

Instead of creating an imaginary place that is dreamlike—enchanted, or nightmarish—some artists present either an impersonation of a life situation or one that subtly elaborates upon that condition. When Jannis Kounellis filled Galleria l'Attico in Rome with twelve horses in 1969, he duplicated a situation from life in the context of art (fig. 12). Is this an impersonation of a stable, or a parody of the traditional verities of art, with that discipline corrected as it were? Of course, there are innumerable examples of artists who approximate the appearances of life in art, but with the impersonation type of installation artists may have reached a penultimate stage, actually cohabiting with life in the most fundamental way.

Depending on the location, an impersonation may or may not be site-specific. If the installation literally replaces a normally functioning space in the world beyond art, the artwork is certainly site-specific. Residing in an art context, on the other hand, these works are more easily movable. The capitalistic consumer society, replete with throwaway objects and commonplace media techniques, usually informs the impersonation, adding to its verity and establishing the primary context by which to interpret it. The concept of art as something exalted is thereby questioned or diminished, because the visitor may use the space very much as if it is a life situation. As with Disneyland, no art background is needed to recognize and take part in these simulations, hence the artist attains a wide audience even as he or she still holds onto avant-garde status. This installation artist has the best of two worlds, being potentially a social engineer with esteemed motives while retaining a bit of bohemian status.¹⁸

With enchantments, the boundary between art and the quotidian world is guarded and maintained, as is the viewer's sense of being before art. By contrast, impersonations often cross that divide, so that the viewer may not even recognize the presence of a work of art. Also, an enchantment projects the aura of the artist/auteur, who imbues the atmosphere with an individual imagination; by contrast, an impersonation renders the artist a rather self-effacing, even anti-elitist being. All that said, impersonations are finally tableaux, too, and may have a dreamy aspect to the extent that they are removed from the real world. Nevertheless, by their impersonating pose, these suggest that the artists want their dreams to be rooted in a sense of the everyday.

Another way to understand an impersonation is against the backdrop of tribal practices wherein art as we know it does not exist. Rather, tribal objects—now so revered in art museums—were practically and ritualistically used, and were totally integrated with their societies in ways that our works of art are usually denied. By simulating life situations, impersonations approach this model, and reinforce an intention on the part of these artists *vis-à-vis* life.

By way of introducing the variety and possibilities of the impersonation, it is useful to quote Jean Baudrillard on the topic of the image, for in each example of this type of installation an image is projected:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to reality whatsoever;
- it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a *good* appearance—representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance—it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.¹⁹

An impersonation crisscrosses these definitions, always questioning whether a profound reality exists, and offering meta-realities as substitutes for contemplation.

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (fig. 13), though not an installation, could be seen as the starting point for the impersonation-type work, representing an example of art that maliciously mimics life or offers up life as art. With both Duchamp and later, Kounellis, the viewer may be confused about the nature of art, and its separation or convergence with life experience. Similarly, how does one distinguish between the sensual experience of looking at art and at commercial goods, or at a stable? Baudrillard's distinctions offer a worthy starting point.

As the aforementioned artistic collaborations in Russia, Germany, and Holland gathered steam, artists attempted to put their talents in the service of larger societal goals, making everyday objects. Though doomed to disappointment and disparagement, these artists' goal

effectively reduced the exalted status of art. In the case of the De Stijl group, the artists Theo van Doesburg, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Hans Arp were commissioned to redesign the interior of a Strasbourg restaurant called the *Café Aubette*. Between 1926 and 1928, the trio designed every aspect of the three-story building; what ensued was a public space that benefited from the artistic skills of its creators. Unlike Duchamp's ironical gesture, this endeavor was an ardent attempt to improve the everyday world. It also introduced the idea of art (an art installation) that effectively functioned in the world, an art that lived in the time of the everyday, too, (this as opposed to the way art normally acts and where it typically lives).

Another type of impersonation can be seen at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, opened in 1927–28 (fig. 14). Whereas Disneyland presents itself only as a fantasy, Williamsburg, though also an imaginary invention, pretends to be an architectural preservation project. Notwithstanding that its pretensions to correct restoration have been skewered by architectural historians, Williamsburg impersonates an historic locale. It is simply a hoax, made more believable by the apparatus of museum-education methods.

When, in his 1961 book *Silence*, John Cage recommended: “We must bring about a music which is like furniture,”²⁰ he set the stage for the impersonation of life by an installation in the post-World War II period, and the desire of the artist to instill prosaic experience into aesthetic form. In this regard, one recalls a famous story told by the sculptor Tony Smith, of the night in the early 1950s when he drove on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. The experience was profound for him:

I thought to myself ... that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it [the road], you just have to experience it.²¹

In other words, for Smith as well as for Cage, art could not compete with a lived experience. It is a short jump to Claes Oldenburg's famed *The Store* (1961) (fig. 15),²² in which the artist rented a storefront on the lower East Side of New York City, and installed papier-mâché simulations of various objects that might be found in a commercial establishment. These objects would hardly be construed as real but, rather, as freehand renderings of how life might look if an artist got hold of it. Following the example of Oldenburg, Martin Kippenberger impersonated and parodied an office setting in *The Happy End of Kafka's "Amerika,"* 1994. Similarly Andrea Zittel makes camper vans which, though one can climb in, are

small, movable installations that suggest how life might be lived if an artist were to elaborate on its appurtenances. More straightforward is Sam Taylor-Wood's video installation of a cocktail party, *Third Party* (fig. 16), shown at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, in 2000. Among eight video projection screens, the visitor is given the sense of being present at a certain soirée, albeit as a fly-on-the-wall. With sights as well as sounds, it was an all-over, surround-sound experience, effectively a simulation.

When asked to create a work for the 1997 Documenta exhibition, Christine Hill took over a storefront in a pedestrian arcade, some distance from the exhibition halls, and opened a working thrift store, *Volksboutique* (fig. 17). While recollecting Oldenburg, this installation carried the idea of an impersonation to its utmost conclusion. So, too, Rirkrit Tiravanija, who created an Indian restaurant within the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1995 (fig. 18). Both of these installations are a functioning space, thus completely dissolving the usual boundary between art and life. One might even question whether impersonation is an issue here or whether the artists simply want to abandon art in favor of commerce. If the answer is positive, Hill and Tiravanija could be described, following Baudrillard's model, as masking "the absence of a profound reality," the latter defined as the normally seen contents of an art museum if not the museum itself.

Though the installations by Kounellis, Hill, and Tiravanija could easily be recreated, the one essential constant is an art context, by which the artist contrasts conventional expectations with the newly found possibilities presented with installation. In a remarkable, though hardly surprising reversal, the designers of the *Comme des Garçons* clothing store in the gallery-filled district of Chelsea, in New York City, built an environment in 1999 that seems quite intentionally to approximate the sensory experience of being within a *Torqued Ellipse* sculpture by Richard Serra. The store, in Chelsea no less, makes life (that is, commerce) into art; perhaps the intention reflects the merchant's supposition that the store "is the reflection of a profound reality" (Baudrillard). Though Serra would complain, the *Comme des Garçons* architecture should hardly be surprising in an era in which installation art seems ubiquitous even beyond art spaces.

One type of recent impersonation is particularly involved with the idealistic notions of the 1920s' Europeans. Scott Burton was often commissioned to make furniture for public spaces, as at the Equitable Center, New York City in 1986 (fig. 19). By producing variations on well-known designs, often in different materials, he enhanced life a bit more than if a

department store had been asked to do the furnishings. Commenting on his type of work, Burton said:

I want to get some social meaning back into art. And I'd like to help change art into some kind of design. I think that the moral, the ethical dimension of art is mostly gone, and only in a newly significant relationship with a nonart audience can any ethical dimension come back to art.... I feel that the autonomy of the studio artist is a trivial thing by now in our society. Who cares if you paint it blue instead of red?²³

While Burton's furniture-cum-art is quite camouflaged, Siah Armajani's work usually announces itself. Armajani has built a career of making bridges, reading rooms, and other more-or-less functioning architectural situations; his commissions have even included an employees lounge for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. (fig. 20). Upon coming upon one of Armajani's works, the viewer knows life has been significantly changed and, depending on the perspective of the beholder, possibly improved and made more vital. We are presented with a meta-reality wherein we know a commonplace function is still present, but its appearance has been transformed. The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia has been devoted to such an outlook for twenty-five years, so that its intent was clear when it commissioned Jorge Pardo to reinvent its lobby and video-viewing room in 1999 (fig. 21). But like an ironist, Pardo does not always allow the parts to function as life demands, witness a glass bathroom door that is only partially sandblasted. With Burton, Armajani, and Pardo, art improved, indeed, made wondrous fairly conventional situations.

All of these installations are site-specific, with each intended to fit its location like a glove, forming a rapprochement between art and life, and disguising the former in order to perform the functions of the latter. Oddly, there is a reversal in these examples between traditional notions of art versus design: whereas in the past designers might have wanted to be called artists, here artists are happily embracing the identity of designer/architects, much as was the case in Europe in the 1920s. As Baudrillard said about images, installations that function as impersonations raise questions about the everyday world, about art, and about the presence or absence of a "profound reality."