



MARK ROSENTHAL

Understanding

Installation Art

From Duchamp
to Helzer



Prestel

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Understanding Installation Art

We live in an era of contemporary art exhibitions consisting of galleries filled with objects and images spread on all surfaces. The denizen of this art world can go whole days without standing before a discrete painting or sculpture: he or she must slowly circumnavigate a space to experience the artwork that is found there. While these manifestations may appear chaotic if not an assault on the viewer's senses and expectations, in contemporary parlance we are in the presence of a broad-based phenomenon known as installation art.

Though seemingly shocking in its revolutionary appearance by comparison with painting and sculpture, installation has always been with us. For instance, when artists painted on the walls of the caves in Lascaux (fig. 1), they were creating a variation of what is known as site-specific installation: art that is made for a particular place, so much so that it cannot easily be moved because the work is not an object but is attached to the surroundings. Indeed, the Lascaux artists made canny use of the undulating wall surfaces to help render the features of the animals. When painting the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo repeated the site-specific approach; similarly, when he created the Laurentian Library foyer, he, like an architect, determined every aspect of the physical experience to be had there.

Curiously, when an artist from the past harmonized an image with a site, that aim has not always been acknowledged. For example, if one peruses the dozens of slides at the Williams College slide library of Fra Angelico's paintings for the monks' cells at San Marco in Florence (fig. 2), one would not find a single one that shows an entire room holding a painting. Yet the physical character of each space was crucial to this artist's numerous aesthetic decisions about the narrative portrayal and the viewing experience in that small room. In other words, there is a tendency to overlook the actual and unchangeable context of some works of art, even though that aspect of its creation (the site) may have been central to an understanding of it. But many modern and contemporary artists have built their endeavors on this larger view of what constitutes a work of art.



2 | Fra Angelico, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1438–45.
Museo di San Marco, Florence.

In the contemporary period, the multivalent character of installation art has yet to be fully grasped. First and foremost, it must be understood and recognized as a medium, however elastic in its material definition, offering the broadest possibilities for investigation and expression. Second, having achieved worldwide reach, this practice may enable art to actually achieve an ambition for universality. Third, because there is no frame separating this art from its viewing context, the work and the space having melded together into an approximation of a life experience, the sphere of art has effectively been compromised, even democratized. Fourth, that late nineteenth-century German art shibboleth and chimera, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, wherein the artist has total command of a space and might use any artistic means, including architecture, music, dance, and theater, along with the visual arts, to create a synesthetic environment, has become an everyday occurrence.¹

Installation art threatens to become the predominant mode of expression for the modern world as we know it, with its global character, desire for sensory overload, and demand for non-elitist practices. The traditional hunger for art that possesses exalted feeling and intellectual stimulation is in no way diminished by installation. Simply put, art has redirected and expanded its borders so as to comprise new areas of content and experience. With the medium of installation, art may be said to have reinvigorated itself.

The contemporary phenomenon of installation has often been marginalized: witness Rosalind Krauss writing of "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" to suggest that the discipline of sculpture has simply seized a larger area for itself.² However, her neat turn of phrase minimizes the revolutionary aspect of installation *vis-à-vis* sculpture. To begin with, a sculpture is simply one object whereas an installation consists of many or none. Hence, in contrast to Krauss's assertion, installation multiplies and magnifies the medium of sculpture. When found in a museum, a contemporary installation has a particularly transgressive thrust in relation to expectations about sculpture, and art in general, for the sanctity and sublime isolation of a sculpted art object, carefully if not extravagantly framed or literally on a pedestal, is absent. In this new kind of art, the integrity of and focus on an individual work are abandoned in favor of a multiplicity of objects, images, and experiences, which spew forth without regard for isolation. The exalted status of art is undercut by the quotidian-type experience—with its sights, smells, and generally ephemeral character—that is central to installation. If art is metaphorically the province of the church (as it once in fact

served), artists are declaring war, saying let everyday life into the sacred precinct. In that regard, the implicit value of an individual work of art is diminished, as cheap trinkets often substitute for oil paint and bronze.

Because the sources, motivations, and types of this approach to art have been diverse and multi-dimensional in the last eighty years or so, a definition is perhaps best left to a physical description. Installation refers to a dedicated space in which one artistic vision or aura is at work, setting forth various kinds of phenomena. An installation may be defined as anything the artist wants to do when given a room in which to work, a definition that deliberately creates a broad swath of possibilities. In an installation there is unlikely to be a single object, but an assemblage, attached or not. Conversely, an installation may consist of no objects at all but a spatial experience, not unlike an architectural manifestation. Regardless, the viewer is usually in an enclosed space, swept up in a work of art much larger in expanse than an individual object can normally create.³ As with the term composition in the traditionally understood context of art, the artist has created an arrangement that is an integrated, cohesive, carefully contrived whole.

As with any genre or art technique having a range of qualities, installation is a way of working, like painting or watercolor, chosen because of its inherent options and exploited for these effects. If installation is recognized as a long-standing technique, then it is unlikely to end soon, as if a mere moment in the passing stream of contemporary art, as one critic has implied.⁴ But equally, the many aspects that compose the current ubiquity of installation make it particularly appropriate as a medium befitting contemporary society.

In what may come to be seen as the most apt and prophetic description of modern art ever uttered, Robert Rauschenberg once stated that he worked "in the gap between art and life."⁵ Throughout the modern era, in ways too numerous and obvious to outline, artists have repeatedly evinced discomfort and outright dissatisfaction with the limits of art as given by historical precedents, limits which denied the material of life. Their responses have ranged from anti-art sentiments, via efforts by which the literal framing and segregating apparatus of art are removed, to the simple desire to create a more inclusive form of art, namely one that takes "life" into account. So ubiquitous is this sentiment that even abstract artists exhibit dissatisfaction with historical art's separation from reality. For modern artists, the old forms and concepts of art needed refurbishment, their premise being that the world is far more complex and rich than earlier practice had allowed. The aspiration of the

modern installation artist became in large part how to reflect the experience of life—its complex issues, aspects, and appearances. The technique of installation has proved to be a useful tool by which to rhetorically speak about and investigate life. Thus, whereas Rauschenberg works in the “gap,” the installation artist may attempt a rapprochement encompassing both art and life.

The lifelike qualities of installation art group themselves around two paramount matters: space and time. The viewer is asked to investigate the work of art much as he or she might explore some phenomenon in life, making one’s way through actual space and time in order to gain knowledge. Just as life consists of one perception followed by another, each a fleeting, non-linear moment, an installation courts the same dense, ephemeral experience. Whereas painting and sculpture freeze time and perhaps suggest something eternal, installation abhors such an effect. The viewer is in the present, experiencing temporal flow and spatial awareness. The time and space of the viewer coincide with the art, with no separation or dichotomy between the perceiver and the object. In other words, life pervades this form of art.

With this unframed form of art sharing the space of the viewer and being as authentic as any other space in the viewer’s experience, we have reached a pinnacle in art’s evolution toward the accurate depiction of space, time, and the world. Cohabiting with the environment, installation thereby can *be* life in some great impersonation. Through this physical convergence and the use of commonplace materials, it can, also, potentially comment on the human condition in a way that is profoundly effective because it is replete with the substance of life. Moreover, by engaging the surrounding space in this intimate fashion, an installation can speak to and about that specific space, to ponder its physical and theoretical being—its identity.

In the last third of the twentieth century, we were presented with what Carl Andre called “sculpture as place,”⁶ that is, a discrete three-dimensional work of art that establishes a sense of locale and, at the same time, promotes an interrelationship with the setting. Subsequently, as the work of art became increasingly entwined with its location in installation art, the context itself became triumphant in the field of art.⁷ In fact, the context often became the subject matter and content of the installation work, so that if a museum or another purely art setting was the locale, then that place became the starting point for a discussion of the meaning of the work. And with the broad-based emergence of installation art, any number of new kinds of art locations came into use,

from prisons to train stations to shop windows. With each of these, as with the art locale, there came another starting point for an investigation by the artist of some aspect of contemporary life. Hence, Robert Irwin said that “no thing [i.e. art] ever really transcends its immediate environment.”⁸ With the triumph of context, it might be added, comes the triumph of life, too, in the sphere of installation art.

While the diversity of Installation art may appear bewildering, it is possible to propose a taxonomy, with four poles to the approach:

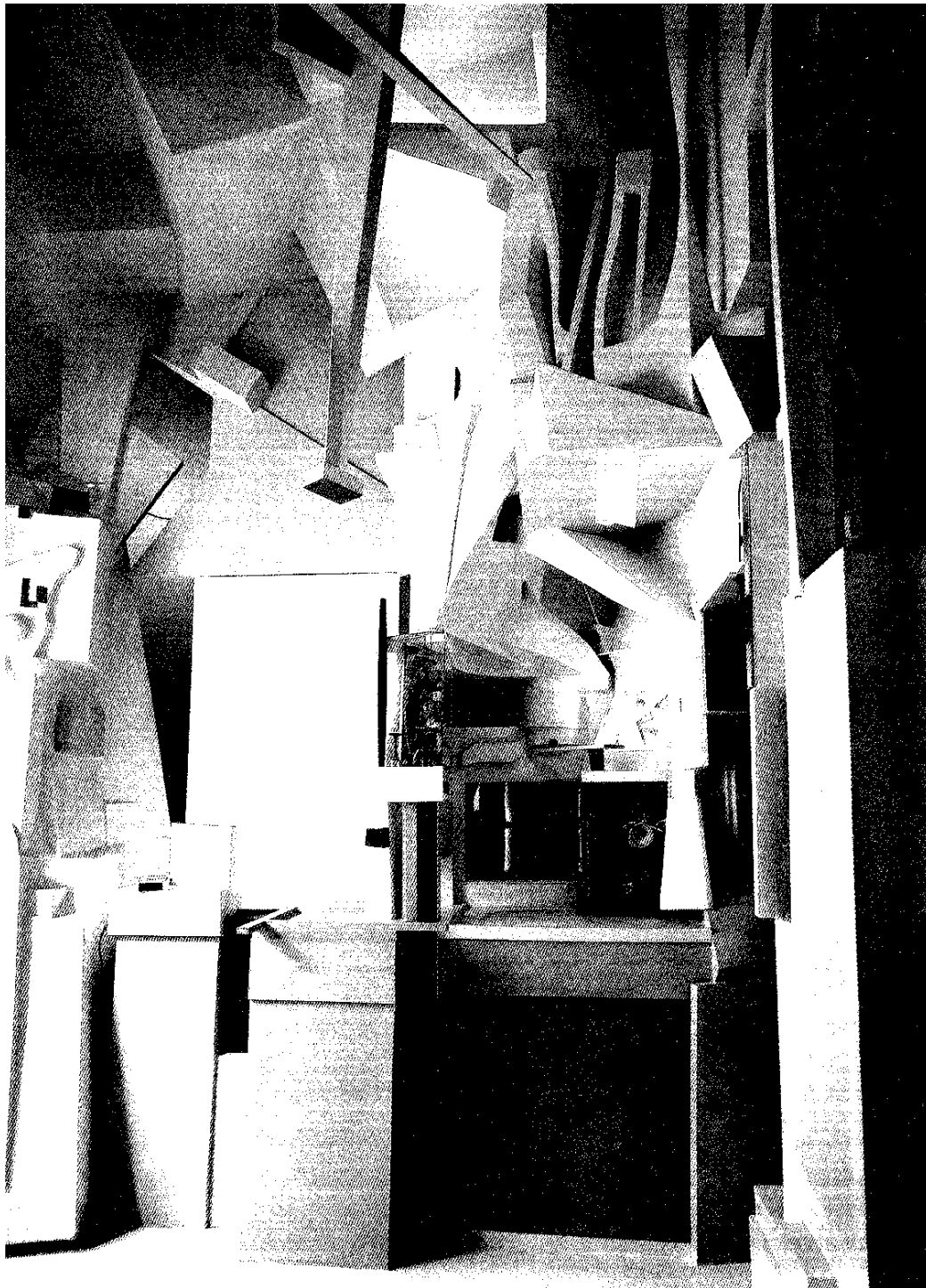
Enchantments Impersonations

Interventions Rapprochements

The top two belong to a larger genus called “filled-space installation” and the lower pair belong to a type called “site-specific installation.” Filled spaces are fairly easily redone at other locations because there is coherence between the parts of each, one to the other, rather than the parts cohering with the whole space in a significant way. This type may even appear isolated from its site: to describe the composition of a filled-space installation is not likely to include the surroundings. By contrast, a site-specific installation is inextricably linked to the locale: the parts relate to one another but, more importantly, they relate to the larger space. Indeed, the site-specific artist will have spent considerable time exploring the location of the work, hence, an analysis of the composition of a site-specific installation must include its locale, because it derives its very form and perhaps physical substance, too, as well as its meaning, from the context. Moving it is impossible, since the work cannot be understood or seen except in relation to the place. The viewer witnesses a dialogue, as it were, between the artist and the space.

The filled space is usually more literary or psychologically inclined—concerned with artifice, private reality, enchantment, or idealization, even as it is experienced in real time. On the other hand, the site-specific work has a kind of hardheaded rootedness to the world, and is usually quite plastic and perceptual in character.

All this is not to say there are no crossovers between the four types, for often there are convergences. But by recognizing a taxonomy it is possible to talk literally and specifically about installation art, to chart the genealogy of a work, and to explore the meaningful implications of each type and genus. I will discuss primarily installations that have appeared in art contexts. Though that is limiting in certain ways, it allows us to see most clearly the innovative aspect of installation work to art history, and the part it plays in the changing character of museums today.



FILLED-SPACE INSTALLATION : ENCHANTMENTS

The prototypical example of an enchantment-type installation in the twentieth century is Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (fig. 3). Between approximately 1919 and 1937, he built this environment within his home in Hanover, Germany. The title was based on the term he used for virtually his entire life's work—*Merz*—but it was applied here to a structure. The Dadaist Schwitters wanted to express a nuanced psychological dimension that individual works lacked, and with the installation technique he created a large-scale field of imaginary possibilities, epitomized by his subtitle, *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. This walk-through environment comprised every surface, each of which was energized by rectilinear or biomorphic wood and plaster forms, discarded objects, and material donated by friends. Schwitters expressed his personal meaning through the iconographic use of the grottos and columnar forms that dominate the symbolic formal vocabulary. Mimicking the atmosphere of the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in three dimensions, *Merzbau* enveloped the viewer.

In many ways partaking of the *Cathedral* connotation in the title, the architectural aspect of *Merzbau* illustrated an important aspect of installation as it would subsequently develop. Like a large cathedral, an installation can transport its viewer into a state of awe, providing also a sense of physical smallness *vis-à-vis* the all-consuming vision of the installation's artist. Some kind of transformation might even occur whereby the visitor is converted, as it were, to the vision of the creator. Schwitters wrote of a "contemplative immersion of the self in art", in which the individual would experience release from "life, from all things that disturb mankind."⁹ A *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in that it synthesizes painting, sculpture, and architecture, this installation was obviously site-specific at first. In later years, however, it was reconstructed on a number of occasions, although because of its destruction in 1943 during World War II, only one of the five room installations was known in detail. That difficulty is endemic to the medium of installation, haunting its existence.

An overall environment with little or no escape route, the enchantment draws heavily on theatrical roots, the suspension of disbelief being chief among these. One witnesses an extreme vision of reality or may have the sense of being inside the artist's mind, indeed, a simulacrum of a consciousness is created. Familiar cultural referents, and literary and psychological possibilities proliferate. The installation is mentally absorbing

3 | Kurt Schwitters,
Merzbau, 1919–37 (detail).



4 | Opening of First International Dada Fair, Berlin, 1920.
Standing, from left to right: Raoul Hausmann, Otto
Burchard, Johannes Baader, Wieland and Margarete
Herzfelde, George Grosz, John Heartfield; seated:
Hanne Hoech, Otto Schmalhausen.

and a spectacle. Various kinds of tableaux lie in the background, too, along with a high degree of "falsity ... artificiality ... deceit,"¹⁰ in the words of one of its chief practitioners, Ilya Kabakov. Beholding more than physically participating, the viewer's sense of his or her body is usually minimal, though physical circulation of the work may be involved.

Enchanted spaces, because they envelope the viewer so completely, rarely relate to the architectural settings in which they are installed, though some artists happily take advantage of unusual physical possibilities to enhance their visions. As Kabakov suggests, windows are an anathema, for they reveal the rejected world; if the ceiling or floor is emphasized, each will likely suggest the sky or the earth.¹¹ Even when dependent to some extent on the specific site, the artist who tends toward enchantment is often quite amenable to moving the installation or fitting it into another location if asked. Usually physically elaborate, these works may involve synesthetic and multimedia effects.

The 1920s were a particularly fertile time for installation work. There was a great deal of experimentation at the Bauhaus, among the Russian constructivists, and by the De Stijl group in Holland. Typically, their installations involved interchange and collaboration between practitioners of



5 | Marcel Duchamp, 1,200 *Bags of Coal*, 1938.
Mixed media assemblage.
Installation: Charles Ratton Gallery, Paris, 1938.

various media. The First International Dada Fair in Berlin (fig. 4), 1920, consisted of a messy, floor-to-ceiling atmosphere of objects by a number of artists working in a collaborative fashion. Posters, photographs, sculptures, and paintings together replicated the effect of a collage, albeit in a three-dimensional environment. With layers and overlaps of images and meaning, the artists presented a model of the world, and how it might be dissected and understood. Typical of Berlin Dada, as opposed to Dada manifestations in other cities, this exhibition was intensely political in tone, with exhortations that were antagonistic toward the German government and that favored communism. The Dada Fair thus represented a politicized version of the Enchantment format. Although the works were arranged in accordance with the given gallery site, the concept could certainly have been applied to any variety of locations. Most important was that the installation was a violently anti-aesthetic statement, with individual works serving a larger purpose. The very sense of disorder and anarchy reiterated the expressive political message, and art assumed a new purpose.

As might be expected, Marcel Duchamp was a crucial figure for enchantments and other types of installation.¹² For the International Exposition of Surrealism, at the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris in 1938, he made an installation that at once comprised all the paintings by other artists hung in the space, while embodying a work of art on its own. Duchamp hung twelve hundred sacks of coal from above, and placed leaves and a brazier on the ground (fig. 5). Though ceding the traditional art surface—the walls—he at once co-opted the other works within his own floor-to-ceiling grotto of transformation. His unaesthetic materials epitomize the metamorphosis inherent in an enchantment, with the quotidian world turned into art, and vice versa. There is even a deliberate confusion between the two contexts.

For this same exhibition, Salvador Dalí showed *Le Taxi Pluvieux* [*The Rainy Taxi*] (1938) which was a kind of miniature installation, just large enough for a single viewer to join the ghoulish occupants of the taxi-cab. The following year, Dalí created a full-scale, highly theatrical installation entitled *Dream of Venus* for the New York World's Fair. This phantasmagoria, along with *Merzbau*, set the stage for all subsequent enchantments, in that a surreal tinge with either bewitching, perplexing, or even frightening overtones might predominate.

Duchamp's interest in the installation approach culminated with the conception of his famed final work, *Etant donnés* (1946–66) (fig. 6). The viewer wanders into a darkened room not much larger than a broom closet where he or she is ambushed by the artist. Tempted to look through the



6 | Marcel Duchamp,
Etant donnés.
1946–66.
Mixed media
assemblage,
242.6 × 177.8 cm.
Installation:
Philadelphia
Museum of Art.



7 | Main Street, U.S.A.
DISNEYLAND® Park at the DISNEYLAND® Resort.

peephole of light, the viewer becomes a voyeur of a sexually provocative scene, quite unlike the many nudes to be found elsewhere in the museum setting. Here the onlooker “completes” the work of art in that classically Duchampian sense, for until the figure in the tableau is spied on, a “connection” between the work and the spectator is not completed. (Indeed, only when the viewer has stepped on a hidden switch beneath the carpet at the entry to the room is the electric light of the installation illuminated.) Though *Etant donnés* benefits especially from a museum location, both because of the subject and the expectations and attitude of a museum visitor, any museum setting would be equally productive.

Just after World War II, the next great example of an enchantment, though not found in an art context, could be said to be Disneyland, opened in Anaheim, California in 1955 (fig. 7). Perhaps it is shocking to

think of Disneyland in the context of art, but within the narrower practice of installation, it offers an exceedingly apt comparison. There, the visitor is a participant in what Walt Disney, like Schwitters, described as a transforming experience: "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy."¹³ The themes found at Disneyland offered a new vision of familiar surroundings, while the perambulation of it promoted an interactive and spatial relationship. Disneyland, according to Jeffrey Saletnik, instituted environments that "work on the assumption that the participant brings with him the tools—his body and his senses—in which to experience the work on a phenomenological level. The participant need not be versed in the history of art to have a primary reaction to an installation work."¹⁴

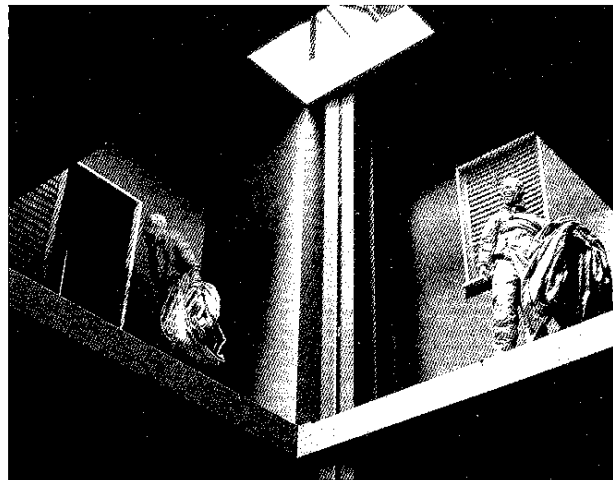
Disneyland was perhaps the single most significant and influential force in shaping a large American public's expectations about similar experiences, suggesting that a total environment of sensory pleasures might be possible in a "leisure" situation.¹⁵ In turn, one could ruminate on the extent to which this form of activity became the prototype for an expectation that art was potentially a "leisure entertainment," too, much as newspapers routinely lump the arts together in sections under this rubric. In other words, some portion of the art-going public came to expect and want to be catered to by cultural activities that offer a participatory component, and which installations are so thoroughly geared to provide. A full-body escape from reality, in which someone else's aura and world-view dominate the viewer's entire perceptual field, is the goal. This comparison shows that an apparently non-art phenomenon possesses characteristics associated with the artistic tendency of installation, and that both types of work require a very similar type of participation by the viewer.

Tableaux of all kinds have existed through many eras, indeed, the phenomenon of the period room, still found in many museums, is a variant on this. In each example a milieu is created that is observed and perhaps participated in; these are also highly movable affairs. Along with large-scale theatrical productions, such manifestations are part of the backdrop of enchantments, as is Disneyland. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the tableau was the fundamental approach of artists such as George Segal and Edward Kienholz, and on a small scale, Joseph Cornell. All made intimate worlds that one observed in a kind of voyeuristic fashion, the viewer having the sense of being on the verge of trespassing on some private place. But in the late 1950s and early 1960s, artists began expanding on these examples, perhaps with Disneyland's all-encompass-

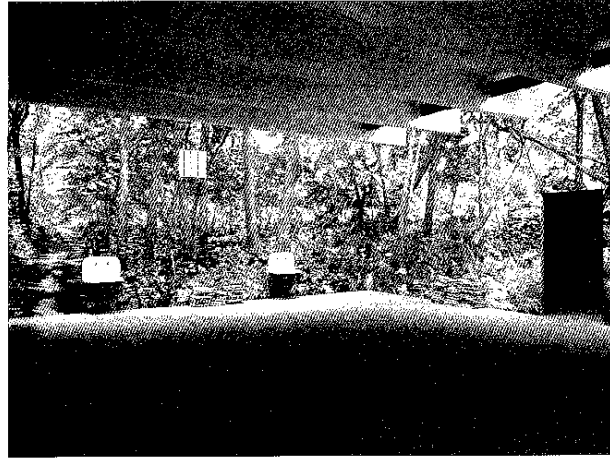
ing model consciously or subconsciously in mind, to produce theatrical-cum-art events known as happenings. Pioneered by Alan Kaprow, happenings were theatrically oriented in the most fundamental sense, but offered the possibility for the viewer to walk through staging replete with sensory stimulation, unlike what occurred before the proscenium. The artificiality of the situation along with its insubstantial materials made for the perception that process and momentary experience were paramount. These were performances, so the creator's and viewer's time were the same.

The sense of a tableau is very much the situation in the installations of Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden, Robert Gober, Ann Hamilton, and Juan Muñoz among others. For instance, Beuys's *Plight* (1984) is a walk in environment, in which the felt-covered walls immediately create an otherworldly aura. The objects within, like a Symbolist dreamscape, suggest a sphere of portents. Muñoz's *Double Bind* (2001) (figs. 8a and 8b) at the Tate Gallery, London, is a highly dramatic work that tantalizes the viewer who must remain below its spaces. We spy on the activities occurring overhead, in a kind of Piranesian sphere made three-dimensional. The *Untitled* (fig. 9) installation for the Dia Art Center by Gober in 1992, is similarly surrealistic for its unexpected conjunctions, and not a little frightening in its claustrophobic setting. Though initially created specifically for their sites, each of these three works, with their hermetic and enclosed arrangements, can be retrofitted at other locations.

8a, 8b Juan Muñoz, *Double Bind*, 2001.
Installation detail: Tate Modern, London.



Robert Gober. Installation detail:
The Center for the Arts, New York, 1992.



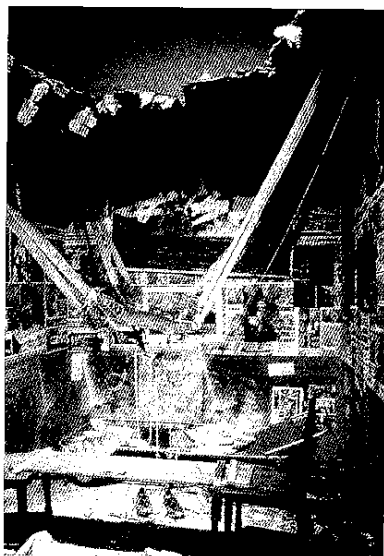
Likewise, the many video installations that have populated the art world for thirty years follow the model of the Enchantment, with the viewer standing before a dream- or nightmare-like world, more often contemplating than participating. Bruce Nauman, Shirin Neshat, and Bill Viola make video installations that appear on at least two surfaces simultaneously, thereby surrounding the viewer. Though initially presented in one space, each work is easily moved to another.

Ilya Kabakov is perhaps best known for his installations of ersatz Russian tenements, in which is found an ambiguity between enchantment, re-creation, and impersonation (fig. 10). The Western viewer is immersed and engrossed in the post-World War II Soviet Union, with all its deprivations. Whereas flimsy objects may elsewhere suggest the detritus of a consumer society, similar material in a Kabakov installation has poetic implications. For him, forlorn objects help to create an atmosphere redolent of Soviet times,¹⁶ as the aura of postwar Germany is suggested by the materials in Beuys's installations and vitrines. In keeping with the enchantment approach, Kabakov wants to create a separation, using walls and doorways, between his installation and the museum or gallery in which it is found, all the better to create for the spectator the sense of entering a world apart from the external world. Nonetheless, as with so many installation artists, placement in a museum is very desirable to Kabakov because, he says, the art context provides a "refuge."¹⁷

From the early 1970s through the late 1980s, Jonathan Borofsky has made a career of filling art spaces with his form of enchantment. Consisting

of paintings, sculptures, and wall drawings, as well as music on occasion, each installation is arrayed on every possible surface and space. Typically, Borofsky drew images that extended from one flat surface to another so as to reinforce the aura of an inner, free-associating landscape. Although site-specific, his wall drawings were really intended to erase any sense of the architecture at all. Closest to the ambience of cave painting, Borofsky's installations were walk-in dreams; in some cases, participation was encouraged, for example, by the presence of a ping-pong table (fig. 11).

The enchantment format is particularly the province of nomadic, global artists who enjoy international citizenship at massive biennale-type exhibitions. Their approach—reenacting or simulating a far-off locale—requires a movable endeavor, going along with the type of exhibitions in which these artists so often participate. *Explorer and Explorers Confronting the History of Exploration...! The Theater of the World* (2002) by Georges Adéagbo, a Benin artist, was created for the Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany. As with Borofsky, one feels as if one has entered the mind of the artist, in this case seeing the wildly diverse ideas and interests possessed by him. Indeed, it is a kind of global village of sources, from Joseph Beuys to Georges Rouault to Egypt to South America. For that same exhibition, Pascal Marthine Tayou simulated a Cameroon village with *Game Station*, and Tania Bruguera approximated a Cuban jail. All of these works demonstrate the convergence of the enchantment with the impersonation.



10 Ilya Kabakov, *10 Characters: The Man who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1988.
Installation detail: Ron Feldman Gallery, New York.

11 Jonathan Borofsky, Installation detail:
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 1980.

