the questions he set out from and which he asked himself, leaving them open. That is the possibilities opened up for aesthetic experience on the one hand by the meeting of various arts; and on the other the way in which the arts involved in this meeting are also transformed – as Wagner maintained was what happened in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Fischer-Lichte [2010]: 22). So it will be useful to note a “performativization” of



the individual arts (and here the model would be *Untitled Event* by John Cage) and also the circumstance that the effect of «hybridization» and of *Hybridbildung* cannot but find itself in opposition to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it not being a formation of a hierarchical or hegemonic character (Fischer-Lichte [2010]: 26, 28). The author notably emphasizes the transformative power of theatre and performances and reads theatricality according to this main feature. While I believe that her account fits well within theatrical and performative studies, I have some concern regarding the possibility of applying such remarks to the field of installation art in order to grasp its peculiar theatricality.

In her essay on *Installation Art* Claire Bishop considers “dream” as an appropriate analogy for Kabakov’s «total installation» in a phenomenological respect. She recalls that Sigmund Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) had described the experience of a dream stressing a few main features: its being primarily visual («dreams think essentially in images»), its liveness («dreams construct a situation» that «we appear not to think but to experience»), its composite structure, that is meant to be not exactly decoded, but just analysed through free-association, through individual affective and verbal connections. These three features, Bishop maintains – «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» (Bishop [2005]: 7). This suggestion comes actually from Kabakov’s own description of how the total installation operates on the viewer: «the main motor of the total installation, what it lives by, [is] the cranking up of the wheel of associations, cultural or everyday analogies, personal memories» (Kabakov [1995]). Naturally nothing forbids our following, in the analysis of a work, the artist’s suggestions, which although being in any case significant, evidently cannot be bound to a reading of a critical nature. In this regard I would like above all to note that the reference to the ability of each dream element to be replaced by an associative word or syllable as the

dream’s third (Freudian) main feature, if applied *tout court* to the aesthetic experience of an installation risks centring the reading exclusively on the imaginative projection of the visitors and on their capacity for symbolic–rational reconstruction of the event, leaving the matter of the *setup* of the work, its constructional aspect, completely to one side. This aspect specifically concerns the construction of a *position* and a *presence* that is *sui generis* within the exhibition space and is not only the creation of a situation and an atmosphere. What we are dealing with, if we wish, are two antithetical forms of theatricality, one «absorbed» in its own exhibitional configuration and structure in the specific act of taking up position or being installed in the available space, the other perceived and experienced by the visitors in a prevalently emotive and projective form, based on the specific experience of each one. For this reason I do not consider the categorization criterion proposed by Bishop to be sufficient – as installation art requires its audience to physically enter the artwork in order to experience it, installation pieces can be categorized by the type of experience they provide for the viewing subject. Indeed, although there is reference to the necessity that the visitors enter into the installation physically, the «psichomotorial» aspect of this experience is ignored in the cognitive motives that it shares with the «symbolic–reconstructive» aspect (Antinucci [2004]) (which in any case receives more emphasis) and ends up by being observed *e parte subjecti* only as behaviour (it is the visitors’ performance) while *e parte objecti*, i.e. from the installation’s perspective, is made to coincide with the device of the “inclusion of the viewer” envisaged by its own setup. In both cases, however, it is not easy for the analysis to put itself forward as immanent to the installation piece in its particularity and it tends rather to be the result of a gaze that sits outside of the phenomenon analysed – a gaze from above. Furthermore, focussing above all on the symbolic and conceptual result of the experience, which is what we do in the immersive *scene* of the installation artwork, insofar as it «requires creative free-association in order to articulate its meaning; in order

to do this, the installation's assemblaged elements are taken one by one and read "symbolically" – as metonymic parts of a narrative» (*ibid*) the specific cognitive contribution referable to the psychomotorial character of the experience is diluted, sacrificed to the objective of grasping its presumptively conceptual and functional meaning as in a storytelling.

In sum, one last objection to Bishop's proposed reading applied to Kabakov's installation practice, is that in the case examined, there is a risk of neglecting precisely any reference to the "total" character of the installation, which must in any case have some expression in the experience we have of it in terms of a "situation". We need to have a grasp of the overall form and structure of the whole installation's architecture, in order to acquire familiarity and to not lose our orientation, despite the various disorienting "uncanny" details spread along the pathway.

#### 4. INSTALLATION AS RE-PRESENTATION.

Let us now summarize some of the points we have been collecting up to this point: the installation threshold does not work as a stage curtain, and what stands out is not the idea of a representation in the sense of a rehearsal, but the setting of the work as circumscribed and as "in motion" at the same time<sup>7</sup>. Also because a "theatricality" of installation artwork comes to the fore as effect of a suspension of time: the temporal logic of installation diverges necessarily from any «external historical narrative» (Hartoonian [2018]: 40 f.)

Here theatricality does not emerge mainly from the self-staging of installation as *hortus conclusus* – however open it might appear – but

instead from what we could call the installation strategies of *metastaging*, overcoming theatricality as "placement": its way of emerging as a performing venue inside an "installed environment".

Not only in Kabakov, but in many installation pieces the "situation" as being-*posited* plays on an ambiguity that presents some particular traits of theatricality. On the one hand its site-specificity, which allows visitors to have an aesthetic experience – considered such prevalently in the perceptive and emotional-affective sphere – that is particularly intense due to the environmental immersivity that characterizes installation art, but also due to its liveness. The single visitors occupy physically the installation's delimited space standing or moving across the space available: they interpret and witness at the same time the installation. In both these activities spectators-participants mediate between the proposal of the artist and its realization as an "instructed situation" with its need to be indefinitely executed, accepting to be part of, so to say, an executant-visiting audience of the installation piece.

On the other hand is the installation's presentation as a picking up on and a repetition of everyday mundane elements, as a mediation towards *reflection on* those elements, though often undertaken by the installation domain proposing a studied omission of all *écarts* which would possibly enact «instituting processes» (Merleau-Ponty [2010]: 8, f.), based on the installation's divergences from mundane situational norms.

Also in order to avoid understanding its particular "theatricality" in a too literal theatrical direction, this is a type of repetition that I think can be usefully read as a "presentification" in the sense suggested by Husserl in *Ideen 1*. I refer to the possibility, which Husserl calls "neutrality modification", conceived of according to a distinction between neutrality and positionality (Husserl [1983]: § 111, 115), of counterpositing to an attitude of passivity – linked to the 'posit' on the part of the conscious something existing or having been in memory – an activity of re-presentation, equipped too with material content, that tendentially neutralizes and suspends the being avail-

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Benjamin correctly maintains that the artwork's presence has to be "sustained" by its audience and by the work's own agency: is not so much the object in itself «but the continual questioning of the object [...] the sustained presence of the work, part of whose work is to raise and maintain the question of the [work]» (Benjamin [1994]: 17)

able (*Vorhandensein*) of the natural world (§ 31), opening up to a free imagination and reflection. We can think of the installation as a particular type of “positing”, re-presentation that presents the object-image made up of the installation as existing-so-to-speak. Evidently the installation, as a re-presentation of situations, has leverage on the appearance of a relation of contiguity and continuity with regard to situations *posited* as normative, miming them in a paradoxical *counter-position* that while it neutralizes them does not renounce playing on a multiform and changeable dynamic of the positing and being-positing of the “difference” it aims to produce.

## 5. THE THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

I want to address here another aspect of the problem, namely, the property of theatricality to transform a *space* in a *place*. In his *Theatricality as Medium* Samuel Weber discusses this issue, looking for the meaning of theatricality in relation to theatre, film and electronic media. He first refers to theatricality in baroque theatre, characterized by «ostentation» (Weber [2004]: 270); then to theatricality and psychoanalysis: the use of verbs with the same root *stellen* (to place) by Freud to indicate distortions and suppressions of events according to Weber indicates the importance that the placement of memories assumes, a fact that «underscores the theatrical nature of the masquerade» (Weber [2004]: 282). In particular Weber’s study of the concept of theatricality concentrates attention, whether the medium of theatre or film is introduced into the field, on the question of the *locality* that defines an operational space and therefore also on the need to find a collocation or an appropriate position for the carrying out of precise operations. In this sense the theatricalization consists in circumscribing a field of action and in cutting out from a space a specific site. Highlighting, for example, the role that the category of detachment plays in Genet’s theatre, Weber observes how in this case «the fixity of theatrical space is the condition of an act of recognition»:

what has to be recognised is the *responsibility of theatre* itself «as parodic detachment». (Weber [2004]: 310-311) In fact for Genet «theatre is the repetition of detachment, of division and of multiplication, by which the singular becomes many and the many singular» (Weber [2004]: 312).

A further issue Weber investigates in his book concerns what is meant by expressions such as «the theatre of operation», which allows him to deal with the non-aesthetic, military, use of theatre

*as a medium in which conflicting forces strive to secure the perimeter of a place in dispute. “Theater” signifies the imposition of borders rather than a representational-aesthetic genre. The former focuses upon the manner in which a place is secured, whereas the latter regards the place as already taken or given, and therefore as a means or instrument of that which is to be represented. In respect to its mediality, then, theatricality is defined as a problematic process of placing, framing, situating rather than as a process of representation. (Weber [2004]: 315. Weber’s italics)*

Weber exemplifies this statement with an analysis of the way the Spike Jonze film *Being John Malkovich* (1999) «doubles and thereby divides the convergence of image and person that otherwise functions as the condition of Hollywood stardom», and thus deconstructs the idea of individuality as a self-contained subject (Weber [2004]: 316-317). The body is not a barrier against that which is external to the subject, guarding its organic life: rather, Malkovich’s body becomes a kind of apartment house or, better, a dwelling for transients. The body emerges both as a temporary container and as an observation post, something like a loge in a theater. After a period of observation, however, the observation post takes on a more military character – it becomes a forward command post that does not merely observe, but increasingly controls the body it is “in” (Weber [2004]: 317). The body becomes the arena of «a struggle for possession» in which expropriation and reappropriation alternate.

## 6. SITE-SPECIFICITY

The idea of linking the categories proposed by Heidegger in *On Origin of the Work of Art* (1935) and in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1953) to that type of artistic operation that is called ‘installation’ is certainly not new, also because in many ways it is induced by some translational solutions from the term *Gestell* that have emphasized the meaning of “installation”<sup>8</sup>. In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger maintains that «technology is no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing» (QT, 12); and explains: «Technology comes to presence (west) in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alêtheia*, truth, happens» (QT, 13). What is at stake in modern technology is the revealing of a challenge: nature is asked «to supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such» (QT, 14). *Gestell*, enframing, is according to Heidegger the word which means this challenging and «reveals the real in the mode of ordering, as standing reserve» (QT, 20), and yet «the word *stellen* (to set upon) in the name *Ge-stell* not only means challenging. At the same time it should preserve the suggestion of another *Stellen* from which it stems, namely, that of producing and presenting (*Her-und Dar-stellen*) which, in the sense of poiesis, lets what is-present come forth into unconcealment» (QT, 21, transl. modified).

The structure of a self-revealing and latency of the meaning of the real had been described by Heidegger almost twenty years before in terms of a tension between “world” and “earth” inside the *work of art*:

*World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening*

*it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. The opposition of world and earth is striving [...]. In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the world is an instigating of this striving. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife. (OWA, 48-49)*

In fact *Ge-Stell*, if taken literally, would then be the collective name for all sorts of placing, putting, setting, arranging, ordering, or in general, putting in place. And *Gestalt* suggests that the tensions of the work of art can be *framed* and can find a setting up in a figure.

Various interpreters have grasped this point and even in the limited context of this path of ours we can record two cases (Rebentisch and Weber) of a reconsideration, more or less critical, of the questions raised by Heidegger in the texts quoted. In dealing with these readings we will see, however, as we will seek to argue, that the reconsideration conceals some traps, although some of the aspects discussed can, under certain conditions, contribute towards a definition of a *specific position* of the work – and therefore also of the installation work’s site-specificity – that is more circumstantial from the theoretical point of view.

In *On Origin of the Work of Art* one of the points of greatest difficulty is the counterposition of «earth» and «world». The world enters into a «striving» with the earth and «the work-being of the work» exists in this striving which emerges as a striving between self opening and sheltering-concealing of a historical truth content. Samuel Weber concentrates his reading exactly on «the disputant, clearing and concealing» the truth. He correctly points out how Heidegger’s use of words stemming from “stellen” is functional to draw attention to the necessary specificity of the “opening” of truth: the truth «installs itself» in the opening of «a space of strife and play» (Weber [2004]: 53).

In a later *addendum* (1960) to the text *On Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger remarks that an «essential ambiguity» is noted in regard to

<sup>8</sup> From now on, respectively, OWA and QT. For instance, the French translation for “Gestell” by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe is “installation”. Quote Rebentisch [2003]: 232.

the definition of art as «the setting-into-work of truth». In this ambiguity, truth is subject on the one hand and object on the other: «it remains undecided (but decidable) who does the setting or in what way it occurs» (*addendum* OWA, 85-6). With regard to the *setting* Heidegger argues that «we must think of to “place” in the sense of *thesis*» and not in the sense of fixing something in place. (OWA, 81) *Thesis* for ancient Greeks «means a setting up in the unconcealed». For instance, «letting a statue be set up» means «bringing (it) *here* into the unconcealed, bringing (it) *forth* into what is present» (OWA, 81). In other words the Greek sense of thesis is «to let lie forth in its radiance and presence». (OWA, 82)

Juliane Rebentisch dwells on the ambiguity of the setting up of a work, seeing there however not so much (as occurs in the detail provided by Heidegger) the question of the truth event as such, but the question of the aesthetic experience, given that if we talk of the manifestation of a truth we understand it in substance «as an indefinite event that essentially plays out between receiving subject and aesthetic object» (Rebentisch [2003]: 238). This is a guiding thread that runs through the author's entire study: the same problem of the relationship variously understood as subject and object is met for example as a dissimulated problem but still for all this internal to the criticism of the theatricality of art, in terms of stage presence or inclusion of the viewer (Rebentisch [2003]: 70–71), or even of an absorption or dehumanization of the viewer, as in the idea of the “objecthood” of Minimalist art theorized by Fried.

And also with regard to the Heideggerian idea of “*Gestell*” Rebentisch looks to its internally antagonistic structure as that which can render this idea «aesthetic» and not instead connected, as occurs in Heidegger, with the historicity of being. This antagonism would lead, according to a consciously divergent reading compared to the direction proposed by Heidegger, towards «a specifically aesthetic opening of asymmetrical subject-object relationships» (Rebentisch [2003]: 237). On the other hand, «the double trait» referred by Heidegger to sculpture's “making room” for

the region «as granting and arranging» according to Rebentisch «can also be read [...] as aesthetic antagonism [...] to the internal antagonism of the – aesthetically conceived – *Gestell* on the basis of which, we recall, Heidegger believed the concept of form/shape/figure (*Gestalt*) would need to be rethought as well» (Rebentisch [2003]: 242-243).

In contrast to what is underlined by Rebentisch in her reading, I believe it is necessary to highlight how, within the structure of the becoming-event in the truth of the work, the ambiguity does not remain circumscribed to the *who* posits, but regards also *the way* of appearing, in the conviction that it is precisely in this direction that there is greater need to dwell, both to understand a certain aspect of undecidability that impacts on the dynamic of opening–closing conceived of as a struggle, and to grasp the significance of the end result. Heidegger claims that «the work-being of the work» exists in the «striving between world and earth» (OWA, 49-50). Heidegger adds that «the strife may remain a strife» (OWA, 48-49) if the world does not settle down, and the earth does not react to it, if both do not renounce to continuously and technically re-set materials and already obtained “figures” of historical truth. This dynamic, it seems to me, provides for the central theme of the “setting” or *thesis* of the work an essential link between the state of appearance and the revelatory calibre of that which appears. To understand this dynamic, however, it is not enough to refer to the fact that what appears reveals itself both in its opening (its character as “world”) and in its closing (or its character as “earth”). It is also necessary to enquire to what extent the unconcealing effect of the work of art regards not only the world as an opening of sense, but the earth in its double function as delimiting *site* of the opening and of «specific and material production» of the disclosure. According to Heidegger, «the work moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and *keeps it there*» (OWA, 45; italics mine). It is this, we recall, that distinguishes the work from the means, with which it shares the being-done. When we read «in the creation of a work, the conflict, as rift, must be set back into the earth, and

the earth itself must be set forth and used as the self-closing factor. This use, however, does not use up or misuse the earth as matter, but rather sets it free to be nothing but itself. [...] it is at all times a use of the earth in the fixing in place of truth in the figure», (OWA, 62) the accent is put not only on the material consistency of the opening, but on the fact that in the production the material itself is placed and revealed as such and can contribute in an essential way to determining concretely a historical truth that remains lacking in sense if it is not rendered able to 'install itself' in concrete ways. The setting-here of the work thus regards the rooting of the display in a determinacy and specificity, the sense of *terrain*, so to speak, of the opening, the determinacy that a sense acquires finding a "here", a place from which to allow the sparking, the placing of presence, but also a condition of opacity, insofar something known (and ordinary) is repropounded and represented artistically.

It is not by chance that the essence of the work of art must ultimately be «fixed» in a figure (*Gestalt*), i.e., Heidegger underlines, it must be led «back to earth», to a material and circumscribed concreteness. «What is here called figure, *Gestalt*, is always to be thought in terms of the particular placing (*Stellen*) and framing or framework (*Ge-stell*) as which the work occurs when it sets itself up and sets itself forth» (OWA, 62). This is a decisive point in the author's argumentation. The earth's self-concealing equals the setup of a particular figure, allows the figure to be a specific opening of truth and not just an indeterminate or general opening. «The openness of this Open, that is, truth», Heidegger goes on «can be what it is, namely, *this* openness, only if and as long as it establishes itself within its Open [...] In taking possession thus of the Open, the openness holds open the Open and sustains it. Setting and taking possession are here everywhere drawn from the Greek sense of *thesis*, which means a setting up in the unconcealed» (OWA, 59).

In short, the earth decides "the there" of that which is placed and appears, it renders that which reveals itself *specific* in its material and contextual

rooting. The setting up of the truth entrusted by Heidegger to the work of art in other words cannot but envisage, beyond the «setting up a world and setting forth the earth», a more explicit «keeping there», as a positioning that gives rise to a specific material-formal configuration (the temple yesterday, the art installation today) that participates, as a situated presence, in the operation of punctual unconcealing of the truth of an epoch.

If the hypothesis set out here is correct, the "terrestrial" agency of art just described, as too the accent placed on its "operational" character, can contribute considerably to defining a possible concept of theatricality referred to the art installation: not a *mise en scène*, but a setting-here that repeats the gesture of occupying and delimiting, but also of qualifying and specifying truthfully sites and the art installation's very presence, albeit variously oriented and with varying potentials linked to its *modus operandi*. This to the point of remaining valid also for those more recent installations that posit their own specificity under the title of a provocative but also very usable «theanyspacewhatever» (Pierre Huyghe): the setting up of a theatre of operation, a battleground, not a *mise en scène*.

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