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“Improvisation and Installation Art” in Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, Routledge, London – New York 2021. ISBN: 9780367203641

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1. Introduction

In what follows, I illustrate through the analysis of some examples how philosophical research can illuminate the improvisational aspects of installation art. There is little philosophical research on improvisation in the visual arts.¹ Similarly, there is little philosophical research on installation art – in section 2, I mention some key claims that have been put forward.² Not surprisingly, then, philosophers have not yet focussed – at least to my knowledge – on improvisation in installation art. The issue, though, is timely. Not only some installation artists have explored improvisation in their practice, both solo and collaboratively (see section 3) but, as I shall argue, it can be claimed that some works of installation art represent or express improvisation (section 4), that some invite the public to engage in improvisation (section 5), and that curatorial teams responsible for the displays of certain installation artworks have the opportunity to introduce improvisational elements in their practice, if they so wish (section 6).

2. Installation art

Three uses of the term ‘installation’ can be distinguished within the art jargon: the first appears in expressions such as ‘curatorial installation’ and ‘installation of (an) artwork(s)’, which refer to the

¹ For an introduction to improvisation in the arts see Bresnahan (2015). On improvisation in painting see Gilmour (2000), Sawyer (2000), Sansom (2001), Colaizzi (2007). On improvisation in cinema see Wexman (1980) and Sterrit (2000).

² On the aesthetic appreciation of installation art see Rebetisch (2012); on the ontology of installation art see Irvin (2013).

display of one or more artworks in a museum or other exhibition space; the second use appears in expressions such as ‘mixed-media installation’ and ‘photographic installation’, which refer to sets of displayed objects (‘mixed-media installation’ refers to an artwork composed of objects in different media, such as painting, sculpture and video, while ‘photographic installation’ typically refers to a set of photographic artworks that have been intended by their maker for being put on show together); finally, the third use appears in the expression ‘installation art’. Works of installation art are spatial environments meant to be experienced from within: art theorists (see e.g. Reiss 1999; Bishop 2005) have argued that in works of installation art the region of space where the objects partially constituting the work are collocated is integral to the display of the works and that “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work” (Reiss 1999: xiii). In the rest of this section, I shall briefly sketch out a view of installation art that emerges from available accounts. In the rest of the chapter, I shall focus on the improvisational aspects emerging from the practice of installation art.

Art theorist Claire Bishop (2005) describes some kinds of experience that are distinctive of our encounters with installation art: “dream scene” (47) experiences, prompting the public’s psychological absorption by means of presenting everyday materials among which the public is physically immersed – this is the case, for instance, with works such as Allan Kaprow’s *Yard* (Pasadena Art Museum, 1967), where the artist recreated a junkyard, or the felt and fat installations by Joseph Beuys; “heightened perception” (48) experiences, that encourage the viewer to think about how she perceives the world, such as those aroused by e.g. minimalist works, environments by Hélio Oiticica and Ernesto Neto, or works by Dan Graham experimenting on perception and interaction among spectators; “mimetic engulfment” (82) experiences, aroused by works that, rather than “heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries [...] seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self” (82), such as James Turrell’s immersive light installations and sound installations by Janet Cardiff; “activated spectatorship” (102) experiences, manifesting “a desire to address viewers in the plural and to set up specific relationships between them – not as a function of perception [...] but in order to generate communication between visitors who are present in the space” (102) – the genre of

installation art aiming to arouse the latter kind of experiences was first explored by works such as Joseph Beuys' *Bureau for Direct Democracy* at Documenta 5 (1972), and has been flourishing since the 1990s, with works by e.g. Rirkrit Tiravanija, Santiago Serra or Thomas Hirschhorn.

Philosopher Juliane Rebentisch (2012) offers an understanding of installation art that emphasizes its continuity with traditional art forms presenting (apparently) 'autonomous', self-contained objects, rather than physically immersive environments encompassing the public. In a nutshell, Rebentisch argues that no artwork is self-contained, because, qua artwork, it exists only in relation to the subject who appreciates it *as an artwork* (see e.g. 2012: 15). According to this account, then, the peculiarity of works of installation art seems to lie not so much in their relational character, but rather in the fact that they *thematize* the relationality of art by exemplifying it at its strongest, through the creation of physically immersive environments.

The participatory character of some works of installation art is emphasized by philosopher Sherri Irvin (2020 forthcoming: ch. 4). As she explains, some artists establish 'rules of participation' for their works of installation art, which require the public to perform specific actions while experiencing the works. For instance, in *pad thai* (Paula Allen Gallery, New York, 1990) Rirkrit Tiravanija invited the public to consume the food he cooked inside the gallery space. Interestingly, according to Irvin, members of the public are not the only kind of subjects who can be involved in the making of installation artworks: curatorial teams also can have their share of participation, since works of installation art "centrally involve the expression of parameters for the constitution of a display; and depending on the work, the displays may (or even must) vary dramatically from one exhibition to the next" (2012: 242-243, see also 2020 forthcoming: ch. 2). For instance, Liz Magor's *Production* (1980) is composed by some 2800 loose bricks along with the manual press the artist used to produce the bricks, by pressing wet newspaper sheets. As Irvin argues, "The nature of this work not only allows but demands reconfiguration. The work comments on the relation between the labour of production and the creative task of construction; the labourer simply produces the units, which may then be manipulated in a multitude of ways. Always to display the bricks in the same way would

be to obscure this fact and thereby to undermine an important feature of the work” (2012: 244). It is the responsibility of curatorial teams to participate into the displaying of the work by producing new configurations of its components each time it is exhibited.

To recap, available research has shown that works of installation art are spatial environments intended to be experienced from within, sometimes by performing specific actions, and that can have different displays, much like symphonies, for instance, can have different performances. Works of installation art, then, show a remarkably relational character, since they involve both the public and curatorial teams in the circumstances of their completion. In what follows (sections 5 and 6), I shall show that the role of the public and of curatorial teams is also significant for an assessment of the improvisational character of some works of installation art. First (sections 3 and 4), however, I shall focus on improvisational aspects in the installation artist’s activity and in works of installation art themselves.

3. The artist as improviser

Obrist: To what extent are you improvising?

Sze: I gather materials in advance of the installation, but what you see is a result of time spent in a place. Once the materials are on location all decisions are improvised. Both meanings of the word ‘improvise’ apply to the work: it is created ‘live’ or extemporaneously, like jazz, and it is fabricated from what is conveniently on hand [Sze 2016a: 128].

This is Sarah Sze describing her working style to Hans Ulrich Obrist in 1998. Sze’s works are usually expansive sculptural installations largely composed of cheap, everyday items such as plastic pipes, plastic bottles, study lamps, newspaper sheets, plywood bars, tin cans, aspirin tablets or small succulents (see e.g. *Figure 1* above). As Sze explains to Obrist, she does not preconceive the structures of her works, but creates them on location; furthermore, to produce her installations she puts together “what is conveniently on hand” – which can be contrasted with an attitude of pondering the potentiality for artistic expression of each everyday item composing the installation before adding it

to the work. In a 2010 interview with Phong Bui, Sze explains that her work process greatly relies on the use of the glue gun, which allows her “to work and make decisions very quickly” (Sze 2016b: 140). As Sze herself suggests in the interview with Obrist, her attitude is similar to that of a jazz improviser: the work is conceived and produced at a specific time and in a specific location and it’s composed bit by bit.³

Spontaneity, however, does not equal complete randomness: as Sze tells Jeffrey Kastner in a 2003 interview, in her work “There’s no right and wrong and not a lot of precedent, but everything is a decision, and the decisions are informed. I’m interested in objects that have a dual identity, that you might think of as being very mundane but that have a poetry to them on a very basic level” (Sze 2016c: 134). That the 2003 claim about the being “informed” of her decisions as to how to proceed in putting together her works does not contrast with the 1998 claim that in her works she puts together “what is conveniently on hand” can be understood if we compare Sze’s improvisational ability to that of other improvisers. As Aili Bresnahan points out, “most improvisation theorists agree that improvisation is not an ad hoc activity; rather, it involves skill, training, planning, limitations, and forethought” (2015: 574).⁴ For instance, Matteo Plebani and Gabriele Tomasi claim about jazz improvisation that

The capacity to improvise depends on learning a wide range of rules and very specific and complex abilities. Musicians need knowledge of harmony and styles in order to master the voicing; besides this, they should have a mastery of the instrument that allows for automatism of movements as well as knowledge of the potentialities of its timbre. They should also have transformed these musical capacities or skills into a kind of habit that allows for free expression [Plebani and Tomasi 2016: 67-68].⁵

³ In a conversation with Okwui Enwezor, Sze declares: “I’m [...] interested in the idea that film can be a sculpture, a drawing can be a sculpture, *music can be sculpture*” (Enwezor and Sze 2016: 24, my italics).

⁴ Bresnahan refers to Alperson (1984), Bitz (1998), Bresnahan (2014), Brown (2000), Clemente (1990), Hamilton (2000), Kernfeld (2002), Sterritt (2000), and Zaunbrecher (2011).

⁵ Plebani and Tomasi support their claims with reference to statements by saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Steve Lacey (2016: 66, 68).

Sze's capacity to improvise, analogously to the jazz musician's, depends on having learned how to use the glue gun very quickly (compare this with the "automatism of movements" of the jazz musician), having meditated on the distinct 'poetic potential' of each kind of everyday object she employs in her installations (compare this with the jazz musician's knowledge of the expressive potential of the timbre of her instrument), and having considered how the objects' 'poetic potential' can be exploited by assembling different objects together (compare this with the jazz musician's skillful voicing of musical notes).

If improvisation requires so much knowledge and skill, in what does it differ from non-improvised activities, then? According to Plebani and Tomasi, Wittgenstein's remarks on the relation between a rule and its correct applications can help illuminate this issue (Plebani and Tomasi 2016: section 1.1). Focusing on algorithms, which are sets of rules to be followed in calculation, and in particular thinking of someone who is familiar with the proposition expressing a certain algorithm and is applying the algorithm to a new case, Wittgenstein observes:

"[...] we might ask: how does it happen that someone who now applies the general rule to a further number is still following this rule? How does it happen that no further rule was necessary to allow him to apply the general rule to this case in spite of the fact that this case was not mentioned in the general rule? And so we are puzzled that we can't bridge over this abyss between the individual numbers and the general proposition" [1953, II, ch. II, §10: 282].

Wittgenstein reasons as follows: if any rule can be applied ad infinitum (imagine that the rule is "add 2") and if any rule has been applied only a finite number of times (imagine that the rule "add 2" has been applied only to the number 1000), then not all cases of application of a certain rule have been covered: there are always new cases (in our example, the rule hasn't been applied to any number other than 1000). Moreover, any finite pattern of application of a rule can be continued in an infinite number of ways (e.g. the pattern "1000, 1002" can be continued with "1004", but also e.g. with

“1005” or “1009”).⁶ Our past use of a rule, then, does not tell us how we should proceed in applying it to new cases. As Plebani and Tomasi comment: “One cannot extrapolate from a finite pattern of the application of a rule the way in which to extend that rule to new cases, nor can we hope to fill the gap between a rule and its applications with other rules” (2016: 70). Wittgenstein famously concludes that each new case of application of a rule is a matter of getting “a new insight”, that to follow a rule “a new decision [...] [is] needed at every stage” (1958: 186). According to Wittgenstein, then, there is an interesting tension when we are confronted with a rule: on the one hand, from a logical viewpoint, we are absolutely free to follow whatever rule-application pattern we please, because neither the formulation of the rule itself nor our past behavior tell us how to proceed in applying it; on the other hand, however, we observe “a total uniformity of behavior from the anthropological point of view” (Frascolla 1994: 120) – rule-application practices are extremely consistent. Normally, when we are asked to apply the rule “add 2” we all continue a series such as “1000, 1002” with “1004, 1006, 1008” rather than with e.g. “1007, 1011, 1015”.

According to Plebani and Tomasi, no matter whether we agree with Wittgenstein’s view on what happens when we apply algorithms, his remarks can help us understand what happens when a jazz musician is improvising.⁷ From a logical viewpoint, a jazz musician who improvises is free to follow whatever pattern of behavior she likes. She can, for instance, break her instrument in tiny pieces or choose to play an instrument that produces only ultrasounds. However, the jazz musician finds herself in a situation similar to that of the person who is asked to add 2 to the number 1000 in Wittgenstein’s picture of rule-following: just like the subject described by Wittgenstein has to continue the numerical series with “1002” in order to be understood by other members of her community as someone who is applying the “add 2” rule, the jazz musician has to act in a certain way in order to be understood by other members of her community as someone who is performing a jazz improvisation. For instance, she has to voice musical notes, exploit the expressive potential of the

⁶ See Wittgenstein 1958: 185.

⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether we can extract a coherent view from Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations. The debate on this topic is immense: for a survey see Kutsch (2010).

timbre of a certain instrument, and play that instrument. When a jazz musician improvises, she decides, bit after bit, to adhere to certain social practices. She is, then, free to decide what to do, because the pattern of action she will follow cannot be pre-determined, but at the same time she is following certain rules by deliberately adhering to certain social practices. In improvising, then, an artist follows rules that she has learned and interiorized through time, qua member of a community of improvising artists; however, she does not follow a plan, as it happens in non-improvised artistic practices.

Similar considerations apply to Sze's work process: from a logical viewpoint, at each new step she is free to decide how to proceed in her installation work. However, from a behavioral viewpoint, her actions are the result of decisions to adhere to certain social practices concerning, for instance, how glue guns are to be used (i.e. to glue one object onto another, rather than, say, to shoot glue in the air) and what kind of resemblance and expressive properties are attributed to objects presenting certain perceptual and historical properties within a certain culture (e.g. the aspects of resemblance that a group of standing plastic bottles bears to a group of trees or standing people, or the playfulness expressed by groups of similar, small plastic objects in primary colors) (see e.g. *Figure 1* above). Spontaneity in Sze's sculptural improvisation is a matter of making informed decisions about following certain social practices concerning the objects employed in the making of the works, while at the same time acting without following a plan for putting the works together.⁸

So far, I have argued that Sze's work practice is improvisational.⁹ It is relevant to stress that such practice is not intended as a focus of appreciation for her public: we are not supposed to see Sze at work and appreciate her improvisational skills, but we are supposed to appreciate the static results of her improvisations: her works of installation art. In the next section, I shall argue that Sze's works are intended to be experienced both as traces of her improvisation practice and as representing and

⁸ Contrast this with e.g. the installation produced by the artist duo formed by Peter Fischli and David Weiss for their film *The Way Things Go* (1987): the artists put together a large installation of everyday objects, meticulously arranged in states of impending collapse, in order to film sequences showing the objects being involved in complex chain reactions.

⁹ See Buchloh (2016) for an overview of contemporary artists who have influenced Sze's practice.

expressing improvisation. To conclude this section, however, I would like to contrast Sze's improvisation practice with the collaborative improvisation practice of the artist duo formed by Christian Lemmerz and Lars Top-Galia on the occasion of the exhibition *Eyescape* at the Copenhagen Contemporary gallery in 2019.¹⁰ Lemmerz and Top-Galia co-created a sound- and painted-installation environment during the course of six evenings, the former engaging in pictorial improvisation and the latter improvising with his guitar, in a sort of mixed-media jam sessions. Interestingly, they allowed the gallery's guests to attend their collaborative improvisational performance. This case shows that a work of installation art can also be offered for appreciation qua environment where improvisations take place, rather than merely qua result of an improvisational practice. Moreover, it shows that in installation art, like in jazz music, for instance, improvisation can also be a matter of collaboration between artists.

4. Static artworks and improvisation

Sze's installation artworks are the result of an improvisation practice, as we have seen. My hypothesis is that they are also presented for appreciation as *records* of the improvised actions performed by their maker. Sze suggests this in her conversation with Enwezor:

Sze: Ideally, I want the work to have the residue of improvisation, a sense that there's a planned event juxtaposed with gestures that could only be improvisational in the moment. Despite the fact that you're only witnessing inanimate objects, there's the strong sense of seeing an act in process, of witnessing behaviour [Enwezor and Sze 2016: 16].

Similarly, a 2013 interview with Rirkrit Tiravanija goes:

Tiravanija: You want people to feel the process of it? [i.e. of your work]

Sze: Yes, and that the process has somehow stopped, although it could have continued. It's at that point between accruing and disintegrating, growing and dying [Sze 2016d: 144].

¹⁰ For pictures of the installation see <https://copenhagencontemporary.org/en/christian-lemmerz-lars-top-galia/>

In a similar vein, Laura Hoptman claims that Sze's *Pendulum* – one of the parts of *Triple Point*, the large installation produced by Sze for the United States Pavillion at the Venice Biennale 2013 (see *Figure 1* above) – is to be experienced as a record of her work practice:

In *Pendulum* groups of objects, or more accurately bits of objects, have been carefully arranged in pie-shaped quadrants that radiate out from a circular centre formed by a heap of bright, white salt. [...] [Its] underlying structure is dependent upon a room-sized compass rose floor detail that is a feature of the space in which the work is sited. [...] Sze choose not to complete the circle with her collections of objects, creating a gap that becomes a kind of viewing platform. Surrounded on three sides by the work, we see the whole as a series of concentric circles rather than as wedges perpendicular to the centre. In amongst the objects, we are able to look at each one closely, and to discover the elements as they reveal themselves one at a time. *This way of perceiving one object after another alludes to the manner in which the artist built the work by choosing each object and placing it with attention to its sequence and adjacencies.* Unlike the bird's-eye vantage, which offers the overview of the whole, this point of view *emphasizes both the processes of creating and perceiving the installation* [Hoptman 2016: 103, my italics].

In sum, I suggest that Sze invites us to consider the juxtaposition of an object to another and the arrangement of objects in sequences as traces of the improvised actions she performed to compose her works. At times, members of the public make unauthorized additions of everyday objects to the works, for instance placing a plastic bottle and glass at the extremity of one of Sze's sequences. This kind of behavior can be interpreted – at least when it's clear that the gesture was not meant as a form of criticism of the artist's work – as a sign of the public's desire to co-improvise with Sze, to take part into a jam-session with her, as it were.¹¹ Although Sze does not invite her public to co-improvise with her, and the public's additions are consequently removed, she invites her public to look at her work as at the result of an improvisation – and the fact that members of the public are tempted to extend her improvised gestures shows that they have accepted the artist's invitation.

¹¹ On the significance of unauthorized additions to Sze's works see Irvin (2021 forthcoming).

In the remaining part of this section, I shall argue that Sze's works also *represent* improvisation and are *expressive* of an improvisational character. In her conversation with Enwezor, Sze says, speaking of how she would like her works to look like: "A work should be constantly in a state of flux in terms of how it exists in space, how it exists in time; it should be unclear whether it's in a process of becoming or a process of entropy" (Enwezor and Sze 2016: 16). Relatedly, in a 2011 interview with Melissa Chiu Sze claims: "[...] [The] idea that objects, like experiences, are ultimately fleeting, ephemeral, and located in a very specific moment – the idea of the anti-monumental – became interesting to me" (Sze 2016e: 143). Finally, in her 2010 interview with Bui Sze explains, talking about the role of blue tape in her works (see e.g. *Figure 2* above):

Blue tape is great. I mean, it's at once incredibly useful as a practical tool and also relates to the very idea of temporality, desperation, improvised construction. [...] I intentionally use sketchy materials like blue tape that make you feel that if you pulled off a piece of blue tape a string would pop, and a cinderblock would follow. I call it a portable planetarium, but you can't imagine moving it an inch. You don't immediately know how it stays together. It feels like it's going to fall apart at any moment. It has a sense of demise. It has a sense that you don't know whether it's still in the process of being made or in the process of falling apart. Everything has the potential to be a sprung trap in the viewer's imagination, and one thing might lead to the next, causing the work to fall apart around them. It's a sense that the built world is incredibly fragile, is on the edge of ruin, and it's all potentially a set trap [Sze 2016b: 140].

Sze works are not, literally, "in a state of flux": they are static. When, then, the artist speaks of their processual, fleeting character, which they share with improvisations, she is suggesting that the works represent or somehow evoke fleeting situations such as improvisational ones. One way in which Sze's works *represent* fleeting situations is by offering a depiction of a scene that looks like a frozen moment in a complex process (see e.g. *Figure 2* above), such as that of improvising a solo with a musical instrument, for instance. Another way in which her works represent fleeting situations is through the exemplification of certain properties. As Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin argue, an object exemplifies a property when it possesses it and is also used to refer to it (see Goodman 1976: 52-53; Elgin 1993: 15; Elgin 2011: 400; Elgin 2018: 29-31). For instance, a swatch of yellow cloth possesses

the property 'being yellow' and is also used to refer it. Similarly, in Sze's works we see a variety of objects and conglomerates of objects possessing properties that they are also used to refer back to – as we can infer from the artist's statements – such as 'being ephemeral' (e.g. the elaborate structures realized by juxtaposing bars of plywood, which a gust of wind could blow away – see *Figure 2* above) and 'being transient' (e.g. the deciduous materials such as aspirin tablets and small succulents – see *Figure 1* above). Finally, Sze's works are also expressive of an improvisational character, as I shall explain. According to Goodman (1976: 50-51) and Elgin (1993: 16, 24), an object has a certain expressive property when it exemplifies a property that has a certain metaphorical character, within a certain context. The property 'being gray', for instance, is often metaphorically linked with sadness. Now, as Sze explains to Bui, blue tape is an element of her works that "relates to the very idea of temporality, desperation, improvised construction". This, I believe, is due to the fact that Sze uses blue tape *to express* temporality and desperation as well as *to exemplify* improvised construction. As for the latter, when two things are kept together by blue tape their connection often possesses properties such as being unstable and improvised: Sze, then, uses objects connected by blue tape to exemplify such properties (see e.g. *Figure 2* above). As for temporality and desperation, my view is that blue tape can express such properties because it possesses the property of connecting objects in an unstable manner (see again *Figure 2* above). Instability can metaphorize temporality (the underlying idea being, roughly, that just like an object can easily change its position in space it can also easily change its position in time) as well as desperation (the underlying idea being, roughly, that just like an unstable object is at risk of falling apart physically a desperate person is at risk of having a mental breakdown). The expression of temporality and desperation is, again, suggestive of improvisation: improvisation is a process that develops in time and, outside the realm of art, it can characterize, for instance, the lifestyle of someone who is forced to live to the day, by gimmicks, and feels desperate about her predicament.

To sum up, in this section I have shown, with reference to Sze's works, that works of installation art can be presented for appreciation as *results* of an improvisational practice, as *representing* an improvised situation, as *exemplifying* improvisation, and as *expressive* of improvisation.

5. The public as improviser

All works of installation art are interactive, but interactivity is a matter of degree. At a minimum, the public is required to step into the space of the work, in order to experience it properly qua work of installation art. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are *participatory* works of installation art, where the public is required to perform certain actions within the space of the work, in order to experience it properly.

As we have seen (section 2), Sherri Irvin (2020: ch.4) calls 'rules for participation' the instructions given by artists to the public in participatory works. Rules for participation, too, are a matter of degree. In some cases, they are very specific: according to Irvin's description of the work, for instance, Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1-3* (2013)

invites audience members to sign agreements, committing themselves to one or more of the following three statements:

1. I will always be too expensive to buy.
2. I will always mean what I say.
3. I will always do what I say I am going to do.

The installation consists of three attended kiosks, one for each statement. Audience members can converse with the agent if they wish, and then choose whether or not to electronically sign a contract committing them to complying with the statement. The signatures are to be archived by the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin (APRA Foundation Berlin) for 100 years, and each signatory will receive the Personal Declarations of all others who have signed. If one signatory wishes to contact another, they can contact the gallery or exhibiting collector and request contact information (released only with the other signatory's consent). Thus, the commitment has an element of public accountability [Irvin 2021: ?].¹²

¹² See http://www.adrianpiper.com/art/The_Probable_Trust_Registry.shtml.

The role of the participant in Piper's work can be compared to that of a musician executing a score, or an actor reciting a script.

Often, rules for participation require the public to perform quite specific actions, albeit allowing for a certain degree of freedom in their execution. In Eva Frapiccini's *Dreams' Time Capsule* (2011 – in progress), for instance, members of the public encounter an inflatable structure, similar to a hot-air balloon, but anchored to the ground, and are invited to enter it one by one and tell one of their dreams, which is recorded inside the structure.¹³ Members of the public are free to choose e.g. which dream to tell, which idiom to use, which tone of voice to adopt, but the kind of action they are invited to perform is established in advance by the artist. Members of the public can be compared to actors who improvise on a certain theme. Like an actor improvising e.g. on the theme 'at the bus station', *Dreams' Time Capsule* participants improvise on the theme 'tell a dream'.

In other cases, rules for participation give participants a lot more freedom: they are encouraged to engage in projects of their own, within the space of the work and through the means offered by it. For instance, the installation *Reaction Machine* (2005), by Jonas Hansen and Klaas Jan Mollema, invites participants to sit on a chair in front of a TV screen: on the screen, participants see themselves (because they are being filmed while sitting in front of the TV) looking at another person (who is the participant that preceded them in experiencing the installation and was video-recorded while experiencing it) (Jacucci et al. 2010: 7).¹⁴ Participants are also given a handle: by turning it, they can record a video of themselves. Once participants start exploring the use of the machine, they soon discover that they can record themselves and understand that the other person they see on the screen is another participant who has previously recorded herself. At this point, participants are free to record themselves performing whatever action they please, assuming whatever facial expression they please,

¹³ Here you can find pictures of the work: <http://www.evafrapiccini.it/dreams-time-capsule/>

¹⁴ For pictures of the work see <https://pixelsix.net/reaction-machine/>

etc. In other words, they are given the freedom to improvise in front of the camera. Thus, they can be compared to actors who are freely improvising on a stage.

Are the participants' improvisations in *Dreams' Time Capsule* and *Reaction Machine* intended by the artists to constitute aspects of their works that are offered to the public to be appreciated as art? It depends. On the one hand, it seems that the point of both works is to provide opportunities for participants to have certain experiences and reflect upon them: *Dreams' Time Capsule's* participants are invited to think about what their dreams are, select a dream that they wish to tell, enter, with some difficulty, the work's space (the artist has deliberately made physical access to the work difficult by providing the inflatable structure with a door that only opens diagonally), and experience how it feels to say one's thoughts out loud, albeit in a protected environment, with no listeners. The dreams are recorded, and then the recording is sealed by the artist. Ten years after the recording, the artist sends back to each participant the respective recording by email. No one, then, is allowed to listen to any of the recorded dreams, apart from the respective dreamers. At the same time, a non-accessible, constantly evolving archive of recorded dreams is put together by the artist. Moreover, participants are aware that, even if their dreams are kept private, they are taking part into a project along with thousands of other people across various continents. *Reaction Machine's* participants are invited to think about how they wish to be seen on screen by other participants to the installation, about what kind of 'message' they would like to leave them, and they are given an opportunity to experience how it feels to be performing freely in front of a camera. It seems, then, that both works are presented for appreciation of the artists' projects they realize. *Dreams' Time Capsule* realizes the projects of providing a space for the participants to get in touch with themselves through dream-telling, of providing an opportunity for each dreamer to be reminded of her dreams ten years after, and of putting together an intangible and inaccessible archive of dreams – a highly evocative kind of object. *Reaction Machine* realizes the project of providing a space for the participants to reflect on how they are seen by others, how they want to be seen, and what kind of message they want to leave to others. On the other hand, while in Frapiccini's work the public is not allowed access either to the (other) dreamers' dream-telling

improvisations or to the recordings of their improvisations, in Hansen's and Mollema's work each participant's improvisation is part of how another participant will experience the work. Moreover, with their improvised actions participants can make the experience of the work more or less boring, engaging, entertaining, insightful, etc. In the latter case, then, appreciation of the participants' improvisations can constitute a significant portion of the appreciative experience of *Reaction Machine* as the work of art it is.

To sum up, in this section I have argued that the public of participatory works of installation art is sometimes asked to engage in improvisation, both free and on a specific theme. In some cases, the participants' improvisations contribute significantly to the aspects of the work that are presented to the public for appreciation of it as an artwork.

6. The curatorial team as improviser?

As Irvin (2020: ch. 2, see also section 2 above) argues, a distinctive feature of many works of contemporary art, including certain works of installation art, is that they are partly constituted by rules concerning how they should be displayed. Here's a vivid example from Irvin to illustrate the point:

Zhan Wang's (2006) *Urban Landscape: Beijing* involves hundreds of stainless steel kitchen implements. Zhan did not fabricate these implements; his artmaking activity involved selecting them and devising an arrangement that cleverly represents Beijing. Clearly, correct configuration is crucial to the work, which otherwise would be just a collection of pots and pans. We can gather up all the kitchen implements that are needed to construct a display of *Urban Landscape: Beijing*, but if we lack rules about how to arrange the implements, we don't yet "have" the work [Irvin 2021: ?].

A museum's or exhibition space's curatorial team is usually responsible for liaising with artists and putting together the displays of their works. As Irvin shows, sometimes artists deliberately leave curatorial teams free to decide how to install their works and encourage them to experiment with the displays: this is the case, for instance, with El Anatsui's wall-hang sculptural installations, which are

made mainly out of liquor bottle caps connected with copper wire (Irvin 2021: ch. 2: ?). Not only the artist does not specify particular rules about how to hang the works, but he explicitly states that installers can freely decide how to display them (see Binder 2010, McCrickard 2006, and Vogel 2012 in Irvin p. ?). Furthermore, Anatsui collaborates with studio assistants to produce his sculptures and often allows assistants a significant degree of freedom in choosing the visual effects and assemblage techniques for the works. As Irvin remarks, “it is perhaps natural that the constitution of displays should be seen as a collaborative project as well” (Irvin 2021: ch.2, p. ?). I suggest that we can conclude, then, that Anatsui allows curatorial teams to improvise, if they so wish, on what we could call the theme ‘how to display El Anatsui’s work’. Curatorial teams are free to decide what to do when confronted with Anatsui’s works: in particular, they can either make a plan and follow it or improvise without a plan. I suspect that Anatsui would appreciate improvised installations of his work, because they would suit what he calls his “nomadic aesthetic”, which “is about fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy, as well as giving others the freedom, or better still, the authority to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point, a datum” (McCrickard 2006, n.p. in Irvin 2021: ch. 2, p. ?).

7. Conclusion

I have argued that installation art can incorporate improvisational elements at various levels: artists can improvise while producing works of installation art, installation artworks can be records of improvised actions, depict improvised processes, exemplify improvisation and express an improvised character, the public of participatory works of installation art can be required to engage in improvisations, and curatorial teams responsible for creating displays of works of installation art can be given the freedom to improvise while installing those works. Like in music and the performative arts, then, there is significant room for experimenting with improvisation in installation art. Further investigation is needed to consider whether the presence of elements of improvisation in installation art raises distinctive issues that haven’t yet been tackled by improvisation theorists.

8. References

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