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THE FROZEN MOMENT:
REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE, TIME, AND THE EXPERIENTIAL IN
INSTALLATION ART

by

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Installation art, as we have come to know it today, arose from the 20th century practice of expanding the definition of art and moving away from “the traditional,” both in medium and in subject matter. Past art movements and techniques paved the way for installation, beginning with Cubism’s break with realism and continuing with later trends of using unconventional materials, new spaces, and the viewer’s experience as part of the artwork. Each new movement expanded upon the previous generation’s ideas, and installation art became one of the contemporary art pinnacles to incorporate these themes. Contemporary installation artists utilize space and sculpture, continuing to expand upon the initial ideas of questioning what art can be and where it can be seen. My own contribution to the conversation is an installation that examines time and the experiential through a single, frozen moment of an explosion.

One of the first major breaks with the traditional realist style was Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)*, which launched the beginning of Cubism and laid the foundation for modern art. As Newhall notes in his *History of Photography*, the perfection of photography and film and its accuracy in depicting the world freed art forms that were traditionally tied to realism. A photograph could capture the likeness of a subject quickly, and often more accurately, than a painting or drawing. The mechanical innovation of the camera paved the way for other media to experiment. Hence Cubism, with its segmentation of form and abstraction through geometric shapes, stepped away from imitating nature. Instead, Cubists flattened their subjects in space and depicted multiple perspectives at once. This was the beginning of modern art, as newer generations delved deeper into the question of what art could be.

Once Cubism became the expected and emulated style, a new artist shook the tenants of the art world with the introduction of the readymade. Marcel Duchamp, originally a Cubist artist, submitted an unaltered, signed urinal entitled *Fountain* to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. What ensued was a new era in art production: the “readymade,” or found object, became an acceptable material to use in art. Artists were no longer expected to build every aspect of their artwork, but instead had the option to incorporate objects that were mass-produced or built by others. First, Cubism dissected and altered the subject matter; next, the materials used to create art were called into question. The endless potential of turning ordinary objects into readymades initiated a new spark in the art world: a melding of art and everyday life, and transforming something elite into something common. This opened up a new world of possibility for artists: a way to critique the everyday by using objects from the everyday.

Not only did readymades allow for the exploration of new themes, but they were also an important step for installation art in regards to context and space. What is the distinction between “art,” a signed urinal placed in a gallery, and “non-art,” a graffitied urinal in a restroom? Duchamp’s *Fountain* confronts the viewer with an object that is only art within the context of the gallery. Thus, it forces the viewer to reconsider the gallery as a space, and leads to a multitude of questions. Can art be art outside of the gallery? Where do we draw the line between art and non-art? In what other contexts can art be viewed? Installation art arose, in part, as artists began questioning the contexts in which art was seen and, in turn, the spaces that housed artwork.

A second influence of the readymade was how it dramatically changed the concept of sculpture. “Assemblage,” the assembling of non-art objects into a work of art,

became a common form of art that melded the idea of the readymade with sculpture.¹ Sculpture no longer had to be sculpted from traditional materials like marble or clay; the materials themselves could be found objects, and this further pushed the boundaries between media. One key work is Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, or *The Large Glass*. Built between 1915 and 1923, the material list includes oil, lead foil, wire, and dust, arranged meticulously on two panes of glass. Not quite a sculpture or a painting, *The Large Glass* expands upon the concepts of the readymade and assemblage, using the readymade glass as a type of canvas for the piece.

Assemblage not only opened up new avenues for artists utilizing non-traditional materials, but it also encouraged new ways in which to consider space. Assemblage often incorporated or directly referenced its surroundings as a part of the piece. There was a similarity between found objects and found places, and the fluidity between the two further melded art and life. This led to the third key factor of installation art: site-specificity.

Modern and Contemporary artists started building and showing their artwork within a particular environment, and the pieces were often inextricably tied to their surroundings. Site-specificity can have a large range of meanings, and Oliveira, Oxley and Petry explain the complexity in *Installation Art in the New Millennium*:

Site-specificity implies neither simply that a work is to be found in a particular place, nor, quite, that it *is* that place. It means, rather, that what the work looks like and what it means is dependent in large part on the configuration of the space in which it is realized... What is important about a space can be any one of a number of things: its dimensions..., it's general character, the materials from which it is constructed, the use to which it has previously been put..., the part it played in an event of historical or political significance, and so on. (p 35, emphasis mine)

¹ Robert Atkins. "Assemblage." *The Museum of Contemporary Art*. Artspeak, n.d. Web. 8 Dec. 2013.

Yet with all of these various qualifications, most site-specific installations use the context as a part of the piece, and the location can be as broad as an artist's studio or a vacant parking lot. Therefore, the tradition of viewing artwork in the highly constructed spaces of a gallery or museum was changing with the introduction of new art forms. It was bringing art out of its controlled environment and into the chaos of everyday life. As Rosenthal mentions in *Understanding Installation Art*, site-specific artwork is not a new phenomenon. Michelangelo designed his fresco for the Sistine Chapel around the unique curvatures of the ceiling and adjusted the perspective of the figures to accommodate the viewer below. Cave paintings in Lascaux use the cave's color and texture to accentuate details of the figures. In contemporary installation art, the context and site-specificity is an inherent property of the work, and artists often use this to question what constitutes a work of art.

As art movements of the 20th century continued to redefine past conceptions of art, it allowed for newer media to develop. Through a combination of the readymade, the changing context in which art was viewed, and site-specificity, installation art was born. As more artists began working in installation, many different movements arose, each utilizing a different aspect of the new medium. One of these movements, Light and Space Art from the 1960s and 70s, focuses directly on the viewer's experience and interaction with the art as a space. Working primarily with light as the main medium, Light and Space artists manipulate the surrounding space to alter the visual perceptions of the viewer. In Bruce Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* (1970), for example, Nauman creates an immersive environment that the viewer enters. The viewers inch down a 1-foot wide, neon green corridor and, when they emerge, their surroundings appear to have a pink tint.

This type of installation art explored an entirely new concept: art without objects.

Nauman plays with perception; the artwork is less about the piece itself, and more about the effects it has on the viewer. Another example that also alters the viewer's perception, this time through lack of light, is John Orr's *Zero Mass* (1972-73). You enter what appears to be a pitch-black room, but after spending a few minutes in the space, your eyes start to adjust to the darkness and you can make out the outlines of other people in the room. After about fifteen minutes, you can see well enough to make out facial expressions and clothing details. This piece is entirely experiential; it is little more than an oval-shaped, dimly lit room. In both *Green Light Corridor* and *Zero Mass*, the pieces are spaces, not objects, and *how* the viewer interacts with that space is the integral part of the artwork.

It is with this history of readymades, site-specificity, and a focus on an experiential space that I turn to my own senior thesis. The development of the medium and the milestones made by past artists predicate any contemporary work. Their influence is within the art, regardless of intention. Within my own work, I use found materials; build a space for a viewer to explore; and play with light. Each of these elements are grounded in past art movements, and I have the opportunity to utilize their past innovations and contributions to the art world.

For my project, I use these properties and techniques of installation art to explore the theme of time. Within my studio, I built a web of fishing line and tempered glass that visually imitates a single, frozen moment of an explosion. The materials I used were found objects; though I broke most of the glass myself, it originally came from discarded car windows and shower doors. I glued glass shards together and suspended the



fragments around a light, as if a glass light fixture suddenly exploded into hundreds of pieces. The viewer enters the space through a curtain and walks into the explosion, with glass suspended from all sides. I painted the surrounding walls black and blocked out external light so the only light source was from the indistinct bulb. This cast deep shadows on the walls and seemed to further envelop the viewer in the mass of glass shards. The goal was to create a dichotomy between the frozen moment of the

explosion and the viewers' own perceptions of time as they walk around the space, juxtaposing the concepts of real and constructed time.



The theme of time in art is also not a new phenomenon, as many artists explore portrayals of time through various media. As Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel explain *Themes of Contemporary Art*, there are two ways in which time is depicted in art: static sculpture that *represents* time, and moving, changing work that *embodies* time. As an installation piece, my project focuses on representing time; a static work that conveys frozen movement.

The “frozen moment” has been depicted in art for thousands of years. The Roman Laocoön from the 1st century freezes a single moment with intense movement, as the figures twist in agony. Caravaggio painted contorted figures in the middle of an action. Degas looked at capturing ballet dancers mid-movement, as dancers leap through the air. As Robertson and McDaniel note, “any work of art that appears to halt movement at a dynamic moment creates an impression of arrested time.”² Photography was especially well suited for representing time, since the light-sensitive film records the light and movement of a subject in front of the lens. The technological advancements of the camera and film also made it possible to make very short exposures, seeming to freeze a moment in place. Eadweard Muybridge was one of the first photographers to experiment with freezing movement for scientific studies, and his photographs revealed movement that could not be seen by the naked eye. This property of the camera has been used for artistic purposes as well; Henri Cartier Bresson’s “decisive moment,” for example, utilizes the camera in order to freeze a moment that can never be recreated. His *Behind the Gare St. Lazare* (1932) arrests time as a man jumps over a puddle, his heel inches away from touching the water and sending ripples through the still reflection.

² Mark Rosenthal. *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*. New York: Prestel Publishing, 2003. Print. (116)

Contemporary photographers have continued to examine this theme, utilizing the camera's capacity to take millisecond exposures.

For my thesis, I looked to both photographers and installation artists to see how they represented time in their art. Ori Gerst, Heide Fasnacht, Cornelia Parker, and E.V Day each used explosions in unique ways to convey the sense of a frozen moment, and these four artists helped me visualize my own space. Ori Gersht, a contemporary photographer, created a series entitled *Blow Up* (2007): high-speed photographs of exploding vases, flowers, and fruit. Gersht captures a moment that is too fleeting to be seen without the help of a camera. Some pieces remain intact while others are reduced to shreds, catapulted in all directions. The result is violent and beautiful, as the photographs are able to capture the dynamic movement in sharp focus. I studied the explosions in Gersht's photographs in order to recreate a similar shape in a three-dimensional space.

While Gersht freezes time through high-speed photographs, Fasnacht, Parker, and Day create a similar effect through sculpture and installation. In her piece entitled *Demo* (2000), Heide Fasnacht visually replicates a building in the midst of its demolition. This sculpture is Robertson and McDaniel's example of a stop-action sculpture, since "what would normally occur in the blink of an eye is frozen for us to peruse at our leisure."³ This encapsulates the paradoxes of making art about a frozen moment in time; "First, there is the (rapidly moving) time of the actual explosion; second, the (stopped) time of the artwork's depiction; and third, the (much slower but still moving) time of the viewer's experience walking around and looking at the artwork."⁴ These three aspects of

³Mark Rosenthal. *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*. New York: Prestel Publishing, 2003. Print. (112)

⁴ Ibid, (112-113)

time are similarly explored in E.V. Day's *Bride Fight* (2006) and Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), though in a more fantastical subject matter. In *Bride Fight*, the installation piece consists of two wedding gowns ripped to shreds and suspended in mid-air. The taut fabric of the dresses, along with the careful placement of the gloves, shoes, and veils, capture the intense energy of the imaginary fight. Time is an essential element in this piece, as her sculpture "captures a cinematic freeze frame moment before total destruction."⁵ Similarly, *Cold Dark Matter* creates a space that gives the "exploded view" of a demolished garden shed and the objects inside. Lit from the interior, the sculpture casts shadows on the gallery's walls that seem to extend the explosion to the surrounding space. Parker's use of light is also referential to the perceptual qualities of Light and Space art; the shadows manipulate the surrounding space to envelop the viewer within the self-contained explosion. The viewer can walk around the work and explore the half-demolished objects amidst the rubble, creating a brilliant juxtaposition between the sculpture's frozen moment and the viewer's perceptions of time. Along with the theme of time, *Cold Dark Matter* also creates an intimacy between the piece and the viewer. To see every tool, book, toy, and article of clothing within, the viewer must walk around the space and discover each component. For my own project, I also encourage an interaction and personal engagement with the space.

To create this interaction, a single viewer enters the space at a time. While there are a few shards of glass at the entrance, it is much more concentrated towards the center of the installation. From the entrance, there is a clearing within the pieces of glass that

⁵ E.V. Day. "Bride Fight, 2006." *E.V. Day Studio*. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 Nov. 2013.

allow the viewer to walk through the explosion and stand directly in front of the central mass of glass and light. The viewers' experiences change as they walk through the explosion; from afar, the viewer is observing the explosion; from within, the viewer is immersed inside it. As one walks toward the center of the installation, the light reflects off different shards of glass; and the viewer's movement gives the sculpture the appearance of movement. With one person in the space at a time, the viewer is further removed from reality as he or she is immersed in a fantastical, frozen moment.

Most installation art encourages an interaction with the space, and I studied the work of Lee Bontecou and James Turrell to see how their work engages the viewer. Lee Bontecou creates stunning mixed media wall pieces that create a disorienting experience. Often resembling windows to portals or spacecrafts, the pitch-black nothingness within creates a startling contrast to the external world of the gallery. With most of her work, only one person can view the interior space at a time, thus creating a personal and isolated experience. The drama of Bontecou's pieces influenced my decision to create a sharp contrast between the interior and exterior space of my installation; the sudden change is a clear signal that the viewer is entering an entirely different space. While Bontecou removes light, James Turrell utilizes it to alter the viewer's concept of space. Through seamless light installations, Turrell creates visually ambiguous environments that are primarily experiential and perceptual. One such piece is *Afrum (White)*, created during his early light experiments in the 1960s. A projection of a white light on a wall looks like a floating cube, either caving inward or protruding outward in space. The visual illusion changes depending on where the viewer is standing. This piece gives light the appearance of being a substantive object, and the viewer's interaction with the space

changes the illusion of its shape. One of Turrell's later works, *Key Lime* (1994), also uses light to create a visually ambiguous space. The work consists of three receding rectangles of colored light in a pitch-black room. The colors blend together, and hazy, colorful screens seem to fill the space instead of light. The surrounding space almost becomes invisible as one attempts to make sense of the confusing field of color. The darkness gives the lines of light more mystery and ambiguity, as it is impossible to discern between reality and illusion. In both *Afrum (White)* and *Key Lime*, the viewer's experience is central to the piece. The works use the viewer's movement to enhance the installation, and I use this idea within my own work to change the viewer's experience with the space.

For the fall project, I experimented with space, temporality, and the viewer's experience. In the spring, I will focus primarily on the theme of time, pushing it even farther to create a project with more thematic complexity. My current sources of inspiration are Sarah Sze's *Hidden Relief* (2001) and *The Art of Losing* (2004). The first is a small, fantastical world using the gallery wall itself; the second is a suspended, vortex-like structure surrounded by a staircase, giving the viewer multiple perspectives from which to view the art. While my own piece will continue to develop in the upcoming months, I have many potential ideas for the spring installation. Much like how the viewer experiences *The Art of Losing*, I want to change the perspective from which the viewer sees the piece. This could mean hanging the explosion from the ceiling, having it emerge directly from the gallery wall, or creating a space for the viewer to sit or lie down when looking at the work. Next, I want to explore the use of other materials. Both *Hidden Relief* and *The Art of Losing* use materials such as paper, thread, wire, and

wood, and I am interested in including other objects with the tempered glass that would give the explosion a story or a deeper meaning. I will also remove the interior light and dark walls around the explosion, using the gallery lighting to cast harsh shadows on the surrounding space.

Installation art is a medium that has endless thematic possibilities. Temporality, space, and altering perceptions are only a few ways to approach the installation medium. In building this explosion, my goal was to question the viewer's experience of time and perception. Through this work, I hoped to show how both time and perception can be a relative and personal experience.



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