

Symposium: Installation Art

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Installation Art and the Question of Aesthetic Autonomy: Juliane Rebentisch and the Beholder's Share

I

Intermedial art, as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, constituted a threat not only to the medium specificity of modernism, but also to the artwork as self-contained autonomous object. That this threat was real is evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of installation art. While only named as such toward the end of this period, installation art—a label still rejected by some of its founding artists—is exemplary of such hybrid practices. Its supporters and critics drew a contrast between, on the one hand, modernism's aesthetic engagement with a medium-specific (and self-sufficient) “object,” and, on the other hand, new so-called non-aesthetic “practices” engaging the “literal” spectator within her own space, such that the space of the gallery or situation is drawn into the encounter. So, while in 1967, Michael Fried writes disparagingly of the notion that “someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one” (1998, 193), Claire Bishop echoes such a claim when she suggests that “an insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art” (2005, 6). Despite diametrically opposed critical evaluations of such situated art, a curious consensus emerges around a beholder whose “share” is characterized as a “being present.”

II

One voice raised against this consensus is that of Juliane Rebentisch. In her 2012 book, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (first published in 2003 as *Ästhetik der Installation*), Rebentisch challenges a situation where the discourse on aesthetic autonomy is characterized on one side as a necessary “autonomy of aesthetic experience from the domains of theoretical and practical reason,” and on the other side as a “slur,” alien to a non or even antiaesthetic practice:

But this opposition, I think, is deceptive. Both positions—the academic defense of aesthetic autonomy and its disavowal in artistic practice—encounter one another in a critique of the concept of the work. And in both cases, it is a particular concept of the work of art that is seen as discredited. This convergence is indicative. (2012, 10)

It is indicative because it allows us to see an interrelation “between the anti-objectivist impulse of theories of aesthetic experience and the impulses toward the dissolution of the concept of the work in artistic practice”; thus, the opposition toward objectivism in a philosopher like Rüdiger Bubner is *at the same time* a “reaction to the destruction of the traditional unity of the work in

contemporary art,” exemplified, of course, by installation art (Rebentisch 2012, 10).

Rebentisch, by contrast, argues that we might interpret the philosophical “turn” to aesthetic experience as “an alternative proposal for an anti-objectivist version of the concept of the work of art” (11). Here, aesthetic experience

exists only *in relation* to an aesthetic object; conversely this object becomes aesthetic only by virtue of the processes of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic object cannot be objectified outside aesthetic experience, nor does the subject ultimately become, on the occasion of an object that must be bracketed, the object of its own experience. The new conception of aesthetic experience as a process that comprehends the subject as well as the object of this experience to the same degree and equiprimordially, and which therefore cannot be attributed to either of these entities alone, follows a new conception of aesthetic autonomy as well. Art is not autonomous because it is constituted in this or that way, but because it allows for an experience distinct from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason, by virtue of the specific structure of the relation between its subject and its object. (11)

The object is aesthetic not by virtue of qualities that *precede* the experience of such an object (that is, guaranteed by production), but only when the encounter with the artwork initiates a specifically aesthetic experience. This is not “a return to subjectivism that would sacrifice the art critical discourse and with it any consideration of questions of productions aesthetics” (130–131), but rather a recognition that art critical discourse necessarily *follows* aesthetic experience and is, thus, constitutive of such aesthetic objects through processes of reflective transformation.

Through such discursivity, Rebentisch seeks to avoid the pitfalls of an objectivism conceived as self-referential, and a subjectivism that posits the subject’s aesthetic experience *as its own object*. She defines the aesthetic experience of installation art as a relation that does, indeed, involve aesthetic distance, in that it “brackets” the object not just as a self-referential “thing,” but through an event-like experience: a bracketing that highlights the performative role of the subject. But here, minimalism/installation art reveals a structural aspect of *all* art, namely, “the double and reciprocally referential presence of the aesthetic object as thing and as sign, its ‘stage presence’” (69). This

constructs a tension between that which is representing and that which is represented: a tension that Fried rejects by claiming a self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object that, in its “instantaneous” appreciation, overcomes any dependence *upon* the beholder. For Rebentisch, installation art, therefore, transgresses not so much the “idea of autonomous art” but rather “an objectivist misunderstanding of it” (14).

III

Rebentisch’s position offers a rebuttal to those, such as Osborne (2013), who suggests that critically engaged contemporary art is, by definition, non or even antiaesthetic. Indeed, her wider stated project is “to rehabilitate philosophical aesthetics as a *critical* project” (Rebentisch 2012, 16). At the same time, she maintains that installation art represents an ideological rejection of context-independent art. Rebentisch recasts aesthetic autonomy not as the self-sufficiency of the object, but as a semblance (an experience bracketed from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason) that forces us to confront the ethical and political situation *where* we encounter the artwork. The situatedness of installation art is thus constitutive of the work’s meaning while subject to acts of negation. And here, as Chytry (2014, 469) notes in his review of Rebentisch’s book in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, “the social dimension [enters] the experience of art precisely through her insistence on the public discursivity that necessarily completes aesthetic experience as she has defined it.”

However, in sidelining the artwork’s material processes of production, Rebentisch has been criticized for negating the role of the artist in determining meaning. This is a familiar complaint aimed at reception-oriented theories: an objection that the generation of meaning is shifted from the object itself, or from the processes of production, to each and every beholder by way of their individual interactions with the artwork. Rebentisch anticipates such a criticism by maintaining that the reception of works of art does not exist “independently of the society in which they have their place” (2012, 267), thus “opening up to concrete social contexts” (268) and “concrete subjects—that is socially situated individuals” (271). This is most apparent in site-specific works, reflecting their importance for her account. Thus, she claims:

The aesthetic experience thus does not transcend the concrete empirical subjectivity of the subject of experience but rather reflects on it in a specific way . . . [such that] we are confronted in a particular way with our own silent social and cultural assumptions. For in the mode of aesthetic semblance . . . these assumptions seem to rise most forcefully to the surface of the socially and politically charged works (and it is in this sense, and in this sense only, that the works have the appearance of subjects). Precisely because the meanings that thus *appear* in the work are never truly warranted by the work, the subject is compelled to reflect on its own productivity in the creation of relations of meaning. (271)

Rebentisch's defense against the charge of subjectivity is thus founded upon the fact that the recipient does not exercise "complete control over the subjective powers at work" (271) but is caught in a process of oscillation that cannot be arrested, as we are confronted with our own historically and socially specific assumptions. Here, meaning and material "exist in the aesthetic experience only in dynamic and antagonistic interrelation" (114).

IV

This is where Rebentisch's account, despite a lack of acknowledgment, is reminiscent of aspects of Wolfgang Iser's aesthetics of reception, developed in relation to literature. Both conceive aesthetic distance not as an *escape* from a work's social and historic context, but as a potential to open up another perspective on what might otherwise be habitual: to confront dominant modes of thought. Here, the recipient's role is performative. Indeed, for Iser, representation is both an act of performance (a bringing forth in its staging something that is not given) and a semblance (denying its status as a copy of reality): "The aesthetic semblance can only take on its form by way of the recipient's ideational, performative activity, and so representation can only come to fruition in the recipient's imagination; it is the recipient's performance that endows the semblance with its sense of reality" (Iser 1989, 245).

However, Iser allocates a central role for the imagination, something lacking in Rebentisch's account despite no obvious reason to rule out the imaginative dimensions of our aesthetic experi-

ence. While the imagination plays a particular role in literature, I want to make a case for its centrality to our engagement with installation art, and to the beholder's share.¹ For Iser, the imagination is essential to negotiating the unstable relation between the perceptive engagement of the real situation we occupy and the virtuality of the artwork: an engagement that establishes an aesthetic tension through its very instability. Nevertheless, as Winfried Fluck notes,

our acts of imagining do not automatically possess an aesthetic quality. For Iser, such an aesthetic quality is created only when the imagined objects are deformed, negated, or delegitimated in their validity, because such negation also challenges us to imagine that which is negated. It does this in a double sense, for in order to make the negation meaningful we have to mentally construct not only the object or situation itself which appears in negation but that which it negates. (2000, 184)

Drawing upon Husserl's notion of superimposition, Iser introduces an antagonistic relation between that which is negated and new meaning which it is in conflict with. Iser identifies two varieties of negation: "primary negations," which invalidate or disrupt norms and conventions, and "secondary negations," arising out of the resulting dehabitualization, which "actualize the theme to the extent that they bring about corrections to the disposition and transform the theme into an experience" (1978, 221). And as Iser suggests, blanks—intentional gaps within the text—play a *constitutive* role here:

It is through the blanks that the negations take on their productive force: the old negated meaning returns to the conscious mind when a new one is superimposed onto it; this new meaning is unformulated, and for precisely this reason needs the old, as this has been changed by the negation back into material for interpretation, out of which the new meaning is to be fashioned. (1978, 217)

While Rebentisch makes no reference to Iser's use of the blank, she does refer to Heidegger's characterization of the "gap" as an "emptiness" that is not a nothing, but a "bringing-forth with implications for establishing a place or situation" (Heidegger 1997, 123–124). Rebentisch emphasizes the antagonistic tendency of such scenes or

situations “to fall apart again and again in these very processes, only to be collected and arranged in potentially new and different ways by a renewed reading” (2012, 245–246). But against Rebentisch, I want to argue that this is not merely a process of interpretation, but one of *critical* retrieval of the creative processes that constitute the work (Wollheim 1980).

One might think of Cornelia Parker’s 1991 installation *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, a suspended reconfiguration of charred fragments from a garden shed blown up by the British Army at Parker’s behest. Here, the explosion, the recovery of scattered material, and painstaking configuring of the installation are all crucial to the work’s meaning. But this is not merely a case of the reconstruction of the artist’s decisions of making. The notion of critical retrieval offers the opportunity to expand upon the role of the imagination in mediating between a work’s *presentation* and *reception*. For Iser, negativity “initiates those processes of imagination which are necessary to bring out the virtuality of those conditions” (1989, 142) through the use of blanks or disconnections placed within the text by the author. Acts of ideation and projection, while indeterminate, are therefore *licensed*. Nevertheless, Iser states that the “iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified” (1978, 65). This demands the reader/ beholder’s share. In the case of Parker’s installation, it requires us to bring to mind the violence of the nonpresent causal event, which is brought into tension with a static display that is only animated by the beholder’s movement. The indexical signs of installation art thus problematize the beholder’s orientation in its deepest sense, reflecting not only the work’s locative function—by bringing our spatial orientation in play—but also our ideological orientation: enticing us into an encounter organized by the kinetic potential of the space while simultaneously repulsing us (reminding us of our externality to the work’s virtual realm).

v

If aesthetic autonomy is recast as a dynamic operating with respect to the ethical and political

situation where we encounter the artwork, then what role does framing play? The question is pertinent, given installation art’s immersiveness—a being *inside* rather than *outside* the work—and if installation art is to avoid degenerating into the kind of spectacle Rosalind Krauss claims, wrongly (I believe), to be its *inherent* condition.

Rebentisch’s response is to emphasize the centrality of “site-specificity” as a primary, if not defining, feature of installation art:

Under the title of “site specificity,” installation art sharpens the reflection on the double localization of art by expressly mediating between its two poles: site-specific installation art aims to thematize the interwoven literal and social sites of art. It reflects on the institutional, social, economic, political, and/or historical conditions that frame it by intervening formally in a given architecture or landscape. (2012, 222)

And yet site specificity, while a feature of some installations, is not a *necessary* condition, as Parker’s *Cold Dark Matter*—a work subject to multiple iterations—would attest to. Indeed, the double localization of art (that is, a context sensitivity to host space *and* the social frameworks that influence reception) is a factor of many works that, while site-responsive, are not specific to any one location.² What is relevant is how, in its framing, installation art acknowledges the configurational properties that structure the relation between what we might call (after Kemp 1998), its inner and outer reality (the apparatus of its conditions of access). This requires us to negotiate the relation between the bracketed world of the artwork and that which it has been bracketed from: the actual world from which it has been separated, rather than self-contained. Here, extrinsic factors intrude but are scrutinized. Indeed, for Iser, there is a “continual oscillation between the bracketed world [of the artwork] and that which it has been separated from” (1989, 239). And far from eschewing framing devices, I believe installation art constructs a tension (or “slippage”) between the literalness of the host space and the work’s virtual realm, such that the imagination plays a role in negotiating its *degrees of virtuality*.

Perhaps recognizing something of the above, Rebentisch reflects upon the fact that it is often not clear which concept of site is being

employed in any instance, maintaining that “for art that thematizes its double context, the simple reference to the concrete and social context in which the work stands is insufficient to explain its specific context-reflexivity” (2012, 222). Rather, she maintains that it is only through the specifically *aesthetic* engagement with aesthetic objects that the concept of the work is “internally tied to that of aesthetic experience” (233). This demands aesthetic distance, and hence some notion of framing. Rebentisch cites Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: “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” (Heidegger 1971, 64; cited in Rebentisch 2012, 233). This is interpreted through a logic that Rebentisch terms “parergonal,” after Derrida’s use of *parergon* in his *The Truth in Painting* (1987, 15–147), and which pervades *all* art. Rebentisch echoes Derrida when she states: “It is a characteristic mark all aesthetic experience that the question of what constitutes the work of art and what is ascribed to it as merely external must remain open” (2012, 244).

One might agree but emphasize the role imaginative and cognitive projections play in orienting the beholder to the work’s conditions of access (its bracketing, or *framing*) and the shifting relation between its inner and outer apparatus. This is not dependent on site-specificity, as *Cold Dark Matter* demonstrates. And to argue, as Rebentisch does, that “no space will ever appear as simply neutral again, least of all the white cube” (250) need not devalue the genuine distinction between installations that merely require a generic kind of framing through such a white cube environment, and those that are, indeed, site-specific, in that they draw upon historical and locational narratives particular to the actual site.

Installation art, thus conceived, constitutes a space that while virtualized—removed from functional imperatives—compels acts of imagination/ideation by problematizing our habitual dispositions. But in the most critically pertinent forms of practice, these processes *do not take place in isolation from context*, in that external factors impinge upon such processes of negotiating the work’s conditions of access. While all installations engage an organizing of the space of the gallery or situation in which we encounter the

work, the extent to which the wider conditions of access enter into the work’s semantic content varies widely, from works that mimic the self-sufficiency of modernist sculpture (despite our occupying of an immersive position “inside”), to those that draw the spatial and ideological conditions of access into the imaginative and ideational encounter.³

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1. Unlike Gombrich's (1961) famous use of the term, the "beholder's share" is here conceived not as sustaining an illusion, but rather as a set of imaginative and cognitive projections prompted by the work in question.

2. Rebentisch takes her notion of the double sensitivity of installation art to context from Potts (2001).

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