

## **OZOLINS Brigita**

### **Installation: strategy or style?**

#### **Abstract**

Early installation art had the power to shock and confront as well as offering a critique of the institutions of art. Today, the ubiquity of installation goes hand in hand with the demise of this once-held power. Not only do we anticipate an installation experience when we visit a major public gallery or art space, but we are likely to be bored, frustrated or disappointed by the encounter. Over ten years ago, Geoffrey Fereday discussed the dangers of installation becoming a style rather than a strategy - a gallery ambience, rather than a critical enquiry. Installation has also been described as a type of disappearing act, a post-object mode of practice that is both something and nothing. Can we engage meaningfully with this increasingly dominant means of contemporary artistic expression? This paper will explore installation from the perspective of a practicing installation artist, and ask - how can installation strategies operate today?

#### **Biography**

Brigita Ozolins graduated from Monash University in the late 1970s, majoring in Classical Studies, and worked as a librarian and an arts administrator before enrolling at the Tasmanian School of Art in the 1990s. She graduated with a first class honours degree and the University Medal in 1999, won an Australian Postgraduate Award in 2000 and is currently enrolled in the PhD programme at the Tasmanian School of Art, where she also teaches and lectures in art and design theory part-time. She has been exhibiting in solo and group exhibitions since the mid 1990s and has also carried out several solo performances. Brigita has completed a public art commission for the State Library of Tasmania, was awarded the Australia Council London studio residency in 2001 and an Arts Tasmania Grant in 2002. Brigita lives and works in Hobart.

### **Installation: strategy or style?**

In 1975 Domenico de Clario's installation *Elemental landscapes* was removed two days after it opened in the National Gallery of Victoria under the orders of the Gallery's then Director, Gordon Thomson. Student protests and sit-ins followed and the curator, Jenifer Phipps, was subsequently sacked.<sup>1</sup> The work, which consisted of a haphazard arrangement of objects that included a chair, a plant, and numerous scattered papers, was presumably considered too outrageously anti-aesthetic and anti-object to be suitable for public display.

The de Clario controversy exemplifies early installation art's power to shock, confront and challenge the institutions of art. Emerging with particular vigour as a postmodern form of artistic expression from the late 60s onwards, installation challenged ideas about what art could be, what it should look like, where and how it could be shown and, perhaps most importantly, how it could be experienced. It rallied against the commodification of art - instead of presenting the audience with a traditional art object that could be bought, sold and contemplated as a cultural artefact, it offered something that resembled a staged scenario, provoking the question, where is the art? The expected relationship between viewer, artwork and gallery was disrupted, inviting different ways of engaging with the work and its motivating ideas.

Today, work such as de Clario's *Elemental Landscapes* would hardly raise an eyebrow.<sup>2</sup> Installation has been assimilated into the art world to such an extent that it is an expected art encounter in galleries or museums and dominates international contemporary art events such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta. Ironically, the ubiquity of installation goes hand in hand with the demise of its once held power. As Fereday pointed out over ten years ago, the absorption of installation into the institutions of art has diminished its effect as a critical strategy. He questions its usefulness as an active cultural critique, believing it has been reduced to an aesthetic procedure centred on a 'poetics of space'.<sup>3</sup> 'All dressed up with nowhere to go and nothing much to say, the first tendency of acritical contemporary installation is to celebrate its gallery ambience.'<sup>4</sup>

A recent visit to an exhibition of predominantly installation-based work relevant to my own art practice reinforced the relevance of Fereday's observations today. Much of the work *looked* enticing, but the actual experience of engaging with it failed to live up to the seductive catalogue images and descriptions and the

accompanying enthusiastic floor talk. There was simply too much text to read, the looped videos failed to lure attention beyond a minute or so, the interactive computer-based work was frustratingly circuitous and dull, and other images and objects didn't invite curiosity beyond an initial encounter. The gap between the theoretical premise of the work and the actual encounter with it was huge and the demands on the viewer seemed out of proportion with what the work might offer. A trip to the movies, an evening at a nightclub or even watching television may have been more rewarding.

Clearly, installation can no longer charge the relationship between viewer, work and space simply by virtue of being installation. In fact, we are likely to be bored, frustrated or even disappointed by the encounter. As a practicing installation artist and having also experienced work remarkable for its ability to engage, challenge, disrupt, shock or entertain the viewer, I am compelled to ask a number of questions: What is it that makes an installation successful? How can installation strategies work today? And, as Jon Bird asked in his introduction to a special edition of the Oxford Art Journal devoted to installation, 'Does the term installation have a meaningful or useful function beyond describing work that is neither object nor medium bound and retains an ambivalent relation to tradition?'<sup>5</sup>

Installation is intrinsically paradoxical. As many critics and writers have observed, despite its ever-increasing dominance, installation suffers considerable theoretical and critical neglect and there is no clear consensus on a working definition of the term. Often explained through negation rather than positive attributes, writers argue it is indefinable because it is anti-object, lacks medium-specificity and is frequently dependent on the unique features of the particular site in which it is installed. Installation has thus been referred to as a disappearing act - with no clear parameters or physical qualities, it no longer exists once removed from the gallery.<sup>6</sup> This inherent indefinability of installation in terms of form makes it difficult to grasp how it is what it is. Some critics have thus focused on the etymology of the word, reducing installation to the act of placement or putting. This is both helpful and problematic. Certainly installation is about strategic placement but this approach reduces the complexities of installation to a single action that implies any arrangement of objects constitutes installation art. As Fereday points out, there is a distinct difference between an 'installation of rocks' and a display that consists of 'rock art'.<sup>7</sup> Installation is also discussed in terms of its theatrical qualities, its ability to tease the relationship between art and life and its plural rather than singular nature that enables it to embrace difference.

The core feature of installation's strategic potential, however, is centred on its ability to activate the relationship between viewer, work and space. Before discussing this in further detail, I want to take a brief look at installation in terms of context.

The concept of installation is of course not exclusive to contemporary art practice and harks back in the last century to a range of artists and art movements, including Duchamp, Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Minimalism and the Happenings and Events associated with Pop Art (some critics go back as far as Stonehenge, Rococo interiors etc). It was in the late 60s however, that installation began to emerge with particular force. Along with conceptual art and performance, its focus on the dematerialisation of the art object and lack of medium-specificity offered a particularly strategic critique of modernism and the commodification of art. Installation was not painting and it was not sculpture - it was something else altogether, an art strategy based on ideas, process and content rather than form. Throughout the 1970s and into the 80s, installation's hybrid and plural nature and its endless capacity to offer the viewer anything and everything as art, made it an ideal and powerful strategy for reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary culture, addressing issues such as feminism, identity, colonisation, marginalised cultures, our relationship to language, the body and consumerism. From the 1990s onwards, however, it is more difficult to reconcile installation as a strategy in terms of context.

Fereday suggests that the only way installation can redeem itself is to address its now established position as a culturalised environment within the institutions of art.<sup>8</sup> Although he makes some keen observations about the demise of installation's power, the problem with this argument is its prescriptive assumption that in order to be meaningful, installation has to be an art critical strategy. Installation may have emerged as a critique of modernism, but that does not mean it has to maintain a role as an art critical device in order to be effective. As Michael Archer states in his article entitled *Crisis, what crisis?* art can't be judged as meaningless just because it doesn't signify in a particular way.<sup>9</sup> He goes on to argue that if art fails to meet

our expectations, then it is those expectations that may be misplaced. Archer thus ultimately lays fault with the viewer.<sup>10</sup> This seems too easy an option. It presumes a huge gulf between viewer and artwork, with the viewer on the deferential side. If artwork fails to engage, it fails to engage.

Nicolas Bourriaud offers a possible way of understanding the seeming ordinariness of some contemporary art through his theory of relational aesthetics. He argues that since the 1990s, new art forms have placed an emphasis on making small rather than grand comments about the nature of contemporary life and, most importantly, our relationships within it. He believes that the world has become so mechanised and lacking in basic human contact, that the simplest of actions by the artist not only provide a real experience for the viewer, but can be subversive, political strategies.<sup>11</sup> Bourriaud cites work such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's shared meals, in which the artist cooks and dines with viewers, the remnants left as a trace of the real art experience and Christine Hill's community driven projects in which she works as a supermarket checkout assistant, cleans people's shoes or gives them massages in an effort to overcome an anxiety of uselessness and re-establish lost connections with the public. Bourriaud sees such actions as subversive because they disrupt our expected means of relating to and communicating with each other in a world dominated by a globalised market economy. The process of social engagement the artwork can offer thus ultimately becomes more significant than the production of objects or artefacts.<sup>12</sup>

Bourriaud's theory provides an attractive framework for understanding the relationship between viewer, art and the context of contemporary life, but it is also problematic. Approaching works through the theory of relational aesthetics assumes that the viewer's life is indeed characterised by overly mechanised and technological encounters in which the experience of something modest, real and everyday is both lacking and necessary - and can be provided through art. But if the modest, real, everyday gesture fails to engage the viewer, it also fails as relational art - applying the theory doesn't make the work more interesting in reality. Secondly, and despite Bourriaud's assertions to the contrary,<sup>13</sup> relational aesthetics hardly seems new, harking directly back to the anti-object processes, ideals and motivations of 1960s and 70s conceptual, performance and installation art. Nevertheless, Bourriaud makes some valuable observations and his emphasis on the relational aspects of contemporary art is linked to where I believe the core strategic potential of installation lies.

So, to return to the key feature of installation: its potential to activate the relationship between viewer, work and space. Installation does this through its reliance on the viewer to complete the work. Rather than displaying a discrete artefact for contemplation, installation offers something that resembles a staged scenario. This scenario, described by Michael Fried as theatrical, anticipates the viewer's presence: 'The work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him'.<sup>14</sup> Fried was actually highly critical of this tendency towards the theatrical in art, which he regarded as a negative feature of Minimalism and a threat to the survival of modernism. Ironically, his theories now provide an often-quoted framework for understanding the relationship between viewer and work in installation. The nature of that relationship, however, has been explored and interpreted variously. O'Doherty speaks of an interaction characterised by objective distance - or even trespass. In reference to Segal's and Keinholz's work, he says, 'The spectator in the tableau somehow feels he shouldn't be there'.<sup>15</sup> Alex Potts also describes an experience of displacement when negotiating video installation. He feels simultaneously drawn into and out of the work,<sup>16</sup> an attraction and repulsion he suggests reflects our attitude towards the spectacles of contemporary consumer society.<sup>17</sup> Fer parallels the experience of installation to two tableaux within Proust's *Remembrance of things past*: the subjective, inner world of all the bedrooms in which Proust slept and in which the subject is entrapped, and the other, more objective experience of standing outside houses or shops at night, where the subject is entranced by the illuminated world within.<sup>18</sup> Bourriaud, of course, sees the encounter between viewer and work as quintessential and suggests that what distinguishes recent art from modernism is that it has no preconceived idea about the relationship between viewer and object. He argues that while modernist art assumes an elitist position before the viewer, contemporary scenarios are unresolved and offer the viewer the possibility of becoming anything from witness to passive consumer, customer, protagonist or co-producer. He concludes that this focus on the viewer's experience also shifts the aura from the artwork to the viewer.<sup>19</sup>

The nature of the relationship activated between viewer, art and space within installation is thus complex and varied. But whether that relationship is entrancing, alienating, ambiguous, social, interactive or all-

encompassing, it is arguably the pivotal feature of installation. Unlike the experience of contemplating a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a plinth, the viewer enters the space of an installation and becomes, in some way, part of the set the work has staged. Installation's strategic potential thus lies in its ability to activate viewer involvement. It is not just about the placement of things, but the way in which that placement or action generates an experience.

Mark Wallinger's *Prometheus*, (1999) exemplifies the powerful way in which the gallery space can be utilised to engage the viewer on a physical, conceptual and emotional level. The installation is constructed within the gallery in such a way that the negotiation of the space becomes crucial to the experience of the work. *Prometheus* consists of a room within a room. The first, which is in relative darkness, forms a corridor that leads circuitously around the second. In each corner of this first room, positioned close to the ceiling, a video monitor shows a blindfolded, barefooted man (Wallinger himself) strapped into an electric chair. He is singing something indiscernible but spookily captivating in a high pitched voice. At sudden and unexpected intervals the video comes to a stop and reverses at high speed, giving the impression that Wallinger's body is receiving a series of electric shocks. The experience is both mesmerising and appalling. The encounter in the central room offers a complete contrast, disorienting the viewer with blazing fluorescent light and confusing perspective. Here, the viewer has moved into the position of God, looking down, rather than up towards the electric chair featured in the videos, which is now protruding, life-sized, at a ninety-degree angle from the wall opposite. The walls on either side bear huge images of clenched fists, one tattooed with the word love, the other with the word hate. But the most disarming aspect of the experience is the huge metal coil that acts as a circular framing device for everything within the room. It emits an alarming electrical buzzing noise that will only cease if the viewer manoeuvres a circuit breaker around the coil.

The conceptual breadth of this work is extraordinary, completely contradicting Bourriaud's advocacy of the significance of the small gesture by encompassing the grandest of themes: man and god, justice and fate, blind faith and innocence, power and impotence, good and evil. The manner in which Wallinger draws the viewer into the experience of these themes is remarkable. As soon as the corridor has been entered, the viewer has unwittingly become a player in Wallinger's game, absolutely anticipated and required to complete the course ahead. The viewer moves physically from the darkness into the light, from a narrow corridor that evokes the four corners of the earth and the blind faith of innocence, into a central core of power and control, where the world is literally turned upside down and good and evil seem indistinguishable. The viewer is made to look up and then to look down; to walk in a circle and to stop the flow of power emitted from the electric coil, seemingly playing with the very eye of God. The architecture of *Prometheus* leads the viewer on a physical journey that is inextricably linked to the conceptual concerns of the work.

Martin Creed's *Half the air in a given space*, (1998), was installed in an historic building on Goat Island as part of the 1998 Sydney Biennale. In contrast to Wallinger's highly engineered and sophisticated installation, Creed's work demonstrates how the simplest of strategies can create a bewildering, hilarious, yet complex experience for the viewer. The air of the house was literally half filled with inflated white balloons through which viewers paddled and swam, depending on how deep they ventured within. My personal experience was marked by childish giggling mixed with increasing anxiety as I navigated spaces where I was unable see where I was in relation to anything else, my sense of distance and perspective completely disrupted by the all-encompassing sea of floating white spheres. I even let out a small scream as a stranger swam past me. Once outside, I was almost breathless, as if I really had been starved of half the air in the house.

Creed's installation engages the viewer in something akin to a performance. Filling a space with the most banal and innocuous of objects, he has created a humorous yet powerful experience that gives the viewer a heightened awareness of the limits of their physical and psychological sense of self. That sense of self literally becomes a surface, the viewer's skin and clothing rubbing continuously against the fragile rubber of inflated balloons. The strategy here is simple, but the experience is complex.

Although not personally experienced, I read with fascination about Noble and Silver's recent performance and installation extravaganza, *We're spending four weeks at Beaconsfield, so let's hope everything goes OK*

(*part four*) (2002), which plays with the intersections between art and life and reality and fiction.<sup>20</sup> The artists, both also successful stand-up comics, demand the viewer's involvement through a series of interactive experiences that utilise the entire Beaconsfield gallery and never seem to let up. These include engaging in conversation directly with the artists, watching the artists talking to each other, watching the artists address themselves as video projections, being ignored, being given tasks to perform, watching a violin performance, watching someone showering, and being served a lavish meal. Duncan McLaren commented in his review of the work that he had never felt such a range and depth of emotions in a gallery, which included exposure, exclusion, amusement, astonishment and being treated like a king.<sup>21</sup> The work seems a perfect example of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. It not only illustrates the extraordinary way in which artists can use installation to concertedly and insistently involve the viewer in a relational experience, but shows how artists themselves can play an increasingly significant role in that experience. *We're spending four weeks at Beaconsfield* also represents a return to a sensibility more akin to 1970s installation, where the gesture has become more significant than the objects that make up the work. The success of this particular gesture is clearly highly masterminded, involving the kind of production and direction associated with making film.

These works offer contrasting examples of the challenging and remarkable experiences installation can offer, the artists utilising highly considered and varied strategies to focus the viewer's physical, emotional and conceptual engagement. Yet it is difficult to conclusively answer the question, how can installation strategies operate today? Although I believe that what makes installation successful is the extent to which the space, the work and the ideas have been coordinated and manipulated by the artist in order to engage the viewer, it seems ultimately impossible to define that success in terms of specifics: construct a passageway that forces the viewer to follow a certain path, place the video up high so it's hard to see, fill the space with things that disorient, offer the viewer a meal. To pin down certain actions would result in a paradox, for installation's features themselves are inherently fluid and boundless. How is it possible to define that which has an endless capacity to resist definition?<sup>22</sup>

Archer said, 'There is a lot of art and much of it is not really very good, but this situation is perennial', and thus it is with installation.<sup>23</sup> Installation *has* lost its once held power to shock and offer a critique of the institutions of art simply by virtue of being installation. It *has* become an overused term that refers to just about any art that does not fit neatly under traditional headings. And yet it is, of course, still possible to engage with installation meaningfully and it is still possible to be overwhelmed, excited, disturbed or shocked by the experience. Installation's power lies in its ability to offer endless possibilities for playing out a scenario that enriches, challenges or disrupts the relationship between viewer, work and space. Those possibilities, however, are dependent on the unique strategies individual artists employ to lure the viewer into their vision of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Charles, *Peripheral Visions: contemporary Australian art 1970-1994*. Roseville East, NSW: Craftsman House, 1995, p 16

<sup>2</sup> In what could be seen as an ironical twist, in 1993, the National Gallery of Victoria invited de Clario back to install a new version of the 1975 exhibition. It also gave him the privilege of incorporating numerous objects from the Gallery's own collection into the work.

<sup>3</sup> Fereday, Jeffrey, 'Installation's crisis of presentation' (1992) in *What is installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2001, p 55-58

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p 57

<sup>5</sup> Bird, Jon, 'Introduction', *Oxford Art Journal on installation*, Vol 24, No 2, 2001, p 3

<sup>6</sup> Keith Broadfoot, Geczy and Gennochio, George Alexander and others in *What is installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Fereday, p 58

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<sup>8</sup> Fereday, 2001, p 58

<sup>9</sup> Archer, Michael, 'Crisis, what crisis?', *Art Monthly* (UK), No 264, March 2003, p 2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p 4

<sup>11</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics: translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland*. (?): Les presses du reel, 2002, p 17

<sup>12</sup> Ibid,

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p 44

<sup>14</sup> Fried, Michael, *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago and London: UCP, 1998, p 163

<sup>15</sup> O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. Berkeley: UCP, 1999, p 49

<sup>16</sup> Potts, Alex, 'Installation and sculpture', *Oxford Art Journal on installation*, Vol 24, No 2, 2001, p 10

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p 19

<sup>18</sup> Fer, Briony, 'The somnambulist's story: installation and the tableau', *Oxford Art Journal on installation*, 2001, p 79-80.

<sup>19</sup> Bourriaud, p 58

<sup>20</sup> McLaren, Duncan, 'Noble and Silver', *Contemporary*, Issue 47/48, 2003, p 100-104

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p 104

<sup>22</sup> Broadfoot, in 'The end of the line: installation art today' (1996) in *What is installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*. Sydney: Power Publications, 2001, p69, argues that installation is indefinable for similar reasons.

<sup>23</sup> Archer, 2003, p 4.