

## Installation Art and Space: Participation as the Meta-medium

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Installation artworks have been an accepted medium since Marcel Duchamp wrapped the *International Surrealist Exhibit* in New York in 1942 with string after all of the other works had been installed. In this simple move, Duchamp's motive was to activate and control a space that already adhered to a strict set of conventions—those of viewing artworks on the wall.<sup>1</sup> Duchamp's desire to subvert those conventions is what makes the work both a piece of art and an architectural moment. In her book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss explores Gotthold Lessing's discussion of sculptural space in his treatise *Lacoon*, published in the 18th century. From Lessing's discussion of sculptural space, Krauss learned that sculpture can be defined as "bodies deployed in space."<sup>2</sup> Krauss further discusses how the early minimal installation works of Michael Heizer and Richard Serra create an awareness of one's body and position in space. It is this awareness that for Krauss distinguishes and defines these works as separate from sculpture.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, installation, as sculpture, becomes architectural in nature. While sculpture involves "bodies deployed in space" installation is the study of that space and its ultimate effect on the body. Installation, then, functions as a link between works created to be experienced within a specific designated space, and works that are meant to expand human spatial experience. All works that involve spatial perception, on some level, invoke participatory relations between threshold, composition, scale, and image.<sup>4</sup> Experimenting with space as it is engaged by the human senses reveals that certain concepts intersect in both the practices of architecture and sculptural installation work. In installation, participation is the form of engagement, it is the meta-medium. As such,

participation functions to create new paradigms of artistic authorship within works of installation.

In 1980, Giancarlo De Carlo published an article in the journal *Perspecta* that called for an architecture of participation. In his article, De Carlo disparages the loss of the users of the architecture within the consideration of modern architects and calls for the users to become part of the design process. In this case users would, in a sense, assume some authorship of a work of architecture.<sup>5</sup> In a participatory architecture, work is no longer created in an elitist manner by a single ordained creator but instead it is generated through the friction that occurs between user and building, audience and artwork. This can be transformative in the perspective that it encourages on the process of making. Within the interdisciplinary realm of architectural installation there is a desire to study the basic elements of architectural experience. Because the end goal is to have people participate in a work—to disrupt, distort, and, ultimately force them to rethink how they view space—architectural installations compel people to move through space differently, or react to it in an unexpected way. Thus this idea of the users' involvement in the work has different and more immediate meaning. The users of a participatory work engage the work, experience the work and through this become a part of the artwork. Because in some installations, the end goal is to participate in or view a performance, the users are compelled to move through the space differently, or react in an unexpected way. As in architecture, how time passes and the ways in which space is framed were central concerns to each piece in this paper. This

paper will examine ways in which participation functions to reveal the true nature of a work.

### **Participation: Critical Acts as Architectural Re-visioning**

Gordon Matta Clark's seminal installation work *Days End* 1975 on Pier 52 in New York City can be viewed as a participatory critical act. The cutting of a pier warehouse to include a view of the sky above and the water below was an act of urban transgression that required the audience to risk their safety in order to view it. When city officials and police showed up to determine the cause of these large holes that had appeared in the Pier 52 building, accounts differ as to what transpired. Some recollect Matta-Clark as offering the officials an explanation as follows: "I've taken a decaying sad reminder of a previous industrial era and renovated it." Others recall Matta-Clark when asked if he was the artist claiming: "No I've never seen him. I think he went to Europe."<sup>6</sup> The work took place in a part of the City where at a time when the controls on what could and could not happen were slight. Some felt that the docks were a place of anarchy. Matta-Clark's work inserted an image of experience and order into this environment. This is what makes the work visionary; however this is only possible through the participation of the users. The viewers of this work crossed a plank 12" wide to fully experience the work. This plank bridged an expanse of bay water below.<sup>7</sup> The danger inherent in this experience became a metaphor for the work itself. The participation becomes the way one understands the experience. The re-visioning of architectural space occurs with the active collusion of the viewers through the illegality of the very presence of the viewers within the work.

### **Participation: Form and Memory:**

In architecture, the remembered image of a space is created through experience. Thus a product of culture, memory, and location; image is how we conceptualize space in our minds' eye.<sup>8</sup> Image can be memory, it can be impression. It is an integral part of our mental inventory. Consisting of a series of large rolled steel plates that have been torqued to stand on their edges, Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* are feats of engineering, creating a spatial experience that is controlled by their form. In *Torqued Ellipses*, framing how people

interpret space through movement becomes a primary architectural concern.<sup>9</sup> The curved steel plates of *Torqued Ellipses* are the embodiment of material properties exploited in the service of framing architectural space in such a way that imaging of the space becomes varied and complex.

Ambient sound becomes part of these works in an intentional manner. Many people that have viewed the *Torqued Ellipses* describe the sudden, unexplainable, drive to see how these spaces would affect sound. Architectural qualities in this work serve as a function of the treatment of the massive milled steel sheets. As one moves through the piece there is an immediate process in which the visual filmic framing of the installation takes precedence over the shape of the ellipses. This combines with the desire to create sound within the piece to create a sense that the participatory acts within the space inform the creation of the space in our memory. The material that encloses this particular installation--structuring the views to create understandable circulation patterns--becomes both producer and end product of geometrical composition.<sup>10</sup> This composition is not what one remembers about the piece. The imprint of the piece is based in the framing and sounds that occur as one cycles into and out of the ellipses. The ellipses become a participatory system within which space is pure experience, and the memory is reflexive of this. Krauss maintains that the Serra's work exists in the realm of "activity and effect"; the works are generated based on the action of making, and the action of using.<sup>11</sup> Within the memories of the users, this transforms the work; participation blurs the memory of the geometric form and substitutes the framed and ambient experience.

The introduction of participation and choice, on the part of the users adds a dimension to the work to be presented here, a dimension that is not evident in all architectural situations. These issues result from another layer within the architectural understanding of concepts of spatial composition and threshold. The passing from one zone to another in architecture usually affords the user a new set of choices and possibilities; this was seen as an important idea to be exploited in the installations presented here. Performance is often used as a tool to explore the user choices and their consequences. In some

ways the performance aspects of the installations were seen as analogous to program requirements. The user's participation becomes a physical element in the works, and an unknown one.

#### Participation and Technology Loops:

Technology allows the authorship of a work to migrate towards the user. *Interface*, 1972 by Peter Campus, and *Present Continuous Past(s)*, 1974 by Dan Graham; are video installations in which the user's participation becomes the work itself. *Interface* consists of a camera, a projector and a reflective piece of glass. The camera is behind the reflective piece of glass and the projector projects onto the piece of glass. When a user enters the space they see their own image, and a mirrored projection of themselves side by side.<sup>12</sup> The user, their reflection and their projected image then become the experience of the work. Participation is the true media here. The technology is an adept conduit for this experience. The Graham installation also works within the framework of reflection and projection of the user. This installation is a completely mirrored room with a screen on one side in which a video of the room with an eight second delay is projected. The work derives from the resonance of the actual movements and the time lapsed movement in the infinite reflections.<sup>13</sup> Again participation is the artwork; the time lapsed and present actions of the users become the experience of the work.

Technology creates the link within the works between existence and art. The very nature of the technology is present in both works. That closed circuit projection creates a loop between what is seen and what is done is an important component in the experience. For participatory engagement to be meaningful, this loop collaborates with the users to create the experience. The technology loop is universal and it is something that exists across platforms. Digital technology is a loop between input and output, analog technology also exists within this loop. The Graham installation explores the deformation of this loop through time. The delay of the video by eight seconds introduces another element into the way time is built in the space of the installation. This deformation exists to a small degree in all works involving technology, by prolonging it; Graham makes it (and

consequently the technology loop) the focus of the work. The manipulation of the space by the users is enabled through their manipulation of this time delay.

#### Dissolving Machines: Authorship, Sound, Technology:

Dissolving Machines is a series of 4 interactive installation works that were completed in the fall of 2005. Commissioned by the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, they were conceived to test the boundary between participation and authorship. The installations were situated within walking distance of each other, and were meant to be experienced by a larger part of the city. In each piece, users knowingly and unknowingly create a sound score of their time in the installation. The works are to be entered bodily, and engaged in a variety of postures-standing, sitting and walking. Figures 1-3 The material of the work is configured to create sound as users move through or situate within it. Employing an analog sound input system with author manufactured input devices such as contact microphones; the technology was designed to convey, layer and amplify the sounds created by those experiencing the pieces.

As the users enter the space; sounds they created would feed into a looped sound system and be amplified. The audience would continue to add sounds in live time simply by continuing to be in the installations. The noise would layer as the looping mechanism continued; creating a sonic environment that consisted of a record of sounds made by the user. In all works the ambient surrounding sounds were amplified into the mix and also looped. As time would pass the user would become increasingly savvy to the loop system and they began to create an extemporaneous sound piece. These installations are systems that allow the users to be the authors of their own soundtrack for the experience. Through the exploitation of the technology loop inherent in the use of sound equipment; and the willingness of the audience to discover the experience, users become performers.

The idea of authorship becomes a central concept within these works. By allowing the audience to generate the soundscape, their experience becomes the work. The output of the audience was saved and placed in one

installation that was more centrally located. People could "visit their works" the next day at that location and were encouraged to do so. In these works the goal was confer on the audience an attitude towards the act of making music or sound. The hope was that through engaging the piece, users would be inspired to authorship outside the realm of these installations.

**Conclusions**

If users are compelled within works of installation to react, to remove shoes to lounge to watch, how does that create experience and space that is architectural?

Although the pieces discussed here are not performance pieces, they do engender some act of bravery or engagement from the audience. It is this act that binds the user to the work, and allows there to be some place within the work for the user's own vision. In this way, the participation of the users becomes the true outcome of the artwork. If the medium with which we create and the product of that creation are one and the same, participation could be said to be the meta-medium of such works. The product of a work then is not a built form or space but the actual experience and engagement that occurs between art and audience, building and user.



Figure 1. Dissolving Machines participants creating sound pieces in the installation



Figure 2. Dissolving Machines standing piece

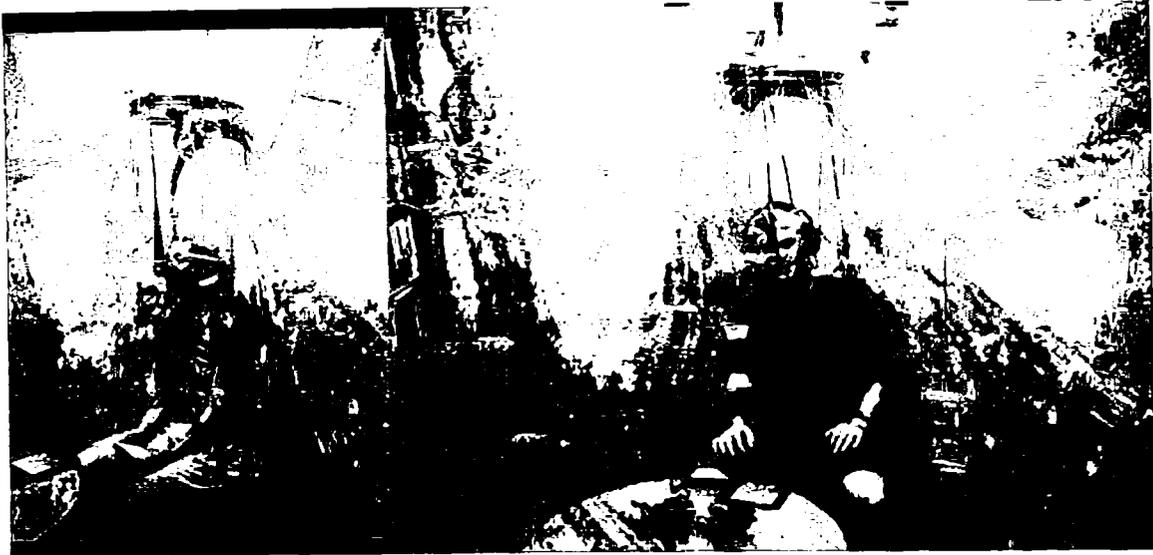


Figure 3. Dissolving Machines participants creating soundscapes

Image credit: All images D.S. Nicholas

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp 1887-*, (New York: Time incorporated, 1966), 162-163.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press Paperback Edition, 1981), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 279-280.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Block Friedman, *Creation in Space: Fundamentals of Architecture*, (Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1989), 37.

<sup>5</sup> De Carlo, Giancarlo, *An Architecture of Participation* in "Re-Reading Perspecta: Perspecta 17" ed. Robert A.M. Stern, Alan Plattus, Peggy Beamer, Paul Lytle (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004) pp. 396-397.

<sup>6</sup> Crow, Thomas, *Gordon Matta Clark* in "Gordon Matta Clark" ed. Corinne Diserens (London: Phaidon, 2003) pp. 11-12

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 12-13

<sup>8</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space," in *Re-Thinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach, pp 139-140, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan, *Dia Beacon* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003), 267-268.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 267-268.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press Paperback Edition, 1981), 275-276.

<sup>12</sup> Media Art Net Website: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/interface/> (accessed October 8, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Media Art Net Website: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/present-continuous-pasts/> (accessed October 8, 2005).