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Changes in Contemporary Art  
and the More Active Role of the Spectator

This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts degree by

Laura Middleton Vansen

B.A., University of Colorado, 1966

Department of Fine Arts

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Chairman  
*Poland Reiss*

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of the University of Colorado in partial  
fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Department of Fine Arts, Creative Arts

1969

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CHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY ART  
AND THE MORE ACTIVE ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR

It is becoming more important for works of art to receive their meaning and quality from the unique, expectant (and often anxious) focus of the observer, listener or intelligent participant. The artist and the artists' public are expected to carry on a dialogue

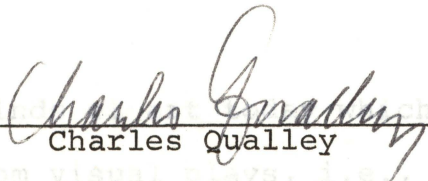
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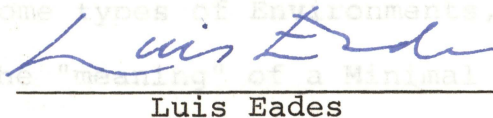
has been approved for the

Department of Fine Arts

by

  
Charles Qualley

  
Roland Reiss

  
Luis Eades

Date June, 1969



CHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY ART  
AND THE MORE ACTIVE ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR

It is becoming more important for works of art to receive their meaning and quality from the unique, expectant (and often anxious) focus of the observer, listener or intelligent participant. The artist and the artists' public are expected to carry on a dialogue on a mutual plane. In the past the picture shop and the museum made art into a dream world atmosphere. Art is now drawing its substance, appearances and enthusiasms from the common world . . . a constantly changing world which asks for, and receives, overt response from its viewers.

There are kinds of art today which incorporate participation from visual plays, i.e., Op art, etc., to those kinds which require total participation, i.e., Happenings, some types of Environments, etc. As with Pop and Op, the "meaning" of a Minimal work of art exists outside the work itself. The content level is erased . . . the spectator furnishes all (or nothing, and thus the work seems without meaning). In painting the question may be asked, should the format or field always be the closed flat rectangle? Obviously not. By utilizing gestures, scribbling, large scale paintings with no frame, the artist has suggested to the gallery.

observer that both the physical and the metaphysical substance of the work continue indefinitely in all directions beyond the canvas. The contemporary consideration of the picture plane is of a free space field. We no longer have a picture of something . . . but an inherent existence with a logic of its own.

Nevertheless, we tend to carry a mental rectangle with us to drop around whatever we are doing. The room (gallery, etc.) has always been a frame or format, too. Today, this shape is inconsistent with art forms. The customary gallery situation is now becoming obsolete and more and more artists are seeking the open air as space for artistic expression.

In Environment, Assemblages, etc., the work often begins to engulf the air around them, giving shape, dividing into parts, weighing, allowing interaction with solids at such a rate or in such a strange manner that it causes note of the shape and feel of the gallery which sends back its shape to contend with the work of art. People, too, affect the appearance or "feel" of the works in question, i.e., their particular shape, color, density of number, proximity to the paintings or sculpture and relation to each other when more than one. Besides being additional elements within the field of anyone's vision, their movements and responses are subject to the shape and scale of the gallery.



Walter de Maria says that each object/situation subjects the spectator/participant to an intensely focused experience. He calls this the "single experience". His simple, reductive forms are contradicted by a jarring content in form of complex and disturbing ideas . . . to a point of nervous suspense and anxiety. The work is full of psychological and metaphysical overtones that may yield unsettling and intensely disagreeable experiences. De Maria's work is tangential to several major categories of recent artistic endeavor: box art, primary structures, i.e., "Cage", "4/6/8," "Bed of Spikes", kinetic or "time" art, "Optional" art (if the term means a self-sufficient work that gives the spectator the "option" of participating), pictures-to-be-read, "invisible drawings", i.e., Concrete poem, "Garbo", Idea art, i.e., his half-mile long chalk drawing in the desert, which will (when completed) subject the spectator to an extreme situation; the spatial and psychological experience of walking a mile long corridor. He assumes this will provide an intense and unforgettable "single experience". Some of his pieces bear words, some make sounds, some have movable parts, and some are designed to order the environment.

I feel a strong affinity with de Maria's concepts, although I did not "discover" them until very recently.

driving to change perception. Once a perceptual change

The so-called "single experience" has appeal especially in the directions which include the unfamiliar juxtaposition of elements and the incorporation of familiar objects toward complex and disturbing ends. The previously mentioned idea of the open-ended experiment, without regard for the finished product seems to be more prevalent in de Maria's recent works, i.e., the half-mile long desert drawing which is, I assume, subject to constant change by the desert winds, and shrinkage by the desert sun, which would cause considerable change in the original outlines. This kind of conceptual art opens up many possibilities of freedom from the object and from the rectangular museum environment.

The question of enduring versus passing has often been raised in today's art. A short life span becomes necessary as a means to adequately embody those subtle and spontaneous feelings and responses that are a living expression of change. Change suggests a form, or principle for an art which is never finished, whose parts are detachable, alterable, and rearrangeable in many ways.

The detachment of art's energy from the craft of object production has further implications. This reclamation of process refocuses art as an energy driving to change perception. Once a perceptual change



is made, one doesn't look at it but uses it to see the world. It's only visible at the point of recognition of the change. After that, we are changed by it but objects have also absorbed it.

I have recently attempted a mural-type indoor assemblage which, it is hoped, will embody change, while incorporating the qualities of illusion. The "wall" of a plastic curtain, flat and opaque, will change periodically into an enclosed inner transparent area which holds large moving balloon shapes . . . a constant metamorphosis and re-conceptualization of the visual objects. Distancing and insight ("inner-sight") are continually juxtaposed, as the lights in front of the curtain, and those behind it switch on and off at different intervals.

In two other works there has been an attempt to make extensive use of transparency and reflections. The pieces are both plexiglass boxes, one incorporating convex image transfers and a convex mirror reflection, the other containing a flat two-sided mirror in which are reflected two smaller fluorescent pink boxes (one suspended by wire inside the other). A kind of integration is concretized by the mirror objects which unite different reality levels. Their own structure and the reflections of their surroundings also include

the spectator. Lucas Samaras's "Step-in Mirror Box" seems to give a similar integration.

In another recent work I have used familiar objects (a wood cabinet, a transparent green plastic front window, a ten-inch hair fall, a rotating fan) toward unfamiliar, sometimes disturbing ends. The familiar idea of a woman's blond hair gently blown by the wind is seen in the context of the weird, or strange, through the nearly dark, enclosing cabinet box. Spectator participation is optional, but desirable, since the inner workings of the cabinet depend upon the right hand door being opened, thus releasing a trip-switch connected to the light and fan.

Such art works include in their conception a more active role for the spectator than the traditional object-oriented visual response (which regards the work as a source of beauty, noble thoughts, etc.).

which is in the permanent possession of the University of Colorado and recorded with the Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

*Poland Pass*  
Co-Chairman of Committee

*Mavis Boyd*  
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Chairman, Fine Arts Dept.

Date \_\_\_\_\_



In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree M.F.A. in Creative Arts

Laura Middleton Vansen  
Name

has submitted this written thesis as a supplement  
to the creative thesis.

One plastic box: plexiglas, transfers and metal  
Number and Medium

16" x 16"  
Size

"Convexity"  
Title

which is in the permanent possession of the  
University of Colorado and recorded with the  
Department of Fine Arts.

Approved by

Roland Peiss  
Co-chairman of Committee

Luis Ender  
Co-chairman of Committee

Charles A. Gwally  
Chairman, Fine Arts Dept.

Date June, 1969

No. of Slides and Medium

Plastic <u>16" x 16"</u> Size	<u>"Convexity"</u> Title
Mirror glass <u>12" x 12" x 6"</u> Size	<u>"Mirror Box"</u> Title
Wood, plastic, metal <u>2'10½" x 1'3½"</u> Size	<u>"Untitled"</u> Title
Canvas, plastic, acrylic <u>9'6" x 3'3¼"</u> Size	<u>"Broken Light Bulb"</u> Title
Plastic, mirror glass <u>12" x 12" + 6" x 6"</u> Size	<u>"Pink Fluorescence"</u> Title
Book, 2" drawings <u>12" x 11½"</u> Size	<u>"Novel Gallery"</u> Title

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