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On experiencing installation art

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[This is the last draft of the paper. Please quote only from the published paper, and not from this file].

1. Installation art and sculpture

Both sculptures (with the exception of low- and high-reliefs) and works of installation art present us with three-dimensional objects that we are invited to observe from multiple viewpoints. Starting from similar observations, art theorists have investigated the links between the two art forms as well as sought to distinguish between them.¹ Famously, Michael Fried (1998, originally published 1967) introduced a distinction between theatrical and anti-theatrical artworks: the former present objects in situations that include the beholder and invite her to appreciate them *qua the mere objects they are* – Fried discussed especially the early minimalist works by Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Carl Andre (153), which are the precursors of installation artworks;² the latter require to be experienced as detached from the beholder (155) and invite her to appreciate them *qua media* that have been manipulated to convey meaning – in anti-theatrical sculptures, in particular, manipulation of the medium aims at presenting a variety of elements in interplay with each other (161). A decade later, Rosalind Krauss (1977) argued that works of minimal art as well as works like Bruce Nauman's *Corridors*, which today we would ascribe to the category 'installation art', convey meaning *differently* than sculptures, i.e. by prompting the public to interact with them and scrutinize their space under the light of its socio-cultural significance, rather than by representing space (see esp. 262; 270).

Krauss' distinction seems promising in light of the fact that Susanne Langer's (1953) insightful understanding of the phenomenology of sculpture can help us look deeper into the idea that sculptural

¹ On the links between sculpture and installation art see e.g. Krauss (1977) and Potts (2001).

² See Bishop (2005): 50-56. On the undifferentiated character of minimalist art see Wollheim (1965).

space is different from the space of works of installation art.³ In a nutshell, Langer argues that, when we encounter a sculpture, we experience the space around it as organized around the possible movements of the sculptural object – analogously to how, when perceiving three-dimensional space, we experience it as organized around our possible movements (Langer 1953: 86-92; see also Hopkins 2003: 281-282). According to Langer, while in standard perception of three-dimensional space “the kinetic realm of tangible volumes, or things, and free air spaces between them, is organized in each person’s actual experience as his *environment*, i.e. a space whereof he is the centre” (Langer 1953: 90), when we perceive a sculpture *as a sculpture* – as opposed to a mere object that doesn’t convey any content – we imagine that the sculpted object could move in certain ways in the space surrounding it, depending on how it is sculpted: “A piece of sculpture is a center of three-dimensional space. It is a virtual kinetic volume, which dominates a surrounding space, and this environment derives all proportions and relations from it, as the actual environment does from one’s self” (91). According to Robert Hopkins’ reading of Langer, sculptural experience is not illusory, while it is an experience in which our perception of the three-dimensional space is structured by thoughts that concern the ways in which we imagine the sculpted object could move in it (Hopkins 2003: 282, see also 275).⁴

Based on Krauss and on Hopkins’ reading of Langer, then, we can distinguish between the experience of sculpture and that of installation art: while in the former we are prompted to imagine the possible movements of the sculpted object within the space surrounding the sculpture, the latter doesn’t arouse this kind of imaginings.⁵

2. Installation art and architecture

³ Langer’s view was partially inspired by Bruno Adriani’s *Problems of the Sculptor* (1943) (see Langer 1953: 90-92); its explanatory value has been illustrated by Hopkins (2003) and Irvin (2020).

⁴ Compare this to Richard Wollheim’s account of pictorial experience (see Hopkins 2003: 275; Wollheim 1987). Langer argues that her view applies to both figurative and abstract sculptures (1953: 89, see also Hopkins 2003: 286-287).

⁵ Works of installation art can incorporate sculptures within their space – as is the case e.g. in Marcel Broodthaers’ *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures* (1972) – but they are not experienced, in their entirety, as sculptures.

Not only Fried and Krauss but also more recent literature on works of installation art stresses that they are structured around the beholders, who are invited to explore their spaces and the objects possibly placed within those.⁶ Think of Robert Irwin's simplest light installations, such as *Untitled* (1971), which belongs to the Walker Art Center collection.⁷ The work is displayed by hanging a rectangular, transparent cloth from the ceiling of an empty gallery room and anchoring it to the floor, to keep it stretched and wrinkleless. The cloth hangs obliquely – its lower rim is closer to the back wall of the room than its upper rim – and is as wide as the back wall: the beholders cannot reach the back wall, but they can get close to the cloth, which creates a space with a very sloping roof. The cloth is illuminated with fluorescent lights and its image is reflected by the polished, uniform gallery floor: as a consequence, when the beholders get closer to the cloth, they have the visual experience of entering into a luminous prism. The gallery floor, walls and ceiling are integral to the display of Irwin's work, which is a simple, luminous space that the public is invited to enter and explore. Think, also, of Yayoi Kusama's *The Obliteration Room* (first displayed in 2002 as an art project for children), a much more complexly structured work which, at the beginning of its exhibition, shows an entirely white apartment, complete with white furniture.⁸ Here, the public is confronted with an articulated space and is invited to cover, or better yet, *obliterate* it with brightly coloured stickers, so that the apartment gets more and more colourful over the course of the work's exhibition.

The mode of experience of the works from within their own spaces, however, doesn't seem unique to installation art. Works of architecture, too, consist of portions of space that we are supposed to experience from within. Some works usually categorized as installation art, in particular, present spaces that are similar to architectural ones: think, for instance, of some of Richard Serra's massive Cor-Ten works such as *Sight Point* (1975), now installed in front of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Some works usually categorized as architecture, also, are akin to installation art: think, for instance,

⁶ See e.g. Reiss (1999), Potts (2001), Bishop (2005), Rebentisch (2012, originally published 2003).

⁷ For a picture of the work see https://walkerart.org/collections/artworks/untitled-174?_ga=2.268448120.807861937.1585216282-390546938.1585216282

⁸ For a picture of the work see <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/yayoi-kusama-8094/yayoi-kusamas-obliteration-room>

of Bernard Tschumi's *Folies* (1982-1998) at Parc de la Villette, Paris, which are structures that the public can enter and explore and that, according to the original plan, shouldn't fulfil any specific function (only recently, some have been converted to offices, information centres and restaurants).

Notwithstanding the similarities between the experience of installation art and that of architecture, I believe that the former is distinguished from the latter by its interactive character. In the next section, then, I argue that interactivity is a key feature of installation art and that it also allows us to distinguish its experience from that of architecture.

3. The interactive character of installation art

Considering Irwin's and Kusama's works shows that installation art can prompt the public to engage in various sets of actions. The actions prompted by *Untitled* are rather basic: one is invited to enter its empty space, walk, sit down, or perhaps even crawl, and undergo the visual experience aroused by the fluorescent lights. By contrast, the actions prompted by *The Obliteration Room* are more complex: one is invited to enter a furnished space and to put stickers over every available surface. Are works of installation art *interactive*? Berys Gaut argues that "a work is interactive just in case it authorizes that its *audience's* actions partly determine its instances and their features. So traditional musical and other performing works are not interactive, for the audience is not authorised to determine their instances and features; the performers do that. But in interactive works it is the audience that determines the work's instances and their features" (Gaut 2010: 143).⁹ Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed plays, according to Gaut, are a case of interactive works: audience members who go on stage during the performances of the plays partly determine the works' instances and their features. Do works of installation art fit this view of interactivity?

First, according to Gaut, interactive works are types whose instances are tokens, i.e. they are multiply instantiable works (2010: 141). If, with Sherri Irvin (2013; 2020 forthcoming ch. 5), we argue

⁹ On the advantages of Gaut's view of interactive artworks over others that have been put forward in the debate see Kania (2018: 188-189).

that works of installation art, like other contemporary works of art, are non-physical historical individuals susceptible of having multiple occurrences, then we can conclude that works of installation art are, too, multiply instantiable works.¹⁰ According to this view, any new exhibition of *Untitled*, for instance, is a new occurrence of the work (more on this below).

Second, Gaut (2010: 141) argues that only those among the audience's actions that are authorized by the work's author contribute to producing tokens of an interactive work. This, too, is in line with Irvin's view of contemporary artworks (including works of installation art): namely, she argues (see e.g. 2020 forthcoming, ch. 4) that various works of contemporary art are governed, among other things, by rules for participation, which establish what kinds of actions the public is allowed to perform when interacting with them. Kusama's work, for instance, allows the public to put stickers around the room but not to, say, draw on its walls.

Finally, according to Gaut, interactive artworks are "types of which their interaction-instances are tokens" (Gaut 2010: 141), which means that the audience of those works contributes to producing their tokens (by performing authorized actions). Is this condition, too, satisfied by works of installation art? Irvin doesn't properly discuss this issue (see 2013 and 2020 forthcoming: ch. 4-7). In a nutshell, she argues that a sub-set of contemporary artworks, which includes works of installation art, is composed of non-physical historical individuals which stand in a relation of ontological dependence to particulars that represent the rules, sanctioned by their authors, for the constitution of their displays (i.e. their occurrences) – and, on occasion, to other kinds of objects (e.g. particular material objects such as a particular chunk of marble, if the rules prescribe that only that particular chunk be included in all the work's displays). Although Irvin acknowledges that some of those works ontologically depend on particulars that represent artist's sanctioned rules about how their public is supposed to participate in their displays (2020 forthcoming: ch.4 and 5), she does not discuss the hypothesis that the public participate into *the instantiation* of the displays of those works, focussing instead exclusively on the role

¹⁰ In what follows, nothing hinges upon the difference between Irvin's and Gaut's ontological views, so I shall leave the issue aside. Irvin's account is inspired by Smith (2008) and Rohrbaugh (2003).

that art institutions play in producing the works' displays (2020 forthcoming: ch. 2). It seems, then, that according to Irvin the displays of e.g. *The Obliteration Room* are those produced by art institution teams whenever the work is exhibited.

An alternative view, according to which works of installation art fit entirely Gaut's understanding of interactive art, is the following: art institution teams produce *partial displays* of works of installation art whenever the works are exhibited, while the works' public *completes the displays* by interacting with them in the way sanctioned by the artists through the works' rules for participation.¹¹ In particular, display completion happens whenever a member of the public interacts with one of the partial displays of a work in the way sanctioned by the artist. Each partial display, then, can prompt the making of many complete displays.¹²

To this proposal one could object that while it is evident that the public modifies the display of *The Obliteration Room* by putting stickers around the room, those who enter *Untitled* leave no trace of their actions and therefore don't seem to contribute to the production of the work's displays and properly interact with it. This objection, however, relies on a narrow understanding of what counts as the display of a work of installation art which, as I shall argue, is not faithful to the practice of installation art.

In installation art, in general, members of the public, are "in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work" (Reiss 1999: xiii). This aspect of installation art has been thoroughly investigated by Claire Bishop (2005), who has argued that we should regard all works of installation art as experimenting with the public's experiences. Now, one could observe that this is what any

¹¹ As Irvin (2020 forthcoming ch. 4) explains, some works *permit* certain forms of interaction, while others *require* them. My view can accommodate this distinction: if a work of installation art merely permits certain forms of interaction, to collaborate to the production of one of its displays it is sufficient for the public to experience its space from within, while it is not necessary that the public engage in other, more specific actions allowed by the artist (that the work be experienced from within is a basic interaction all works of installation art require – see e.g. Reiss 1999 and Bishop 2005); if, instead, a work of installation art *requires* certain forms of interaction, then to collaborate to the production of one of its displays it is necessary and sufficient that the public perform the required actions.

¹² The proposed account has the merit of spelling out what remains implicit in Irvin's discussion of rules of participation in works of installation art. According to Irvin (2020 forthcoming ch. 6 and 7), rules for participation can be part of what we appreciate in a work of contemporary art. To illustrate her point, she discusses some participatory installation artworks, but what remains implicit in the discussion is that it is in virtue of the fact that the public follows the rules for participation by performing certain actions that certain potentialities of the works are actualized – i.e., to employ the jargon just introduced, that *partial displays* of the works are turned into *complete displays*.

artwork does, in a sense. I submit, however, that the lesson to learn from Bishop is that in installation art artists use the public's experiences as *material* for their work, manipulating them to prompt the public to appreciate some qualities of those experiences, in the same way as a painter might experiment with oil paint to prompt the public to appreciate e.g. its expressive qualities. The public's experiences, then, play a different role in installation art than e.g. in pictorial art: when we appreciate a painting, the obtaining of a certain visual experience is *instrumental* for us to be able to focus on the materials manipulated by the artists, such as oil paint and the configurations of marks and colours on a surface it allows to produce; however, the appreciation of *the very fact* that we have a certain visual experience while looking at the painting is not part of the experience of pictorial appreciation: the visual experience has a purely instrumental role. In installation art, instead, the experiences occurring as a consequence of the public's interacting with the work's partial displays in the ways prescribed by the artist are among the things the public is required to focus on, *per se*, in order to appreciate the work. This is why the public's experiences contribute to completing the displays of a work of installation art, no matter whether the public's interactions with the work's partial display issue in publicly observable results. The public's experiences, then, are part of the works' displays.¹³

To support the proposed view, let's consider again Irwin's and Kusama's works. To appreciate both it is crucial that we focus, among other things, on some of the qualities of the experiences they arouse in us. *Untitled*'s goal has been described as the exploration of "how phenomena are perceived and altered by consciousness" and Irwin's activity as "in effect orchestrating the act of perception".¹⁴ Bishop writes about Irwin (as well as other 'West coast' artists like James Turrell): "The phrase 'light and space' was coined to characterise the predilection of these artists for empty interiors in which the viewer's perception of contingent sensory phenomena (sunlight, sound, temperature) became *the*

¹³ According to Irwin (2020 forthcoming, ch. 5), works' displays are public events during which the works' audience encounters certain objects. I am sympathetic to this view, but I suggest an amendment for works of installation art: those works' *partial displays* are *public events* during which the works' audience encounters certain objects, while their *complete displays* are the *sum* of a *public event* during which the works' audience encounters certain objects plus the *private event* of experiencing those objects. The private event, however, isn't *essentially* private, because it can be described to other people and members of the public can compare the respective experiences of display-events.

¹⁴ <http://www2.walkerart.org/calendar/2009/robert-irwin-slant-light-volume>. See also Irwin (1985).

content of the work” (Bishop 2005: 56, my italics). As for Kusama, in her early years she used to experience hallucinations, some of which of polka dots, and she has produced a significant body of work about self-obliteration (e.g. *Dots Obsession*, 1998) where she appears covered in polka dots to blend in a similarly looking environment (see Turner 1999). *The Obliteration Room*, then, can be described as orchestrating for the public an experience similar to those had by the artist.

To conclude and answer the question put forward in the previous section, I submit that what truly differentiates the experience of installation art from that of architecture is its interactivity. Architects build structures that we are invited to explore from within, just like works of installation art. Moreover, we can conceive of works of architecture as non-material objects with material instantiations, analogously to works of installation art.¹⁵ Instantiations of architectural works, however, are not completed by the public’s actions. The same, as I have argued, is not true of works of installation art.

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¹⁵ For an introduction to various account of the ontology of architecture see Fisher (2015).

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