

INTRODUCTION INSTALLATION ART AND EXPERIENCE

What is installation art?

'Installation art' is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as 'theatrical', 'immersive' or 'experiential'. However, the sheer diversity in terms of appearance, content and scope of the work produced today under this name, and the freedom with which the term is used, almost preclude it from having any meaning. The word 'installation' has now expanded to describe any arrangement of objects in any given space, to the point where it can happily be applied even to a conventional display of paintings on a wall.

But there is a fine line between an installation of art and installation art. This ambiguity has been present since the terms first came into use in the 1960s. During this decade, the word 'installation' was employed by art magazines to describe the way in which an exhibition was arranged. The photographic documentation of this arrangement was termed an 'installation shot', and this gave rise to the use of the word for works that used the whole space as 'installation art'. Since then, the distinction between an installation of works of art and 'installation art' proper has become increasingly blurred.

What both terms have in common is a desire to heighten the viewer's awareness of how objects are positioned (installed) in a space, and of our bodily response to this. However, there are also important differences. An installation of art is secondary in importance to the individual works it contains, while in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity. Installation art creates a situation into which the viewer physically enters, and insists that you regard this as a singular totality.

Installation art therefore differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art.

This idea is not new: at the start of her book *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (1999), Julie Reiss highlights several recurrent characteristics that persist in attempts to define installation, one of which is that 'the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work'. This point remains undeveloped in her book. Yet if, as Reiss goes on to remark, spectator participation 'is so integral to Installation art that without having the experience of being in the piece, analysis of Installation art is difficult', then the following questions are immediately raised: who is the spectator of installation art? What kind of 'participation' does he or she have in the work? Why is installation art pains to emphasise first-hand 'experience', and what kinds of 'experience' does it offer? These are the kinds of questions that this book seeks to answer, and as such it is



as much a theory of installation art – of how and why it exists – as it is a history. Besides, installation art already possesses an increasingly canonical history: Western in its bias and spanning the twentieth century, this history invariably begins with El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, goes on to discuss Environments and Happenings of the late 1950s, nods in deference to Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, and finally argues for the rise of installation art proper in the 1970s and 1980s. The story conventionally ends with its apotheosis as the institutionally approved art form par excellence of the 1990s, best seen in the spectacular installations that fill large museums such as the Guggenheim in New York and the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

While this chronological approach accurately reflects different moments in installation art's development, it also forces similarities between disparate and unrelated works, and does little to clarify what we actually mean by 'installation art'. One reason for this is that installation art does not enjoy a straightforward historical development. Its influences have been diverse: architecture, cinema, performance art, sculpture, theatre, set design, curating, Land art and painting have all impacted upon it at different moments. Rather than there being one history, there seem to be several parallel ones, each enacting a particular repertoire of concerns. This multiple history is manifested today in the sheer diversity of work being produced under the name of installation art, in which any number of these influences can be simultaneously apparent. Some installations plunge you into a fictional world – like a film or theatre set – while others offer little visual stimuli, a bare minimum of perceptual cues to be sensed. Some installations are geared towards heightening your awareness of particular senses (touch or smell) while others seem to steal your sense of self-presence, refracting your image into an infinity of mirror reflections or plunging you into darkness. Others discourage you from contemplation and insist that you *act* – write something down, have a drink, or talk to other people. These different types of viewing experience indicate that a different approach to the history of installation art is necessary: one that focuses not on theme or materials, but on the viewer's *experience*. This book is therefore structured around a presentation of four – though there are potentially many more – ways of approaching the history of installation art.

The viewer

Like 'installation art', 'experience' is a contested term that has received many different interpretations at the hands of many different philosophers. Yet every theory of experience points to a more fundamental idea: the human being who constitutes the subject of that experience. The chapters in this book are organised around four modalities of experience that installation art structures for the viewer – each of which implies a different model of the *subject*, and each of which results in a distinctive type of work. These are not abstract ideas remote from the context in which the art was produced, but are rather, as will be argued, integral both to



the conceptualisation of installation art as a mode of artistic practice in the late 1960s, and to its critical reception. They should be considered as four torches with which to cast light on the history of installation art, each one bringing different types of work to the fore.

Chapter One is organised around a model of the subject as psychological, or more accurately, psychoanalytical. Sigmund Freud's writings were fundamental to Surrealism, and the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition is paradigmatic for the type of installation art discussed in this chapter – work that plunges the viewer into a psychologically absorptive, dream-like environment. Chapter Two takes as its starting point the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; the English translation of his book *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) was crucial to the theorisation of Minimalist sculpture by artists and critics in the 1960s, and to their understanding of the viewer's heightened bodily experience of this work. This second type of installation art is therefore organised around a phenomenological model of the viewing subject. Chapter Three turns back to Freud, specifically to his theory of the death drive put forward in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), and to revisitations of this text in the 1960s and 1970s by Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. The type of installation art discussed in this chapter therefore revolves around these different returns to late Freud and his idea of libidinal withdrawal and subjective disintegration. Finally, Chapter Four looks at a type of installation art that posits the activated viewer of installation art as a political subject, examining the different ways in which poststructuralist critiques of democracy – such as that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – have affected installation art's conception of the viewer.

The argument, then, is that installation art presupposes a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it, and that it is possible to categorise works of installation by the type of experience that they structure for the viewer. Of course, it is possible to say that all art presumes a subject – insofar as it is *made* by a subject (the artist) and is *received* by a subject (the viewer). In the case of traditional painting and sculpture, however, each element of this three-way communication (artist – work of art – viewer) is relatively discrete. By contrast, installation art from its inception in the 1960s sought to break radically with this paradigm: instead of making a self-contained object, artists began to work in specific locations, where the entire space was treated as a single situation into which the viewer enters. The work of art was then dismantled and often destroyed as soon as this period of exhibition was over, and this ephemeral, site-responsive agenda further insists on the viewer's first-hand experience.

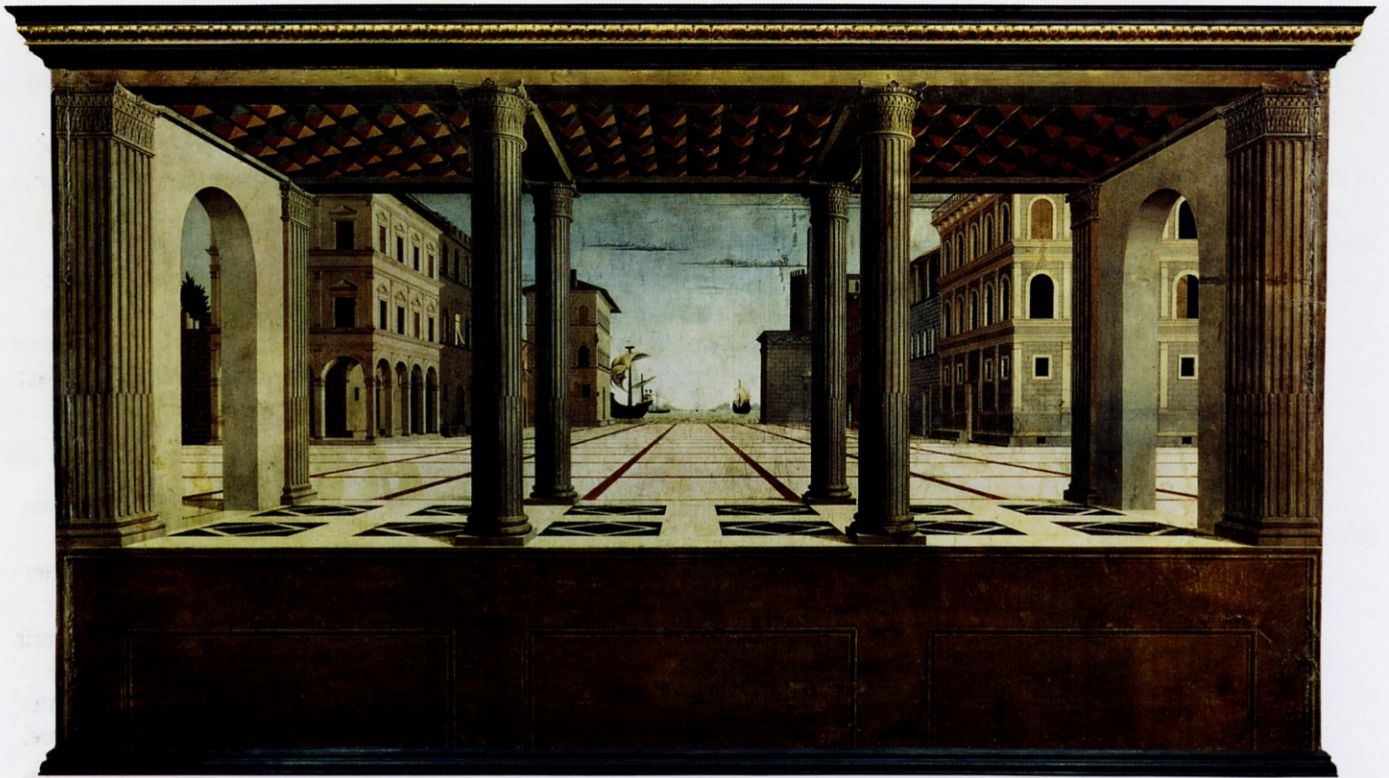
The way in which installation art structures such a particular and direct relationship with the viewer is reflected in the process of writing about such work. It becomes apparent that it is difficult to discuss pieces that one has not experienced first-hand: in most cases, you had to be there. This problem has substantially affected the selection of examples included in this book, which are

a combination of those that I have experienced first-hand and those works that have become the focus of particularly strong or interesting observations from others about the experience of viewing them. The inevitably subjective streak in all these accounts once more asserts the fact that works of installation art are directed at and demand the presence of the viewer.' This point is further reinforced by the problem of how to illustrate installations photographically. Visualisation of a work as a three-dimensional space is difficult via a two-dimensional image, and the need to be physically *inside* an installation renders photographic documentation even less satisfactory than when it is used to reproduce painting and sculpture. It is worth bearing in mind that many artists turned to installation art precisely through the desire to expand visual experience beyond the two-dimensional, and to provide a more vivid alternative to it.

Activation and decentring

There is one more argument that this book presents: that the history of installation art's relationship to the viewer is underpinned by two ideas. The first of these is the idea of 'activating' the viewing subject, and the second is that of 'decentring'. Because viewers are addressed directly by every work of installation art – by sheer virtue of the fact that these pieces are large enough for us to enter them – our experience is markedly different from that of traditional painting and sculpture. Instead of *representing* texture, space, light and so on, installation art *presents* these elements directly for us to experience. This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer must walk into and around the work), and on a heightened awareness of other visitors who become part of the piece. Many artists and critics have argued that this need to move around and through the work in order to experience it *activates* the viewer, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached). This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory, since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world. A transitive relationship therefore comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena.

The idea of the 'decentred subject' runs concurrently with this. The late 1960s witnessed a growth of critical writing on perspective, much of which inflected early twentieth-century perspective theories with the idea of a panoptic or masculine 'gaze'. In *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924), the art historian Erwin Panofsky argued that Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical 'world' depicted in the painting; the line of perspective, with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, was connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it. A hierarchical relationship was understood to exist between the centred viewer and the 'world' of the painting spread before him. Panofsky therefore equated Renaissance perspective with the rational and self-reflexive Cartesian subject ('I think therefore I am').



Francesco di Giorgio

Martini

Architectural View

c.1490–1500

Gemäldegalerie,
Staatliche Museen zu
Berlin

Artists throughout the twentieth century have sought to disrupt this hierarchical model in various ways. One thinks of a Cubist still life, in which several viewpoints are represented simultaneously, or El Lissitzky's idea of 'Pangeometry' (discussed at the end of Chapter Two). In the 1960s and 1970s the relationship that conventional perspective is said to structure between the work of art and the viewer came increasingly to attract a critical rhetoric of 'possession', 'visual mastery' and 'centring'. That the rise of installation art is simultaneous with the emergence of theories of the subject as decentred is one of the basic assumptions on which this book turns. These theories, which proliferate in the 1970s and are broadly describable as poststructuralist, seek to provide an alternative to the idea of the viewer that is implicit in Renaissance perspective: that is, instead of a rational, centred, coherent humanist subject, poststructuralist theory argues that each person is intrinsically dislocated and divided, at odds with him or herself.² In short, it states that the correct way in which to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and *decentred* – by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures. This discourse of decentring has had particular influence on the writing of art critics sympathetic to feminist and postcolonial theory, who argue that fantasies of 'centring' perpetuated by dominant ideology are masculinist, racist and conservative; this is because there is no one 'right' way of looking at the world, nor any privileged place from which such judgements can be made.³ As a consequence, installation art's multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the Renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work.

With such theories in mind, the historical and geographical scope of this book should be addressed. Despite the vast number of installations produced in the last forty years, the majority of the examples featured here date from 1965 to 1975, the decade in which installation art comes of age. This is because it is at this time that the main theoretical impulses behind installation art come into focus: ideas of heightened immediacy, of the decentred subject (Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida), and of activated spectatorship as political in implication. This decade also witnessed the reconstruction of proto-installations by El Lissitzky, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Kurt Schwitters, and some of these modernist precursors are discussed in order to stress the fact that many of the motivations behind installation art are not uniquely the preserve of postmodernism but are part of a historical trajectory spanning the twentieth century.

This is also why this study's field of investigation stays more or less within Western horizons, despite the fact that installation art is now a global phenomenon – witnessed in the contribution of non-Western artists to biennials worldwide. In order to keep this book focused on one aspect of installation, its viewing subject, there is no discussion of the work of those non-western artists whose desire to immerse or activate the viewer springs from different traditions.

THE DREAM SCENE

1

'Under the coal sacks, through the aroma of roast coffee, amongst the beds and the reeds, the record-player could make you hear the noise of panting express trains, proposing adventures on the platforms of main-line departures in the station of dream and imagination ...' Georges Hugnet¹

The Total Installation

In *The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* 1985, the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov (b.1933) stages a narrative scene for the viewer to unravel. You enter a sparsely decorated hallway with coats and a hat hanging up on one wall; on another wall is a shelf, upon which a number of framed documents rest. These comprise three reports of an incident – a man flying into space from his apartment – that were ostensibly given to the police by the three men who shared the flat with the escapee. Looking around the hallway, you notice an incompetently boarded-up doorway; peeping through the cracks you see a small cluttered bedroom, strewn with posters, diagrams and debris, a home-made catapult with a seat, and a hole in the ceiling. In one corner of the bedroom is a maquette of the neighbourhood, featuring a thin silver wire soaring out of one of the rooftops. Kabakov refers to this type of work as a 'total installation' because it presents an immersive scene into which the viewer enters:

The main actor in the total installation, the main centre toward which everything is addressed, for which everything is intended, is the viewer ... the whole installation is oriented only toward his perception, and any point of the installation, any of its structures is oriented only toward the impression it should make on the viewer, only his reaction is anticipated.²

It is significant that Kabakov refers to the viewer as an 'actor', since his work is frequently described as 'theatrical', by which it is meant that it resembles a theatre or film set. Kabakov himself often compares his work to theatre: the installation artist, he says, is the 'director' of 'a well-structured dramatic play', and all the elements of the room have a 'plot' function: lighting, for example, like the use of sound and reading matter, plays a vital role in enticing the viewer from one part of the space to the next.

Since leaving Russia in the late 1980s, Kabakov has become one of the most successful installation artists working today and his writings are amongst the most fully formulated of the attempts made by artists to theorise installation art. However, the idea of the 'total installation' offers a very particular model of viewing experience – one that not only physically immerses the viewer in a three-dimensional space, but which is *psychologically* absorptive too. Kabakov often describes the effect of the 'total installation' as one of 'engulfment': we are not just surrounded by a physical scenario but are 'submerged' by the work; we 'dive' into it, and are 'engrossed' – as when reading a book, watching a film, or dreaming. This book hopes to show that cinema, theatre, reading and dreaming all offer quite distinct experiences, but what they do share with installation art is a quality

Ilya Kabakov
*The Man Who Flew into
Space from his
Apartment* 1985
Collection: Centre
Georges Pompidou,
Paris



of psychological absorption. The text will therefore focus on one specific mode that Kabakov cites – dreaming – and will argue that this provides the closest analogy to our experience of one particular type of installation art.

The Dream Scene

Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) offers a psychoanalytic definition of what dreams are and how we should interpret them. For Freud, the experience of a dream has three main characteristics. The first is that it is primarily visual ('dreams think essentially in images'), although it may include auditory fragments, and presents itself with a sensory vividness more akin to conscious perception than to memory ('dreams construct a *situation*' that 'we appear not to *think* but to *experience*'). The second characteristic of the dream is that it has a composite structure: if taken as a whole, it will seem to be nonsensical, and can only be interpreted when broken down into its constitutive elements, rather like a rebus.³ Most importantly, Freud argues that the dream is not meant to be 'decoded', but analysed through free-association – in other words, allowing meaning to arise through individual affective and verbal connections. The ability of each dream element to be replaced by an associative word or syllable is the dream's third main characteristic.

These three features – the sensory immediacy of conscious perception, a composite structure, and the elucidation of meaning through free-association – precisely correspond to a model of viewing experience found in the 'total installation' as described by Kabakov. We imaginatively project ourselves into an immersive 'scene' that requires creative free-association in order to articulate its meaning; in order to do this, the installation's assemblaged elements are taken one by one and read 'symbolically' – as metonymic parts of a narrative. The appropriateness of the dream as an analogy for this type of installation art is borne out in Kabakov's description of how the 'total installation' operates on the viewer: 'the main motor of the total installation, what it lives by – [is] the cranking up of the wheel of associations, cultural or everyday analogies, personal memories'. In other words, the installation prompts conscious and unconscious associations in the beholder:

Familiar circumstances and the contrived illusion carry the one who is wandering inside the installation away into his personal corridor of memory and evoke from that memory an approaching wave of associations which until this point had slept peacefully in its depths. The installation has merely bumped, awakened, touched his 'depths', this 'deep memory', and the recollections rushed up out of these depths, seizing the consciousness of the installation viewer from within.

Moreover, this 'wave of associations' is not simply personal, but culturally specific. *The Man Who Flew into Space ...* was originally part of a large installation of seventeen rooms called *Ten Characters* 1988, conceived as a communal apartment complete with toilets and two kitchens, in which each room was

inhabited by a different personality. Representing the characters by the ephemera they had left behind in each space, Kabakov invited us to fantasise about the complex psychological interiority of the apartment's inhabitants: *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (with an enormous collection of valueless objects), *The Talented Artist* (a selection of banal Socialist Realist paintings), *The Composer*, *The Man Who Saved Nikolai Viktorovitch*, and so on. This installation, like much of Kabakov's subsequent work, alludes to the generic, institutional spaces of Soviet life under communism – schools, kitchens, communal apartments – but he hopes that they also represent a category of place that Westerners immediately recognise, and which he believes 'already exist in principle in the past experience of each person'. The viewer therefore encounters these works 'like his own personal, highly familiar past', while the installation as a whole, Kabakov writes, is capable of 'orienting a person inside of itself, appealing to his internal centre, to his cultural and historical memory'.

In *On The Total Installation*, Kabakov presents many arguments about installation art, several of which are worth reiterating since they epitomise the general tenor of opinion since the 1960s. He argues that installation is the latest, dominant trend in a succession of artistic forms (which have included the fresco, the icon and the painting) that all serve as 'models of the world'. Indeed, installations should appear to the viewer, he says, as 'a kaleidoscope of innumerable "paintings"'. Here we encounter two ideas that frequently recur in texts on this type of installation art: firstly, that the immersive qualities of the 'dream scene' installation are in some way related to the character of absorptive painting, and secondly, that traditional perspective is overturned by installation art's provision of plural vistas.⁴ For Kabakov, what confirms the place of installation in this trajectory is its status as a non-commodifiable object. When the fresco first appeared, it was an 'immaterial' model of its world. As it waned, the fresco (like the icon and the painting) became increasingly 'material' and 'real', that is, it became a commercialised and commodified product. Kabakov claims that this is also characteristic of installation art:

It is just as absolutely immaterial, impractical in our practical time and its entire existence serves as a refutation of the principle of profitability ... the installation cannot be repeated without the author; how to put it together will simply be incomprehensible. It is virtually impossible to exhibit an installation permanently because of the lack of sufficient space in museums. [...] The installation encounters the firm hostility of collectors who don't have the place to house it and conditions do not exist for keeping it in reserve. It is impossible to repeat or reconstruct the installation in another place, as a rule it is 'tied', intended only for a specific dwelling. It is impossible to reproduce, recreate, a photo gives virtually no impression of it at all.

Despite the fact that Kabakov's own installations are successfully collected, toured, stored and photographed around the world, these are – as we shall see – well-rehearsed arguments about installation art: its scale and site-specificity

Overleaf:
Ilya Kabakov
*The Man Who Flew
into Space from
his Apartment* 1985
Collection: Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris

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РЕШЕНИЯ XXVI СЪЕЗДА КПСС ВЫПОЛНИ

КРЕПИ ОРГАНИЗМ ДИСЦИПЛИНУ НА СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВЕ

СТРАНИ - СТАРТЫ НАПЕЖИ, СТРА - ОЛИМПИСКИЕ СТАРТЫ!

ВЫПОЛНИ РЕШЕНИЙ АПРЕЛЬСКОГО (1984 г.) ПЛЕНУМА ЦК КПСС - ДЕЛО ПАРТИИ, ДЕЛО

Деловая, Сила Борьбы за особую великую рабочую массу - труд и Россия стал осуществлением социализма социализма в рабочем движении.

ПЛА - ПО ТРУДУ



International Surrealist
Exhibition
Galerie des Beaux-Arts,
Paris, Jan–Feb 1938

circumvent the market, while its immersiveness resists reproduction as a two-dimensional image, thereby placing new emphasis on the viewer's presence within the space.

The International Surrealist Exhibition

Many of Kabakov's installations – particularly those that mimic museums – encroach upon the role of the curator, almost to the point of usurping his or her position altogether. Today it is commonplace to observe that the hanging of an exhibition – the sequence of works on the wall, the lighting and layout of the rooms – determines our perception of the art on display, but this heightened awareness is a relatively recent development. For the early twentieth-century avant-garde, the exhibition hang was perceived as a way in which to supplement the radical polemics of their artistic practice and to announce their distance from current aesthetic conventions. The Surrealist exhibition displays in Paris in 1938, 1947 and 1959, and in New York in 1942, are some of the best examples of this tendency, which has been referred to as an 'ideological hang'.⁵ In recent years, the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition has become an oft-cited precursor of installation art, celebrated less for the individual paintings and sculptures it brought together than for its innovative approach to exhibiting them. The exhibition is often referred to as 'Duchamp's coal sacks', but these comprised just one element of the installation. Contributions by Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, Georges Hugnet and Benjamin Peret played an equally important role. Under the direction of Marcel Duchamp as overall producer (*générateur-arbitre*), the installation's complex realisation was an unquestionably collaborative venture.

Held in the Galerie des Beaux-Arts, one of the smartest galleries in Paris, the 1938 exhibition sought to transform the grandiose decor of this prestigious venue, which was out of keeping with the Surrealist aesthetic. Georges Hugnet reports how the desire to conceal the gallery's interior swiftly became a priority: the red carpets and period furniture were removed, while bright daylight (entering via skylights) was obscured with 1,200 dirty coal sacks – filled with newspaper to give the appearance of volume – hanging from the ceiling. Dead leaves and bits of cork were strewn on the floor, and a Louis XV-style bed with ruffled linen was positioned in each of the four corners. Next to one of the beds was a pond, made by Salvador Dalí, complete with water lilies and surrounded by reeds, moss, rosebushes and ferns. The central room of the exhibition made a direct appeal to the viewer's senses: the poet Benjamin Peret installed a coffee-roasting machine, which 'gave the whole room a marvellous smell', while a disquieting recorded soundtrack of hysterical inmates at an insane asylum permeated the gallery, and, as Man Ray reports, 'cut short any desire on the part of visitors to laugh and joke'.⁶ A brazier in the middle of the space was surrounded by the only clear area in the show, while the works themselves were crammed onto revolving doors, pedestals and what walls were still available around the edge of this oneiric environment.



*International Surrealist
Exhibition
Galerie des Beaux-Arts,
Paris, Jan-Feb 1938*

For the opening night, the exhibition was held in darkness. Man Ray had devised a way in which to illuminate the exhibition with stage lights concealed behind a panel, which were to have provided a dramatic flood of light onto the paintings as the viewer approached the work.⁷ However, this was not ready in time for the opening – much to the chagrin of the artists, whose works were now plunged into darkness. Guests to the vernissage were therefore issued with Mazda flashlights to negotiate their path around the exhibition.⁸ Given the Surrealist interest in dreams and the unconscious, this nocturnal mode of encounter was an entirely fitting solution, since it evoked Freud's comparison of psychoanalysis to archaeology: viewers were cast into the role of excavator, uncovering the works one by one as if retrieving for analytic illumination the dark and murky contents of each artist's unconscious psyche.

Unlike the components of Kabakov's installations, the coal sacks, pond, beds and brazier of the 1938 installation were not culturally recognised symbols for anything in particular; their existence and juxtaposition served simply to spark new trains of thought in the visitor's mind. Indeed, using a railway metaphor, Georges Hugnet described the exhibition as 'a station for the imagination and the dream', a platform of departure for the visitor's unconscious free association.⁹ The suspended coal sacks, he wrote, were like a 'steamroller' that 'caused, in the ramparts of our senses, a breach so large that the besieged citadel was run over with the heroic charge of our dreams, desires, and needs'. Hugnet's language evokes a mode of experience redolent of psychically charged impact, both disturbing and pleasurable, which André Breton described as 'convulsive beauty': a fleeting experience of 'extraordinary happiness and anxiety, a mixture of panic, joy and terror' in the face of an apparently harmless object or incident – but which could nonetheless prove revelatory for the subject once analysed.¹⁰ This disturbing co-existence of desire and anxiety was considered by many of the Surrealist artists to hold revolutionary potential, since it threatened the thin veneer of bourgeois manners and social propriety. The 'dream scene' of the 1938 Surrealist Exhibition can be seen as a similar attempt to present the viewer with a psychologically charged encounter in order to rupture and destabilise conventional patterns of thought. The rumpled beds in each corner of the gallery confirmed this equation between the exhibition's *mise-en-scène* and the unpredictable and irrational imagery of dreams.

Environments and Happenings

Lewis Kachur has noted that it makes sense 'to see Surrealism's public exhibition spheres as actualisations of the spaces within the "painted dream", Dalí–Magritte wing of the group', in other words, as literal manifestations of the worlds depicted in their paintings.¹¹ Duchamp's *Mile of String* installation for the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* in New York, 1942, took a more abstract and gestural approach, criss-crossing the space with a mile-long string so as to impede clear

viewing of the paintings on display. His irreverent gesture prefigured a more sustained engagement with abstraction that was to come with the work of Allan Kaprow (b.1927), prompted by the death of Jackson Pollock in 1956.

Kaprow maintained that Pollock's contribution to art was significant for three reasons. Firstly, his all-over paintings – made on the floor and worked on from every angle – spurned traditional composition, ignoring the frame in favour of 'a continuum going in all directions simultaneously'. Secondly, Pollock's action-painting was performative: he worked 'in' the painting, and this process was a 'dance of dripping ... bordering on ritual itself'. Thirdly, the space of the artist, the viewer and the outer world became interchangeable: Pollock's method of painting was choreographic, and the viewers themselves must feel the physical impact of his markings, 'allowing them to entangle and assault us'.¹² In form, technique and reception, then, Pollock's work offered a challenge to the generation that followed.

Although wall-sized murals might have been the most obvious way to respond to this challenge, Kaprow rejected this solution since it was both two-dimensional and gallery bound. It is worth remembering that at this time – the late 1950s – Abstract Expressionist painting was commanding unprecedentedly high prices for living artists, and generating a boom in New York's commercial art galleries. It was precisely this type of market-oriented space that Kaprow wished to negate when he began making immersive environments using second-hand materials and found objects. For him, commercial galleries were 'stillborn' and sterile, spaces for looking but not touching – he disparaged the 'lovely lighting, fawn grey rugs, cocktails, polite conversation' that took place there and instead wished to make environments that were vividly 'organic', 'fertile', and even 'dirty'.¹³ Downtown loft spaces such as the Reuben Gallery, the Hansa Gallery and the Judson Gallery (in the basement of the progressive Judson Church) became the preferred choice of venue for artists like Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and Kaprow who chose to make immersive 'environments'. The move towards installation art and the rejection of conventional art galleries were therefore intimately connected.

An important part of Kaprow's agenda in turning to environmental installations was a desire for immediacy. Instead of *representing* objects through paint on canvas, artists should employ objects in the world *directly*:

[Pollock] left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. *Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movement, people, odours, touch.* Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things.¹⁴

That Kaprow understood the implications of Pollock's work in this way reflects the influence of John Cage, whose composition classes in New York he had



Allan Kaprow
An Apple Shrine
 Judson Gallery, Judson
 Memorial Church,
 New York, Nov–Dec 1961
 Photo: Robert McElroy

Allan Kaprow
Words
 Smolin Gallery,
 New York,
 11–12 Sept 1962
 Photo: Robert McElroy

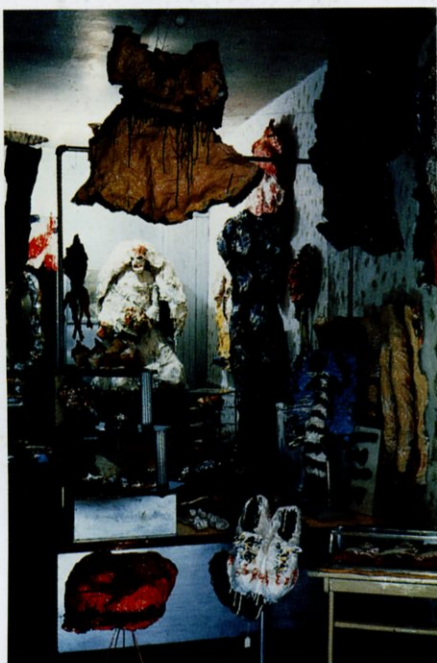
attended during 1957–8. Cage's insistence on a Zen-inspired integration of art and everyday activity contributed to a new understanding of authorial intention and the role of the viewer. In events like *4'33"* of 1952, a silent work for performer and piano in which peripheral noise became the 'performance', the role of contingent phenomena (such as the coughs and shuffles of the audience) received a new significance. It was only a short step from Cage's passive incorporation of context and chance to Kaprow's Environments that aspired to make the viewer an active element of the composition.

Kaprow initially considered this inclusion of the viewer to be merely formal: 'we have different coloured clothing; can move, feel, speak, and observe others variously; and will constantly change the "meaning" of the work by so doing'.¹⁵ Later, he gave the viewer 'occupations like moving something, turning switches on – just a few things', which in turn suggested 'a more "scored" responsibility for that visitor' and the fully interactive role of audiences in the Happenings.¹⁶ *Words* 1962 was a 'rearrangeable environment with light and sounds', in which visitors could select words pre-painted on white sheets of paper and hang them around the room to form phrases. Kaprow claimed that he 'wasn't installing anything to be looked at ... but something to be played in, participated in by visitors who then became co-creators'.¹⁷ Both Environments and Happenings insisted on the viewer as an organic part of the overall work.

For Kaprow, this inclusion of the viewer placed a greater responsibility on him/her than had previously been the case. In his eyes, the activation of viewers had a moral imperative: the Environments and Happenings were not just another artistic style, but 'a human stand of great urgency, whose professional status as art is less a criterion than their certainty as an ultimate existential commitment'.¹⁸ As Jeff Kelley has argued, Kaprow's views were informed by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, whose *Art as Experience* (1934) he had read closely and annotated as a student.¹⁹ Dewey maintained that we can only develop as human beings if we actively inquire into and interact with our environment. Being thrust into new circumstances means having to reorganise our repertoire of responses accordingly, and this in turn enlarges our capacity for 'experience', defined by Dewey as 'heightened vitality ... the complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events'.²⁰ When Kaprow plunged visitors into a 'dirty' and 'rough' environment, filling them with 'tense excitement' and 'risk and fear', it was in order to provide visceral irruptions into everyday consciousness for the sake of its growth.²¹ Artwork that was politely framed, argued Kaprow, 'stood for experience rather than *acting directly upon it*'.²²

Thus Kaprow did not consider a conventional art gallery a suitable location for the transformative potential of aesthetic experience: there, the viewing of art was too inhibited by ingrained responses. Moreover, its pristine white spaces were synonymous with the eternal and the canonical – the precise opposite of Kaprow's insistence on flux, change and disorder. It is clear that the nervous

Claes Oldenburg
The Store
107 East 2nd Street,
New York, 1961
Photo: Robert McElroy



excitement he wished to solicit from the viewer was more psychological than existential: the objects from which the Environments were made were not random but chosen to 'represent a current class of things: memoirs, objects of everyday usage, industrial waste, and so forth'.²³ As a result, the Environments had 'a high degree of associational meaning' and were 'intended to stir the observer on an unconscious, alogical level'.²⁴ Bearing indexical traces of previous usage, the assemblaged materials were intended to prompt reverie in the viewer. In *An Apple Shrine* 1960, the visitor moved through maze-like narrow passages of board and wire, choked with tar paper, newspaper and rags, to a tranquil central clearing – described by one reviewer as having 'the stillness ... of a ghost town evacuated at the moment before an avalanche' – where apples were suspended from a tray and signs read 'Apples, apples, apples'.²⁵ The photographic documentation of this work shows how well viewers became collaged into it, tentatively exploring its passages as they would a decrepit and abandoned old house.

Kaprow's search for the shock impact of 'unheard-of happenings and events ... sensed in dreams and horrible accidents' therefore seems to offer many similarities to Surrealist art, with its aim to undercut the ego's defences and trigger unconscious desires and anxieties.²⁶ But the Surrealist encounter, as described by Breton, was essentially a missed encounter, whose immediacy temporarily steals our sense of self-presence.²⁷ By contrast, the shock of the dirty and new and unexpected in Kaprow's Environments sought to *confirm* the viewer's sense of self-presence: he tells us that 'all the time you're *there*, getting into the act'.²⁸ This 'authentic' revelation of the subject through the immediacy of first-hand experience was to become a recurrent theme in the rise of installation art in the 1960s.

Realism in the 1960s

Kaprow's desire to use actual objects in the world rather than represent them is, unsurprisingly, also found in the work of his contemporaries. At the end of 1961, Claes Oldenburg (b.1929) began renting a shop at 107 East 2nd Street, which he named The Ray Gun Mfg. Co. The back room functioned as a studio, while the front room, 'The Store', was used to display and sell his sculptures. Here, he presented small-scale works made of plaster-soaked muslin painted with trickled enamel paint. The walls, along with every other surface of the room, were also covered in paint – forming a 'wallpaper' of blobby green stripes patterned with leaves that united the space and the work.

Three years later, the Bianchini Gallery held *The American Supermarket*, an exhibition devised by the dealer Paul Bianchini and his business partner Ben Birillo as a way to display and sell the work of numerous Pop artists, including Andy Warhol, Robert Watts and Jasper Johns. Real cans of Campbell's soup were stacked next to Warhol's screenprint *Campbell's Soup Cans* 1962, and, like Oldenburg's *The Store*, drew attention to the similarities between shopping for



Various
The American Supermarket 1964
 reconstructed in,
Shopping, Schirn
 Kunsthalle, Frankfurt,
 Sept 2001–Dec 2002

food and shopping for art. Cécile Whiting has shown how the installation played off two modes of viewer engagement: the connoisseurial detachment of aesthetic judgement and the hands-on 'absorbed shopper' involved in everyday chores. The latter mode, she notes, was at the time particularly associated with female consumers whose relationship to commodities was regarded as more susceptible to 'unconscious or hidden ideas, associations and attitudes'.²⁹

These installations of the early 1960s structure an experience for the viewer that is in close dialogue with the 'art' of window-dressing, strategic shop layout, and the increasingly prevalent concept of a 'retail experience'. Then, as now, department stores aimed to entice viewers into the shop by encouraging fantasy identification with the goods on display in the windows. While this structure was to a degree present in *The Store*, whose objects were visible through a large window from the street, it became an integral part of Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* of 1963. This showroom-style bedroom is presented as a tableau, cordoned off and inaccessible to the viewer.³⁰

For Lucas Samaras (b.1936), the fact that the *Bedroom Ensemble* could not be entered was its downfall. He found unsatisfactory the way in which Oldenburg – like Ed Kienholz and George Segal – failed to accommodate the viewer in his work. Instead he wished to create a wholly immersive environment in which the space existed for the viewer to activate as an engaged and absorbed participant. *Room* 1964 comprised a reconstruction of the artist's bedroom, installed in the Green Gallery, New York. Unlike the tableaux of Kienholz and Segal, in which figures were placed in particular scenarios, the objects in *Room* were not 'glued down' and relationships between the objects were 'fluid'.³¹ Samaras believed strongly that installations should not illustrate a situation, but should be geared towards the visitor's first-hand, real experience. Discussing his *Room* in the context of Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* and of related tableaux by his former tutor Segal, he commented that 'none of them was really concerned with a complete environment, where you could open the door, walk in, and be in a complete art work'.³²

Room therefore addressed itself directly to the viewer, whose experience was not that of detached onlooker but the focus of the work. Samaras saw the piece as an 'aggressive' riposte to the dealer Sidney Janis, who had exhibited Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* under the label of 'New Realism' earlier that year; for Samaras, *Room* was authentically 'real in that it has real things and you can walk in, poke around, sit down and make love'.³³ The room was cluttered with his personal ephemera – clothes, underwear, art works in progress, books, writing, paper bags – and a radio was left playing, suggesting that the room's occupant might return at any minute. Unlike the tableaux of Kienholz and Segal, Samaras 'turned the spectator into an accomplice, a Peeping Tom spying on him in his absence ... Though the spectator had been invited to spy, the menace of his own surreptitious forbidden curiosity replaced physical menace'.³⁴



George Segal
The Diner 1964–6
 Collection: Walker Art
 Center, Minneapolis

The difference between the work of Samaras and that of Kienholz and Segal might therefore be understood not just as the difference between installations and tableaux, but also between dreaming and fantasy. The psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis have explained that in the dream (or daydream) 'the scenario is basically in the first person ... the subject lives out his reverie': this would be analogous to installation art of the type presented by Samaras, in which the viewer is protagonist.³⁵ Fantasy, by contrast, is characterised by a scene in which we identify with a figure rather than acting this role ourselves: the work of Kienholz and Segal would typify this mode, since their sculpted figures are immersed and absorbed on our behalf, and prevent us from becoming the psychological centre of the work.

Paul Thek's processions

Installations like Samaras's *Room* are conspicuously absent from the rest of US art production during the 1960s, largely due to the dominance of Minimalism on both East and West coasts. One notable exception is the work of Paul Thek (1933–88) who sought to combine the viewer's movement in and through the installation with a symbolic iconography. Referring to his installations as 'processions', Thek alluded both to the ritualistic and social quality of the viewer's movement through the work, and to the fact that each piece was constantly 'in process'. His large-scale assemblaged scenes, made of found (and usually organic) materials, also incorporated sound, music and theatrical lighting, and were reworked for each venue where they were shown.

Thek is best known for his irreverent response to Minimalism in his first installation *The Tomb* 1966–7, later renamed *Death of a Hippie*. The work comprised an 8½ foot high pink-lit ziggurat (a form much used by Robert Smithson) into which the viewer could enter. Inside this three-tiered pyramid was a beeswax model of Thek's body as a corpse, surrounded by pink goblets, a funerary bowl, private letters and photographs. Viewers filed into the construction like mourners and could sit on floor cushions around the 'body'. In the rest of the gallery were wax body parts, 'laid out on the floor in their cases and roped off with red cord', placed to look 'like finds from a tomb or an archaeological site'.³⁶ The work encouraged the viewers to activate and interpret the scene by adopting the roles of mourner and archaeologist.³⁷

Later installations recycled the hippie figure, as well as other sculptures (such as *Fishman* 1968) in more elaborate scenes. These installations, made from 1968 onwards, look incredibly contemporary in their casual distribution of materials around the gallery space. In this year Thek relocated his practice to Europe, touring from venue to venue with The Artist's Co-op, a collective with whom he collaborated to produce each exhibition. This nomadic and communal approach to making art was reflected in Thek's conception of how the work as a whole was to be experienced: the viewer's passage through the installation



Lucas Samaras
Room or Room no. 1,
installation at Green
Gallery, New York, 1964



Paul Thek
*Pyramid/A Work in
Progress*
Moderna Museet,
Stockholm, 1971

was compared to communion, and wherever possible, Thek organised his exhibitions to coincide with religious festivals. He felt strongly that the public understood more clearly 'the "liturgical" nature of the art' during a holiday period ('Christmas is my favourite').³⁸ The ritualistic structure of his installations reflected his Catholicism and his desire to 'humanise' the gallery environment by 'turning down the lights, giving people some chairs to sit on, and not having the art restricted in any way'.³⁹ Visitors to his installations of the 1970s followed paths through the works that were softly lit, often by candles, and that contained a variety of opportunities to rest in contemplation.

As might be imagined, Thek was influenced by contact with the work of Joseph Beuys (1921–86), which he encountered for the first time in 1968. Beuys was yet to develop the environmental approach to displaying his work seen in the *Beuys Block* in Darmstadt in 1970, but Thek was clearly inspired by his passion for a democratic 'social sculpture', which had clear parallels with his own inclusive and collective approach to the production and reception of art. Moreover, just as Beuys used fat and felt as allusions to his personal mythology, Thek developed his own symbolic iconography in which trees, boats, fish, stags, pyramids and a stuffed hare were recurrent elements. Although such symbolism remained obscure to the uninitiated viewer, the recycled materials were highly evocative and open enough to permit personal interpretation. Jung's 'collective unconscious', which Thek related to his own experience of Christianity, was an important influence in this regard, as was the group's experience of psychedelic drugs.

Significantly, it was not just the individual objects that Thek considered to be symbolic, but also their layout: a corridor was a 'place of concentrated energy, a womb passage, the Way of the Cross'; a fountain was 'the sacristy'; trees were 'growing life, visible age'; sand was 'water that you can walk on'.⁴⁰ *Pyramid/A Work in Progress* 1971, at the Moderna Museet Stockholm, was the first piece in which the viewer's path through the installation was choreographed step by step:

One had to come through a twisting, almost-pink newspaper tunnel, and walk up some steps onto a wharf which is in a truncated pyramid. On the inside are blue newspaper walls held up by trees from which I had not stripped the branches or leaves so it feels like a forest. So you are in a forest in a pyramid at the end of a tunnel and it is painted blue like the sea and lit by candles. And then the wharf is set as a dining room. There's some bread on the table and some wine and newspaper clippings and books and prayers. In a corner is a little light and a chair and a flute. There is also a piano and a bathtub with oars. And then you leave the pyramid and there's a large room to wander through with all sorts of things and it's all lit by candles and filled with waves of sand. And at the very end, just before you exit, is the Hippie as a Viking chieftain in a kind of boat.⁴¹

Robert Pincus-Witten remarked of Thek's meticulously visualised *Tomb* in 1967 that 'the central experience of the spectator is that of intrusion', but these later installations – more allusive and enigmatic in their imagery – sought to create

a gentle atmosphere of comfort and beauty.⁴² The loose and collective nature of the work was carried through from manufacture to reception, so that the experience of peacefulness he sought to elicit – ‘so beautiful that you’re shattered when you leave’ – was also emphatically communal.⁴³

Institutional critique

Richard Flood has argued that Thek’s installations were defined by the fact that he was an American whose country was fighting a war in Vietnam: his comforting, ‘meditative environments’, Flood writes, opposed ‘the awfulness that was unfolding in South East Asia’.⁴⁴ In Europe and the US, mounting hostility towards the conflict in Vietnam, together with the left-wing student protests of 1968 and the rise of feminism, were proving to be decisive events for many artists. The younger generation came to acknowledge that politically disengaged art could be seen as complicit with the status quo, and argued that any art object that gratified the market implicitly supported a conservative ideology in which capitalism dovetailed with patriarchy, an imperialist foreign policy, racism and a host of other social ills.

The link between museum institutions and social inequality was made explicit in the works of Hans Haacke (b.1936), whose *Manet-PROJEKT 74* 1974 exposed the links between museum patrons, trustees, politics and business. Many artists began to question their role within the museum system, and consciously avoided the production of discrete, portable objects on which the market depended. Assuming responsibility for the dissemination and reception of their art, increasing numbers of artists turned to the issues of medium and distribution as a way in which to make a ‘political’ statement without subjecting the work to explicit propaganda on the level of content. Context became a crucial consideration in addressing art’s relationship to the market and museum infrastructure, and installation art was but one of many forms that emerged as a result.⁴⁵ Married to the physical architecture of a given space for a specific duration, works of installation art were dependent on the context in which they were shown and were therefore difficult – if not impossible – to sell. Moreover, context-dependency redirected meaning away from the individual author and onto the work’s reception: the specific circumstances in which it was experienced by a particular audience. The active nature of the viewer’s role within such work, and the importance of their first-hand experience, came to be regarded as an empowering alternative to the pacifying effects of mass-media.⁴⁶

The international exhibition Documenta 5, held in Kassel in 1972, reflected this changed political mood, and saw an unprecedented number of contributions taking the form of installation art.⁴⁷ Several of these directly addressed the institutions in which art was shown, and became known as ‘institutional critique’. Vastly differing formal strategies were grouped under this label. From 1965 onwards, for example, the French artist Daniel Buren (b.1938) began



Marcel Broodthaers
Musée d'Art Moderne,
Département des Aigles,
Section des Figures
(Der Adler vom
Oligozän bis Heute)
 Städtische Kunsthalle,
 Düsseldorf, May–July
 1972

placing alternate white and coloured stripes on billboard hoardings and gallery walls, responding to the entire site around a gallery in order to undermine its authority as a privileged venue for art. The Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76), by contrast, assumed directorship of his own (fictional) museum, the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968–72. Broodthaers's *Musée* adopted a 'total installation' approach in order to parody the apparatus by which museums confer value upon objects. It has subsequently become the subject of extensive critical discussion, but its status as an installation is often overlooked, as is its relationship to Broodthaers's Surrealist literary heritage. Like the 1938 Surrealist exhibition, the *Musée* operated as a platform of departure for the imagination, but not in order to unleash an encounter with unconscious desires in the name of revolutionary Marxism; instead it sought to induce a different type of catalysing narrative, one more specifically critical of structures of authority, and of our psychic investments in them.

Broodthaers's *Musée* had numerous sections, each of which alluded to the various roles of a museum, from the historical and exhibiting function of the *Section XVIIIe Siècle*, *Section XIXe Siècle*, and *Section XXe Siècle*, to the administrative, financial and press concerns of the *Section Publicité*, *Section Documentaire*, and *Section Financière*. The largest section, the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis Heute)* 1972, involved the actual loan of over 300 objects – each bearing the image of an eagle – from forty-three collections including the British Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Shown at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, these objects were hung on the walls and displayed in vitrines, but this conventional presentation was complicated

by a trilingual plaque placed beside each object stating that 'this is not a work of art'. Explicitly referencing René Magritte's disruption of language and image ('this is not a pipe'), Broodthaers's plaques sought not only to disturb the viewer's assumption that all objects in a museum were automatically works of art, but also to remind us that it was not the individual object *alone* but the relationships between the objects (including their context) that constituted this work of art. The fact that Broodthaers's *Musée* impersonated a museum within a museum strengthened the work's subversive power. He maintained that this potency lay not so much in the idea of a fraudulent museum, but in the creation of an entire fictitious structure around it that drew attention to the way in which any institutional authority is staged. The official inaugurations, the correspondence with stamped letterheads, the mailing list of art world notables, the donations, the visitors who flocked from abroad, the concerts held in the *Section XIXe Siècle*, the contracted art shippers: all these peripheral supports and the simulacra of bureaucracy were as significant as the *Musée's* individual exhibitions.

Although conventionally framed as Conceptual art – with all its connotations of anti-visual austerity – Broodthaers's *Musée*, like his entire oeuvre, is in fact



Marcel Broodthaers
Musée d'Art Moderne,
Département des Aigles,
Section des Figures
(Der Adler vom
Oligozän bis Heute)
Städtische Kunsthalle,
Düsseldorf, May–July
1972



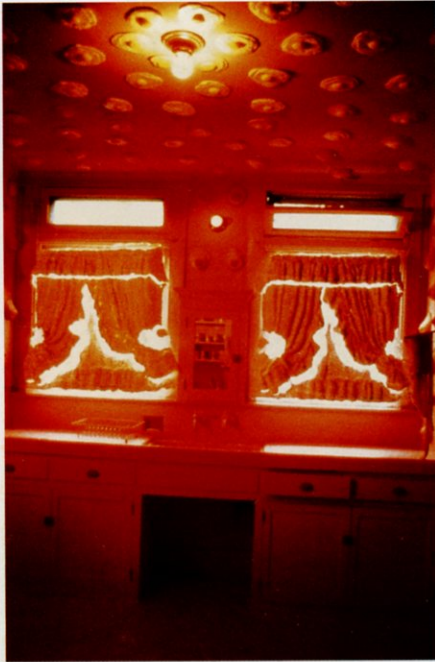
Marcel Broodthaers
Musée d'Art Moderne,
Département des Aigles,
Section des Figures
(Der Adler vom
Oligozän bis Heute)
 Städtische Kunsthalle,
 Düsseldorf, May–July
 1972

dense with rebuses, puns and riddles. And the 'puzzle' of the work is exacerbated by the artist's deliberately contradictory statements about it. As Michael Compton observed, 'it is in the experience of trying to sort it out and of knowing, finally, that one has not, that one perceives a kind of hidden message'.⁴⁸ This is because the work cannot be reduced to a simple deconstruction of museum ideology – its supposedly impartial and valorising status, the objectivity of its taxonomy, its status as public repository of wealth and the symbolic invocation of the eagle to uphold this – since it also harnessed the disruptive force of the viewer's unconscious desires and anxieties. Every visitor to a museum, noted Broodthaers, is steered by 'narcissistic projection ... onto the object he contemplates', and so it was on the level of unconscious free-association that the placards beside each object would disrupt (*perturbe*) conventional patterns of viewing.⁴⁹ As Broodthaers acknowledged, it is only through deception that the truth may appear: 'I believe that a fictional museum like mine allows us to grasp reality as well as that which reality hides.'⁵⁰

Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne* sets a precedent for contemporary installation artists like Mark Dion (b.1961), who seek not to vilify the museum but to 'make it a more interesting and effective institution'.⁵¹ Dion's *The Department of Marine Animal Identification of the City of New York* 1992, like Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* 1992, and Susan Hiller's *From the Freud Museum* 1995, investigates and overturns museum taxonomies, and by implication the ideologies that underpin them. Although all three artists are motivated by different political tendencies, it is significant that they choose to articulate these through a parody of museum-display conventions. Vitrines are filled, labels are written, charts are drawn, taxonomies unravelled; the 'objectivity' of institutional display, these artists imply, is always already interpretation. As Dion notes, the museum tells a narrative 'through a very particular type of representation: for it is both the thing itself and a representation of it'.⁵² It is important that so many of these artworks harness the viewer's own capacity to free-associate in their installations, revealing subversive, marginal perspectives doing combat with grand narratives.

Feminism and multi-perspectivalism

One of the key ideas underlying institutional critique is that there is more than one way to represent the world. Installation art, by using an entire space that must be circumnavigated to be seen, came to provide a direct analogy for the desirability of multiple perspectives on a single situation. One artist who has articulately theorised this shift in relation to installation art is Mary Kelly (b.1941). For her, the viewer of an installation is 'sort of out of control' because 'the view is always partial' – 'there's no position from which you can actually see everything at once'.⁵³ Like many artists in this period, Kelly came to regard installation art's multi-perspectivalism as emancipatory – in contrast to single-



**Susan Frazier,
Vicki Hodgetts and
Robin Weltsch**
Nurturant Kitchen
from **Judy Chicago and
Miriam Schapiro**
Womanhouse
553 Mariposa Avenue
Los Angeles, Jan–Feb
1972

point perspective, which centres the viewer in a position of mastery before the painting, and by extension, the world.

Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* 1973–9 is a complex installation assembled over six years, in which 135 framed images colonise the walls of a gallery space: her identically framed pictures, texts, objects and documents line the gallery walls in the coolly objective manner typical of the museum displays that Broodthaers's *Musée* parodied. And like Broodthaers, Kelly's formal restraint was used to counterpoint a more turbulent and troubling content: collecting her son's used nappies, dirty vests and scribbled drawings, Kelly overlaid each fetishised 'relic' with personal commentary and Lacanian diagrams. Like the rest of Kelly's oeuvre, *Post-Partum Document* occupies an ambiguous position within the history of installation art: its neatly framed components do not respond to the exhibition site, and are more psychologically absorptive (in the manner of traditional painting) than physically immersive. And yet Kelly maintains that it is precisely the temporal, cumulative unfolding of the work in an installation situation that enables it to impact upon the viewer, 'rather than viewing the work from the fixed vantage of traditional perspective'.⁵⁴

Kelly's writing repeatedly highlights a connection between single-point perspective and (patriarchal) ideology, and implies that installation art is one way to challenge and subvert this association. Rather than representing women iconically, as an image to be 'mastered', Kelly uses images of clothing or texts to show a 'dispersed body of desire', a modality of representation that also affects the viewers, since we are unable to 'master' this body in one glance. It would be an understatement to say that Kelly's installations are visually remote from the 'dream scene' works discussed in this chapter, but her observations are crucial to the history of installation art. This is because she represents a position that became increasingly important in installation art's self-legitimation – that the inclusion of the viewer in a multi-perspectival space offers a significant challenge to traditional perspective, with its rhetoric of visual mastery and centring. Instead of a hierarchical relationship to the object (which was viewed as synonymous with bourgeois possession and masculinity), the viewer of installation art finds that 'there's no position from which you can actually see everything at once'.

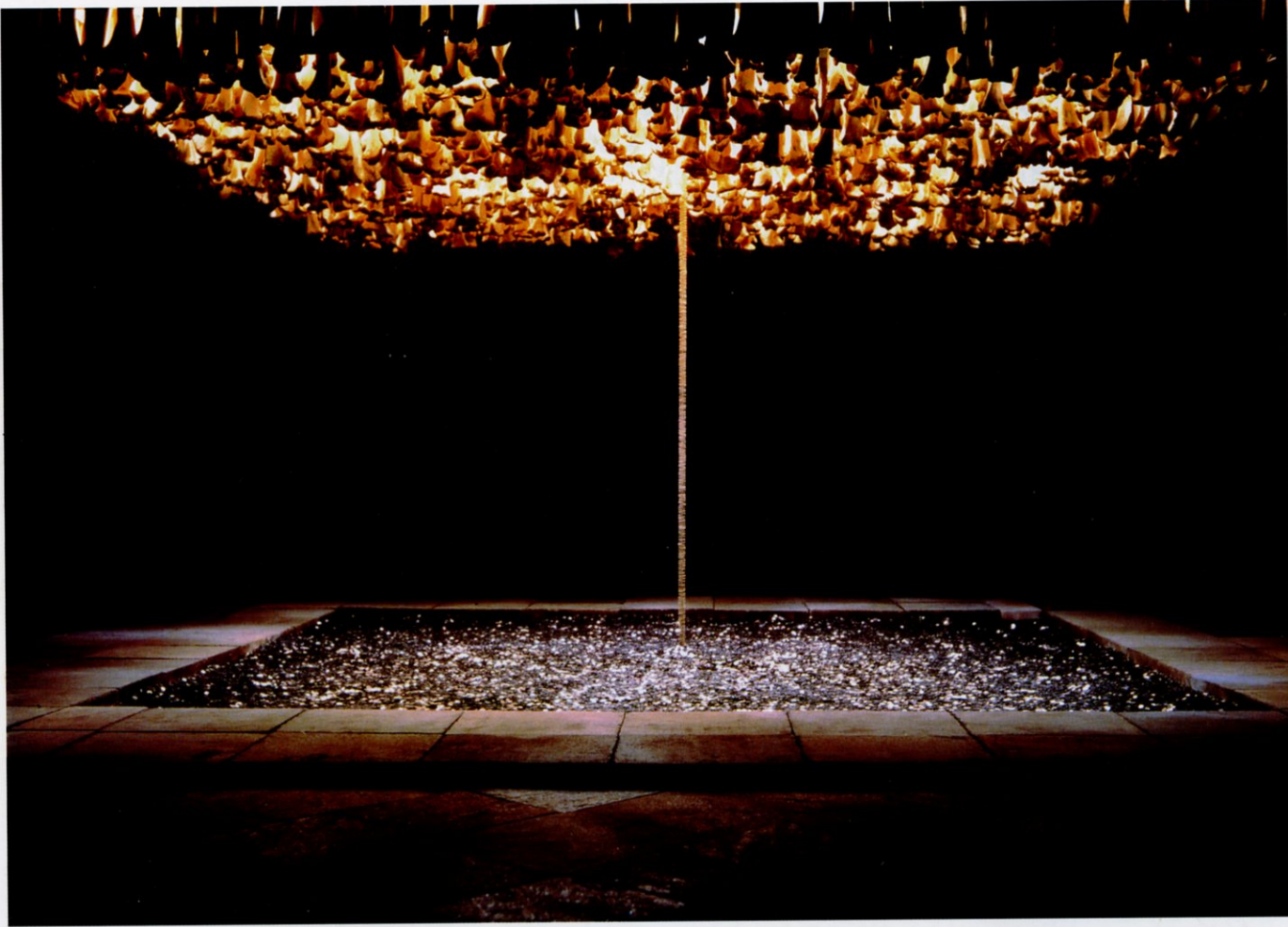
With feminist art of the early-to-mid-1970s in general, it could be argued that formal concerns were less significant than the politicised content. This is well demonstrated if we compare Mary Kelly's psychoanalytic reworking of Conceptual art to the visceral 'central core' imagery developed in West Coast performance and installation art. *Womanhouse* 1972, by Judy Chicago (b.1939) and Miriam Schapiro (b.1923), comprised a series of installations in a condemned Hollywood mansion. Together with the twenty-one students on their Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts, Schapiro and Chicago transformed the building's interior into a series of site-specific installations. Today the iconography of *Womanhouse* appears dated and heavy-handed: Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* contained an

overflowing bin of 'used' sanitary towels and tampons, while the fleshy pink *Nurturant Kitchen* by Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts and Robin Weltsch was adorned with ambiguous shapes that resembled both food (fried eggs) and breasts. Although the anger and frustration permeating *Womanhouse* is specific to the 1970s, its symbolic equation of domestic space and femininity continues to reverberate through contemporary art, from the work of Louise Bourgeois and Mona Hatoum to that of Tracey Emin.

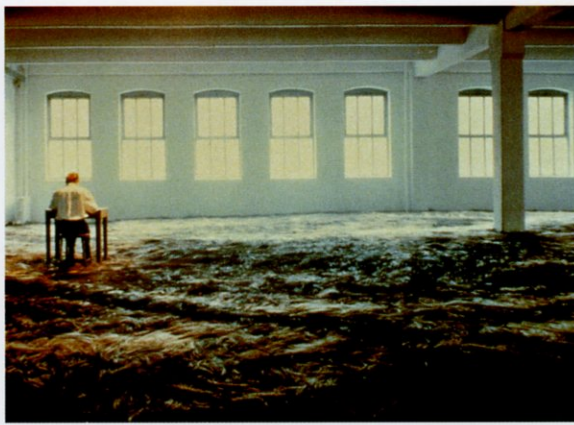
Spectacular immersion

During the 1980s, major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, Skulptur. Projekte Münster and the São Paulo Biennial, together with venues like the Dia Center (New York) and Capp Street Projects (San Francisco), came to rely increasingly on installation art as a way to create memorable, high-impact gestures within large exhibition spaces, be these signature architectural statements or derelict ex-industrial buildings. A surge of new venues dedicated to post-1960s art further consolidated the status of installation art through enlightened acquisitions policies and the creative commissioning of new work.⁵⁵ Today, installation art is a staple of biennials and triennials worldwide, capable of creating grand visual impact by addressing the whole space and generating striking photographic opportunities. For curators, installation art still carries a hint of mild subversion (the work will probably be unsaleable) and risk (since the outcome is unpredictable), though as Julie Reiss has argued, today's installation art is far from a marginal practice but close to the centre of museum activity.⁵⁶

Much installation art of the 1980s is notable for its gigantic scale, and often involves an expansion of sculptural concerns to dominate a space, rather than a specific concern for the viewer's immersion in a given environment. These works do not adversely affect the space in which they are shown, nor in many cases do they respond to it: one thinks of the productions of Arte Povera artists, Joseph Beuys, or Claes Oldenburg during this decade. Cildo Meireles (b.1948) and Ann Hamilton (b.1956) both produced work in the late 1980s that could be regarded as typical of the ambitious and visually seductive installation art prevalent in that decade, but they distinguish themselves by retaining a specific interest in the viewer's sensory experience. Like the other artists mentioned above, their work is characterised by the use of unusual materials, often in vast quantities, yet Meireles and Hamilton seek to transform the character of a room entirely, generating meaning through the symbolic associations of the materials used and thereby immersing the viewer in a vivid psychological encounter. Cildo Meireles was unable to realise many of his installations during the 1970s due to the oppressive military regime that had gripped Brazil since the mid-1960s; many of his works remained in notebook form until the 1980s – a delay that is reflected in the dating of each piece. His installations manifest many of the phenomenological concerns of Brazilian art of this period, staging a heightened



Cildo Meireles
Missão/Missões
(How to Build
Cathedrals) 1987



Ann Hamilton
tropos
Dia Center for the Arts,
New York,
Oct 1993–June 1994

perceptual experience for the viewer that may be optical (the monochromatic overload of *Red Shift* 1967–84), haptic (the balls of various weights in *Eureka/Blindhotland* 1970–5), gustatory (sweet and salty ice cubes in *Entrevendo* 1970–94) or olfactory (the smell of natural gas in *Volatile* 1980–94). The materials that Meireles uses, often in large quantities, are symbolically freighted:

I am interested in materials which are ambiguous, which can simultaneously be symbol and raw substance, achieving a status as paradigmatic objects. Materials which can carry this ambiguity range from matches to Coca-Cola bottles, from coins and banknotes to a broom, as in *La Bruja* (The Witch, 1979–81). They are in the everyday world, close to their origin, yet impregnated with meaning.⁵⁷

Missão/Missões (How to Build Cathedrals) 1987, is perhaps typical of Meireles's use of repetitive and metaphorically laden materials: 600,000 coins arranged on the floor are joined to 2,000 bones hanging from the ceiling by a white column of 800 communion wafers. The objects metonymically allude to religion, commerce and human loss, and together stage a critical commentary on the practices of the church in an oblique and poetic fashion.⁵⁸

An important aspect of Meireles's installations is the fact that they can be reconstructed; unlike many of his contemporaries, Meireles does not tie his work to a specific site, seeking instead to work against the aura of the unique work of art. This is in sharp contrast to Ann Hamilton, who does not restage her installations. This is not just because each one requires an immense amount of collective labour in order to be realised, but also because they are integrally related to the specific history of the site in their structure and choice of materials. For the installation *indigo blue* 1991, for example, she placed 14,000 pounds of recycled work clothing in a former garage in Charleston. Like Meireles, Hamilton harnesses perceptions other than the visual to immerse the viewer, often demoting the optical in order to foreground more intuitive senses like smell, sound and touch: in *between taxonomy and communion* 1991, the floor was laid with sheep fleeces covered by panes of glass that cracked under the weight of the viewer's body. In *tropos* 1993, the Dia Center in New York was carpeted with the tails of slaughtered horses, forming an excessive turf of slippery, tangled, pungent hair.

Hamilton's use of sensory perception differs from that of Meireles in that she aims to reawaken our sensory relationship to the organic physical world through memory and unconscious association. Sensory perception is always placed in the service of emotional triggers to prompt what Hamilton calls a 'state of suspended reverie'.⁵⁹ The inability of language to describe and contain somatic experience is one of her enduring interests, and the erasure of language has become a recurrent motif in her work.⁶⁰ As such, her materials do not operate symbolically (as metonymic references to nature, science, the animal kingdom, and so on), but seek to prompt in the viewer an individual chain of associational



responses. As part of *privation and excesses* 1989, a performer continually dipped his hands into a felt hat filled with honey. While Beuys used both felt and honey as objects of deep personal resonance (he saw the honeycomb as a symbol of warmth and survival and regarded felt as a substance with life-saving properties), Hamilton's emphasis is on the very stickiness of sweet honey adhering to the skin, and the associations of its pungent scent. By presenting these materials in specific quantities, Hamilton seeks to produce an immersive and unconfined state of mind in the viewer, one in which the heightened self-awareness of phenomenological perception is overtaken by personal associations.

Studio/installation/house

All of the work mentioned above involves an emphasis on 'real' materials rather than their depiction or illustration. The associational value of found materials – which had been used in the 1960s and 1970s to connote 'everyday life' (Kaprow), 'low culture' (Oldenburg), or 'nature' (Thek) – were by the 1980s harnessed for their sensuous immediacy, but as a way in which to subvert our ingrained responses to the dominant repertoire of cultural meanings. This strategy remains the prevailing mode of articulating ideas in contemporary installation art, but its origins go back to the 1920s and 1930s – not just to Surrealist exhibition installation, but to the *Merzbau*, an environmental work developed by Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) in his home in Hannover. Extending from the studio to embrace adjacent rooms, the found materials in the *Merzbau* included newspapers, driftwood, old furniture, broken wheels, tyres, dead flowers, mirrors and wire netting. As Hans Richter recalled, Schwitters also included metonymic tokens of his friends:

there was the Mondrian grotto, the Arp, Gabo, Doesburg, Lissitzky, Malevich, Mies van der Rohe and Richter grottoes. A grotto contained very intimate details of each friendship between them. For example, he had cut a lock of my hair for my grotto. A big pencil from the drawing table of Mies van der Rohe was in the area reserved for him. In others, you would find a shoelace, a cigarette butt, a nail clipping, the end of a tie (Doesburg's), a broken pen.⁶¹

These objects were combined into assemblages, *ex voto* shrines and walk-in 'grottoes', while the whole sprawling work was permeated by the stench of boiling glue, found rubbish and pet guinea pigs.⁶²

The *Merzbau* is now regularly cited as a precursor of installation art, and has an extensive surrounding literature that does not need to be revisited here. It will suffice simply to mention two accounts of viewing the work, which focus on the somewhat testing ordeal of Schwitters's guided tours around it and reveal the symbolic status of the materials he assemblaged. Nina Kandinsky recalled that 'he always had an anecdote, a story or a personal experience to hand, to illustrate the tiniest incidental [object] that he was preserving in the niches of the column'.⁶³ Vordemberge-Gildewart recalled that a 'guided visit around this giant work,



Christian Boltanski
Réserve 1990–
 Collection: Centre
 Georges Pompidou,
 Paris

commented on and illuminated by Schwitters himself, lasted more than four hours. It wasn't an easy experience.⁶⁴ Schwitters used the word 'Merz' to denote a technique of assemblage – 'the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes, and technically the principle of equal evaluation of the individual materials' – but despite this technical equality, it is clear that in practice the artist was drawn to objects of a specific, highly personal provenance.⁶⁵

This reading of the *Merzbau* as a palimpsest of metonymic objects will have many resonances for people familiar with recent installation art. The use of old clothing, draped across walls or strewn over the floor, in the work of French artist Christian Boltanski (b.1944) is an obvious example (such as *Réserve* 1990–), as is the use of old shoes in installations by innumerable artists. However, it is Schwitters's conversion of his studio to an installation that has become a more poignant point of reference for recent work. In 1971, Daniel Buren argued that artists should abandon their studios and operate site-specifically, so that the production of a work of art was not divorced from its place of reception.⁶⁶ Buren's agenda was explicitly political: he objected to art's commodity status within the market system. But his alternative – the belief that there is only one correct way to see art (that is, in the place where it was made) – nevertheless still subscribes to a doctrine of authenticity that the market reinforces (for example, in its valuation of the artist's signature). Although many artists today work with installation, and often site-specifically, Buren's anticipated liberation of art from the market has failed to come about. Works of installation are certainly harder to sell than paintings or sculptures, but they are nevertheless bought, sold and collected by both institutions and private individuals worldwide. One contemporary artist whose work reflects the complexity of this situation today is the German artist Gregor Schneider (b. 1969). As with Schwitters, his home is the site of an ongoing work of art, but the rooms are replicable elsewhere, in galleries, museums and private collections.

Das Totes Haus Ur is Schneider's home in Rheydt, which originally belonged to his family but that has been subject to an ongoing internal revision by the artist since 1984. Purged of natural light and colour – almost every surface is bleached a dusty sterile white and reeks of stale disuse – the rooms of the house are obsessively lined and re-lined. One room has up to eight windows placed in front of each other; some are artificially lit to give the impression of opening on to the exterior; the final room has a window that opens onto a solid white wall ('That makes most people scared,' says Schneider, 'and they want to get out').⁶⁷ *The Kaffeezimmer* rotates imperceptibly on an axis, so that people are unnerved to find that the door through which they exit the room does not lead back to the place where they entered. Schneider receives visitors, but the guest room is *total isoliertes* – spartan, soundproofed and windowless.

When invited to exhibit elsewhere, Schneider rebuilds the rooms of his house in the museum or gallery; he refers to these as its dead limbs and this has led to the



Gregor Schneider
Das Totes Haus Ur
(views of the stairway
and *The Totally Isolated*
Guestroom)
12 Unterheydener
Strasse, Rheydt, 1984-

naming of the work as *The Dead House Ur*. These replica rooms are reconstructed from memory and are not always identical to the 'originals' in Rheydt – which are themselves subject to ongoing revision. For the German pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, Schneider reconstructed the entire *Dead House* as a labyrinthine structure spanning four floors. Visitors had to sign a declaration of personal liability before entering, an act that charged the viewing experience with the chilling possibility that one could indeed become trapped inside its claustrophobic interior.

In Rheydt, Schneider has made one small room that is completely insulated:

If you had gone into the room the door would have swung shut. There was no way of opening it either from inside or from outside. I was interested in notions of immediacy. In that room you would no longer have been sensually perceptible. You would have been gone.

Schneider's understanding of the word 'immediacy' here does not strike us as something that can be compared to Kaprow's search for life-affirming experience. Nor is it a phenomenological, heightened perception of space. Like the Surrealist model of the 'encounter' that overshadows this chapter, it is a highly charged psychological experience inflected by unconscious affect. The *Dead House Ur* is an uneasy, uncanny space, not just because it demands our willing submission to its interiority, but because this is itself doubled – both within the house (its interred rooms, rubbish-logged crawl spaces, trapdoors and blind windows) and elsewhere (in its exhibited 'limbs').

An imaginative virus

In contrast to Schneider, the British artist Mike Nelson (b.1967) has neither a studio nor collectors. Within the context of this chapter his work represents a return to some of the values that were originally associated with installation art when it came of age in the 1960s: its engagement with a specific site, its use of 'poor' or found materials, and its critical stance towards both museum institutions and the commercialisation of 'experience' in general. It is also one of the most influential examples of this type of installation being produced today. Nelson cites Kienholz and Thek as formative influences, but his work is more regularly compared to that of Kabakov because it presents for the viewer a series of corridors and rooms to explore, each of which appears to belong to a recently departed individual or group of individuals. Like Kabakov, Nelson adopts a narrative approach to installation, creating scenarios that are 'scripted' in advance from a complicated web of references to film, literature, history and current affairs; his scope is therefore more ambitious, both intellectually and narratively, than Kabakov's world of imaginary characters perpetually locked within Soviet Russia of the 1960s and 1970s. *The Deliverance and the Patience* made for the Venice Biennale in 2001 takes its title from the names of two eighteenth-century galleon

ships built by a community of shipwrecked castaways on Bermuda to take them to Virginia. The installation's sixteen rooms refer to utopian communities, colonisation and the origins of capitalism; this theme is reinforced by allusions to William Burroughs's novel *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z. : the temporary autonomous zone, ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism* (1991), and *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), a history of eighteenth-century trading by Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, all of which Nelson relates to Venice's past (as the nexus of East-West trade routes) and its tourist industry present.

Nelson's first major work of this kind, *The Coral Reef* 2000, at Matt's Gallery in London, is a complex installation that is worth describing in some detail. Passing through a shabby gallery entrance, the viewer first encountered an Islamic mini-cab office, then went on to access a network of corridors, doors and rooms. These included a biker's garage, a spartan chamber bearing a notice of evangelical meetings, a virulent blue room containing heroin paraphernalia, a security surveillance office with pornographic magazines, a bar strewn with equipment for a bank raid, and a small room containing a sleeping bag and some extinguished candles. The spaces were not labelled, and therefore required a degree of detective work in order to fathom who and what was being referenced. The individual rooms had an extraordinary psychological potency, but so did the experience of linking them all together. Each room seemed to allude to a different subculture or social group, and more specifically to the particular belief system for which it stood. This repertoire of belief systems seems to allude to the alternatives that form a substrata (a coral reef) beneath the 'ocean surface' of global capitalism in the West.

Moreover, Nelson's underlying theme – 'the impossibility of believing in anything but wanting to believe in something ... wanting another system of government or humanity' – was repeated in the structure of the work as a whole.⁶⁸ As one moved through the rooms, piecing together their clues – a painting of white horses, a mobile phone, or a newspaper cutting – the sense of 'searching' for what each room symbolises (and for what connects the rooms) replicated the ideological 'search' that each room represented. At the furthest 'end' of the installation, the first room (the mini-cab office) was doubled: many visitors assumed themselves to be back at the beginning, and thus experienced the most unnerving confusion when they next encountered a series of rooms that bore no relation to the ones they recalled walking through only minutes previously.⁶⁹ The doubled room also acted as a destabilising déjà-vu, casting into doubt what one had seen in the rest of the installation.

The Coral Reef therefore integrated our physical presence within its thematic narrative, carefully structuring a viewing experience that reinforced and enriched the concerns of the work. The swastika-shaped layout drew the viewer in and around the space, maximising confusion; as Nelson observed, 'disorientation was so much part of *The Coral Reef* – you were supposed to be lost in a lost world of lost people'.⁷⁰ In other installations – such as *The Cosmic Legend of the Uroboros Serpent*



Mike Nelson
The Coral Reef
Matt's Gallery, London,
Jan–March 2000

2001, or *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted* 2001 – the experience of fictional space constructed by Nelson has been so compelling that viewers questioned whether or not they had even entered a work of art.⁷¹ The complex layering of references, many of which are impossible to fathom without assistance, can give the impression ‘that somebody knows the purpose of the space, what’s happening behind the scenes and you don’t’; as the artist observes, this powerlessness offsets the psychological absorption with feelings of exclusion and otherness, ‘whether that be cultural otherness, intellectual otherness or political otherness’.⁷²

These uncertain beginnings, middles and endings are integral to the psychological impact of Nelson’s installations, and one that he hopes stays with the viewer long after they have left the work; as the critic Jonathan Jones noted, entering *The Coral Reef* was akin to signing a contract in which one agreed ‘to have an implant in your head ... an acceptance of an imaginative virus that you would not be able to purge from your memory’.⁷³ Nelson maintains that one of the reasons for the complicated distribution of rooms in his work, and its meticulous replication of reality, is precisely to expose the viewer to a different mode of receptivity, one in which you could ‘fall into a more relaxed state, where things can affect you on a subliminal level’ – infecting your mind to the point where elements of the work might return, like a dream, ‘at times and places that are quite unpredictable’.⁷⁴

Nelson’s work is thus paradigmatic of the ‘dream scene’ type of installation art that has been put forward in this chapter. Such work is characterised both by psychological absorption and by physical immersion – the viewer does not identify with a character depicted in a scene but is placed in the position of protagonist. As a consequence, this form of installation art is often regarded as being related in some way to the absorptive character of painting, reading and cinema. These analogies are all valid, since there is a strong narrative element to many of the installations discussed here. Yet because the installation seeks to trigger fantasies, individual memories or cultural associations in the viewer’s mind, the symbolically charged ‘dream scene’ provides the richest and most poignant model of comparison for our experience of these works. The use of found materials, whose worn patina bears the indexical trace of previous ownership, is prevalent in this type and acts as a further trigger for reflection and free association. The highly subjective criticism that circles around these often uneasy spaces, and the artists’ insistence on our first-hand experience of them, reinforces this emphasis on a psychologistic mode of interpretation. Perhaps most importantly, the key idea that emerges in writing on this work is that traditional single-point perspective is overturned by installation art’s provision of plural and fragmented vistas: as a result, our hierarchical and centred relation to the work of art (and to ourselves) is undermined and destabilised.