3. INTERACTIVITY AS ARTISTIC MEDIATION SYSTEM. INSTALLATION AND PARTICIPATIVE PROJECTS

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Abstract: *The first official step toward active participation and interaction was made by John Cage, Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, and other artists connected to the happening and Fluxus movements from 1950-1960. Since than the conceptual art maximizes the importance given to the shape and interaction as an artistic product. Essentially, the installations named environmental art bring before the visitor of the exhibition, the viewer, the entire sensory experience, more than the canvas centered on a "neutral" wall or on isolated objects on a pedestal. Analyzing some of this art works we discover that the installations leave the space and time in their usual size with a desire to highlight and understand the experience in a critical manner. This involves dissolving the border between art and life. These interactive installations have been succeeded in the next decade of participatory projects which supported the idea of reflection on the relationship of the individual with technology and the others, but also explored it with other resources, even more direct.*
Key words: *artistic installation, interactivity, art public, participation, sensorial experience*

1. Introduction

Almost all the installations have in common the consideration they give to the viewer's experience. The thing that the viewer of an assembly of elements, called installation, can be sure of is the basic general rules for the perception of space and time. However, they are determined by the artist himself.

In *Art and Objecthood*, Michael Fried[171] recognizes a certain theatrical note in the composition of the installations. There is indeed a close parallel between installations and theatre, both artistic forms expose to an audience who expects to be immersed in a sensorial narrative experience surrounding it, while maintaining a degree of identity as a spectator. Traditionally the one who goes to the theatre does not forget that he comes into space and attends a particular experience created. Thus, the installations receive the curious and impatient visitor, a visitor aware of being in an exhibition site. But in both cases, there is a potential for transposition into a newly created environment, different from the usual reality. The construction of a scene-based framework as an environment for the development of actions is an essential prerequisite for further development of installations.

From the early decades of the 20th century, exploration of the framework is gradually becoming a constant concern, which will provide new ways of approach, interpretation, or concept. From the first museums or art galleries or the first official exhibitions, the artwork was awarded a physical reception frame that required a certain distance between the artwork and the viewer. Tradition and education

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[171] M. Fried, Art and Objecthood", in *Artforum 5* (June 1967): 12-23. Also in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock (ed.), New York, 1968, pp. 116-147

required a type of contemplation based on the duality of real physical space (art gallery, museum) – fictitious space created (artwork). Thus, each viewer knew he was facing an artwork with its own frame and life.

2. Discussions

Breaking the barriers between the two worlds was a process specific to the last century, rooted in the avant-gardes of the early decades, but with a better consolidation after the Second World War. The reasons for which the conquering of the outside space of a visual artwork has been a major interest for some artists are difficult to identify. It could first be said that the desire for novelty and originality, specific to modernism, has pushed the artists to look for new expressions in the outside environment of an artwork. It also seems that it was no longer enough to explore the canvas or some marble block to bring satisfaction to an audience always looking for new, nor to the artist who seemed to have consumed all the traditional techniques. *The white manifesto* or *Spatialism* of Lucio Fontana[172], had become a milestone since 1946, when it was published, for those who claimed that traditional forms had to be answered by integrating other new elements such as space and time into the artwork.

As part of this creative approach, the role attributed to the audience is of increasing importance. He not only assists, but also participates actively, emotionally, in the experience in which he is led by the artist. The exploration of these new environments made the viewer face to face with a new way of understanding the role of approaching an artwork. And not just a physical approach, but an approach involving the participation in the creative process through the integration into the environment proposed by the artist.

Dan Graham performs in 1974 *Present Continuous Past(s)*, an interactive installation where the viewer is involved in a metaphor over time. The mirrors surrounding the room reflect the present, and the camcorder records what's happening in the room space and reproduces the images on a monitor with 8 seconds' delay. A relation is also created between the monitor and its projection which, in their turn are recorded by the camera.8

Digital multimedia technology developed very much in the 1980s, including the process of interaction between the devices and the users, yet the relationship was only about purely technical interaction. But not long has passed and this type of interaction begun to be exploited by artistic circles. Some forms of media interaction would be: Interactive television or cinema (Lynn Hershman, *Deep Contact*, 1989-1990), the interaction between the body and a digital system (Jeffrey Shaw, *The Legible City*, 1988; Peter Weibel, *Die Wand, der Vorhang fachsprachlich auch: Lascaux,* 1993; Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau, *A-Volve*, 1993-1994 or Ulrike Gabriel-*Breath,* 1992-1993), interaction as dialogue (Paul Sermon, *Telematic Dreaming*, 1992 or Agnes Hegedü, *Between the Words*, 1995).

In these installations the viewer is no longer just a receiver, but his status also adds up to that of an agent. These types of interactions also have a pronounced

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[172] In 1946 Lucio Fontana makes public *The White Manifesto* with his students

isolation note, require a single reception. That's just the viewer in relation to the respective device and only him can participate to the experience in a given period of time. These *environments* are not dedicated to inter-human communication, but only condition a unique machine-man relationship. Certainly, the installations originally called *environmental art* bring the entire sensory experience in front of the visitor, the viewer, more than the canvas centered on a *neutral* wall or the objects isolated on a pedestal. One of the greatest transformations in art, but rather its reception, is the fact that *the reading*, understanding, reception of the projects is made according to the context. The visual object is related to the environment, the environment itself plays a formative role on the object, and the result of these connections is in fact the complexity and finality of any project.

The installations leave the space and time in their usual size with a desire to highlight and understand the experience in a critical manner. This implies the dissolution of the boundaries between art and life, between art regarded as art and art regarded as a real environment. The artist and art critic Ilya Kabakov mention the key role played by the viewer within the experience of the installation in the introduction of the work *On the "Total" Installation*: "*The viewer is both a visitor and a victim who, on the one hand, researches and evaluates the installation and, on the other, follows those associations, reconstructions that arise in himself; at the same time, he is influenced to a large extent by the atmosphere of total illusion.*"[173]

The installations attach a particular importance to the observer and to what is observed by him. Kaprow notes that, the public of art as a spectator can be completely eliminated by integrating him into the artwork alongside the space, time and the material objects that make it up, which leads to the disappearance of theatrical conventions of reception.[174] The space, the light, the surface, the shape, the structure, the context and the constituent elements are some of the features to be reported when talking about an installation, whether it is placed in a context such as urban space, art gallery or even a digital environment. Installations often have a finite existence and the elements such as time, interaction or photo documentation are becoming increasingly important and a growing report on the result. The finality is determined by clear parameters such as the impact on the public, the degree of interaction and the functionality of the interaction. Thus, at the end of any project, the audience is the who can guarantee for the success or failure of an idea, insofar as the interaction exercised a certain influence on it, actively involved it in understanding the respective work.

In any case, whatever the basis, the meaning of the term interaction is subject to multiple transformations from participatory actions such as *happenings* or Fluxus between 1950-1960 to the interactive media art between 1980-1990. On the one hand, the change of meaning is since the broad spectrum of interpretation of the term allows interaction to encompass both the theory of interdependent social action and the human-machine technological relationship. From 1960 to 1990 the

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[173] I. Kabakov, *On the "Total" Installation*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 1995, p. 256
[174] A. Kaprow, „Notes on the Elimination of the Audience" (1966) in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, MIT and Whitechapel, Cambridge and London, 2006, p.103

notion of social interaction was dominated by a much more technological definition - human-machine interaction. Dieter Daniels[175], combines this change of paradigm with the following theory: while in the 1960s the media was still seen as one of the many means used to create socio-cultural utopian specific to a society in a constant search of sensational, a change occurred in the 1990s, the decade in which media technology was often seen as the "leitmotif for all social, cultural or economic transformations."[176]

If during the interwar period, or even in the 1950s, the interaction was more about the intersection of the artistic expression media - visual arts, music, theatre, choreography, show and poetry and the ever more direct connection with the audience, once some frames have been broken, the interest of this process has focused more on the technological plan. It was also normal in the context of a society in accelerated technological development, which involved not only the economic but also the social-cultural changes. This notion will receive new interpretive values in the 1990s when the Internet will intermediate and influence the entire social life more rapidly and more strongly.

3. Results

It is also certain that the 1990s brought with them a major transformation regarding the interaction of the spectator with the artwork in general. The concept of interaction[177] is less focused on the notions of media technology, they are important, but they move to the background, and more focused on a communication, social interaction. Most of the projects involving interaction, whether generated or not by technological means, are directed toward cooperation and involvement of participants in various joint actions in order to facilitate the communication networks between them. In the '70s-'80s, we lived in an entertainment society, in the '90s, in one of participation, and we are now developing a society of interaction.[178]

In installations such as *The Legible City* (1988) of the artist Jeffrey Shaw, *Breath* (1992-93) of Ulrike Gabriel or *Telematic Dreaming* (1992) of Paul Sermon, the visitor does not only remain a receiver, but also becomes an agent of the project. The concept of telematics is becoming increasingly important in the context of interactive environments at the end of the decade of 1980. *Tele-presence* allows the visitor a multiple spatial experience. He is both in physical, real and virtual space, simulated from the landmarks of reality or fictitious. A good example would be *Hole in Space* a project from 1980 of the artists Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz[179], in which visitors could experience, mediated by a satellite, the possibility of being simultaneously in two major US cities, New York and Los Angeles, in real and virtual space, through acoustic and visual contacts with other

[175]R. Frieling, Dieter Daniels, „Media Art Interaction, The 1980s and 1990s in Germany", ed. Goethe-Institut München / ZKM Karlsruhe, Springer, Vienna, New York, 2000, pp. 170–197
[176] Dieter Daniels, „*Strategies of Interactivity*", in *Media Art Interaction–The 1980s and 1990s in Germany*, Rudolf Frieling/Dieter Daniels (eds.), Vienna, New York, 2000, pp. 170
[177] It should be mentioned that *interaction* aims to concept, and *interactive* is the adjective of the result of applying this concept in practice
[178] N. de Oliveira, *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2003, p.106
[179] Since 1977, they have been working under the name of *Mobile Image*

visitors. Even before 1990, when the internet and other communication media boom, the artists experienced complex communication structures, collaborative projects. They also focused on the text, its collective composition, the ever-closer relationship between the author and the reader, the text as an artwork, also based on Jacques Derrida's concepts of deconstruction, intertextual theories (Julia Kristeva) or the theory of "author's death" (Roland Barthes).

The experiences of the '60s-'70s in the use of video camera, monitors, computer and relationships that can be created between space, projection and audience have been the basis for complex installations that were developed by artists in 1990-2000, along with technological developments. Video projects are also included in the context of interactivity, alongside the successful digital projects of the '80s. Most often, they provided visitors with a few variants of topics that could be modified, by a narrative structure or not, and randomly recomposed at their own choice.

Grahame Weinbren develops such installations with multiple subjects such as *The Erl King* (1986) or *Sonata* (1991-93). From a feminist context Lynn Hershman gives the interaction in her installations a sexual dimension, turning the attendant viewer into a *voyeur* (*Deep Contact*, 1989-90; *A Room of One's Own*, 1992). The potential to extend such approaches to collective productions was demonstrated by *Videolabyrinth,* 1988, an interactive labyrinth containing three platforms, a project developed by the video artists Rike Anders, Ilka Lauchstädt, Mari Cantu and the programmer Martin Potthoff. The attempts of the entertainment and TV industry to make interactive films and TV programs did not delay showing up, but the success was not as expected. This may be partly due to complicated operating conditions, but also to the preference of the audience for a linear narration in TV programs.

The notions and concepts of interaction, participation and communication are central in the art of the 20th century and in the few years of the 21st century, and they also concern the artwork, the receiver, and the artist. These terms imply a shift from closed to open work, from static object to dynamic process, from contemplative reception to active participation. There is a shift outside the concept of "author", alongside "author as producer"[180], even the idea of the "death of the author "intervened at one point[181], to the idea of multiple author, collective or co-author. The 19th century artist-genius gradually become an initiator of the communication process, whether purely visual, philosophical, or even social or political, involved in any plan of everyday life. More than a form of artistic expression the installation, as we know it today, has allowed and facilitated, above all, a development – from object to environment, from object to surrounding space, to context and concept. In all these modifications, the presence of light has intervened and played an important role, understood as form of connection of objects, phenomena, etc. The light environment together with the interaction factor belong to a broad spectrum in which the combination of these can take place on

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[180] W. Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*,1934, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, pp. 768-782
[181] The term was used by Roland Barthes in an essay published in the magazine *Aspen*, no. 5-6 in 1967

several planes between the elements of a work, between the work and the public, between the context and the work.

If we were to start from a concrete definition of installations, as we find in the glossary of publications that present the art context at the end of the millennium[182], which only tells us that this field of visual-artistic creation integrates the exhibition space as an important aesthetic component, we realize that the space around an artwork has been integrated into the perceptive-interpretative system since the oldest human manifestations of artistic character. Who can deny that there was no strong visual relationship between the walls of a prehistoric cave, other than the physical one, and that the prehistoric paintings did not follow in their successive, alternative, repetitive or random arrangement a certain way of linking the space with the viewer? Or that the assembly of a church, summing up the architectural frame, the painting, the sculpture, the stained-glass window, the music, whether instrumental (organ) or coral, the decoration of the altar or other visual-auditive elements in the respective space did not create a specific framework in which physical, perceptible experience combined with the actions that took place during the mass was capable of shifting a complete experience (spiritual in this case) to emotional acceptance? Here there is no longer the frame, the art object on the pedestal, the borders, but the entire atmosphere created, the space surrounding you, the replaced life, and the life substituting art.

The physical location of the installations is a powerful element for the perception of the viewer, for his experience, in understanding the role of the direct contact with the environment of a visual project in its purpose. Thus, the space becomes an environment endowed with different properties depending on the interest and stake of the author, whether it is a concrete, staged space in which the objects play an important role, whether it is a virtual space built digitally, independently of or linked to an Internet network, or it is just a sound-based environment. In any of these cases, penetration within that framework leads us to the integration needed to understand the purpose of the project. Among the artists who have frequently approached this way of achieving the artworks we can count Robert Smithson, Andy Goldsworthy, Christo, Richard Serra, Brandon LaBelle, or the younger Sarah Sze or Simparch and others. The interest in the installation of projects varies greatly, from conventional spaces such as art galleries or contemporary art museums to unique, varied, specific sites or even natural areas. In each case, the relationships with the space evolve differently due to these variable elements.

A classification or at least a special note can be obtained by preference for a particular environment or specific combinations of working environments. But everything is subordinated to the general concept promoted by the artist and for this reason precise orders or classifications are impossible to achieve. However, a few examples can be enlightening for these different types of space (environment) that the artists use. The identification of clear categories is relative but supported by common characteristics. The space of the gallery has also undergone almost unrecognizable transformations; from the "white cube" to architectural assemblies

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[182] An example would be Uta Grosenick, *Art Now*, Taschen, Köln, 2005

with real personality, the space chosen to bring one project or another into light becomes a generator of relationships. As Brian O' Doherty informs us: *"the history of Modernism is intimately linked to this space, or rather the history of modern art can be linked to changes in that space and the way we look at it. We have now reached the point where we see first the space and then the art. (...) ideal gallery takes from the artwork all the clues that would interfere with the fact that it is art. The work is isolated from anything that distracts it from its own assessment. (...) Art exists in a kind of eternity of exposure and although the presence of a certain period is felt (late modernity), there is no time."[183]*

In short, "the apparent neutrality of the white wall is an illusion" and is recognized as an illusion with Postmodernism, when "the space of the gallery is no longer neutral"[184], but it was recognized both in its physical presence and in its symbolic functions (economic, ideological). The absolute neutrality of the white cube, seen as the absolute area of the exposure, discussed extensively by Brian O'Doherty in his essay[185], it is now increasingly being challenged by the question of whether a clear dividing line between art and visual culture is still needed. The separation of the art inside the white cube from the surrounding world can be regarded as a split between life and art, but at the same time there was a need to clarify the concepts in the exhibition frame, a clear detachment so that the message would not be altered by the environment. Thus, the empty, neutral space would be the ideal place for any kind of exhibition. At the same time, there is a need for clear separation between the parts of the same project. And this was due to the removal of any limitation of relationships. Any object could be put in touch with what was happening or existing around it.

Within the white cube, the artist could start from zero when composing the space and building the relationships between elements or the relation with the audience. It was the environment without physical or temporal characteristics, a uniform environment. In modern art the space of the gallery acquires a neutrality that makes it possible to create any world within that space. Highlighting the gallery space as an environment of experience and highlighting its fundamental role as a "framework" for any aesthetic experience and any exposed object took place through the Historical exhibition of Yves Klein *Le Vide* since 1958. The empty space of the gallery itself became the object of the exposure.

There is a double influence and a constant and dynamic exchange of weight between the two basic visual elements: the framework and the content. The interaction occurs at the gallery level in two main ways: the interaction of the viewer with the environment, with the objects and shapes existing at the physical or dynamic level or the interaction can be between individuals as a result of the conditions created in that area. Here are some examples of the two types of relationships that can be created in a gallery, they can certainly be filled in by other examples and other types of relationships can develop from them.

Love Sounds is an installation set up in 1998 by Jaume Plensa, composed of

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[183] B. O'Doherty, *Inside the white cube*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 14-15
[184]*Idem*, p. 79
[185]*Ibidem*

five alabaster cubes, illuminated from the inside and equipped with a metal door each. Once inside, the insulated viewer hears amplified sounds recorded from 5 parts of his own body. The artist practically creates a world of sounds inaccessible to our common perception. This is about creating a double tension at the perceptive level in the space created by the Plensa, a claustrophobic one, but also in the sound atmosphere. The sculptural use of the object, material and sound elements shows one of the features characteristics of his projects. The installation targets the meditation, tactile and organic side of each. Obviously, what is important here is the intensive process of identifying the artist with the viewer.

The Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qian creates in *Cultural Melting Bath* a space at the border of natural with the artificial. It transports 30 tons of stone from the Diangsu area, China, to Queens Museum of Art, to achieve an environment according to the *feng shui* traditional principles. The rocks themselves were specially selected for their properties "to stimulate the circulation of energy and of the beneficial *qi* in the museum and on visitors"[186]. The medicinal plants specific to this environment have not been forgotten either. In fact, Cai sees this *therapeutic* environment of *Cultural Melting Bath* as a metaphor of healing, of the social environment. In the work he uses the term *melting pot* – crucible – inviting visitors of all kinds to experience this common bath, this practical fusion between the west and the east.

The viewer actively participates and is left to experiment without constraints an environment created especially for him. In this context, artificiality is overcome by the artist's desire to create an environment perfectly identical to the natural one. The experimentation of these new situations between participants of different cultures creates a communication openness that can bring them into contact with each other. *A Space for Conversation* of Simon Moretti is a performative project carried out in 2000 at Tate Modern, London. The installation consists of five circular stains placed in the museum Turbine Hall. The project proposes a simple communication exercise for the public present in that area. Visitors received a pen and a sheet of paper and were invited to communicate non-verbally but only by drawings[187]. They were thus engaged in a less common process. If the verbal language is the most common way in which we relate directly to those around us, a different way of communication is brought to the fore here, the visual one.

4. Conclusions

It was discovered that it is an equally effective way, but not as common in a direct conversation, that is present everywhere in our lives. Practically the artist comes to question the fact that we can practice and conduct not only verbal dialog, but also visual one. Visual conversation determines natural but not yet exploited types of interaction.

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[186] http://www.caiguoqiang.com/project_detail.php?id=22&iid=0
[187] N. de Oliveira, *op. cit.*, p.130

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