

Ways of Perceiving, Curation Essay

Art Vs the Spectator: Altered Spaces

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Art Vs the Spectator: Altered Spaces

This exhibition is about the relationship between art and the viewer, and what that means when the subject of the art is the artist themselves; does the viewer detach from the fact that the artist is a person and how does this vary in different spaces associated with different kinds of authority?

This exhibition aims to discuss how as contemporary Art becomes more public - due to “the erosion of the boundary between public and private art” (Mitchell, 1990, p.883) - will certain pieces allow people to act in ways they normally would not? This then induces further discussion of whether this is positive or negative, and the duality of safety vs freedom of expression. It includes endurance artists such as Marina Abramović and Yoko Ono, more specifically, pieces where the audience has become involved, and is highlighted by theories of authoritative spaces, and art vs the spectator.



Figure 1: First GB Logistics Warehouse (Maxar and Airbus, 2024)

The exhibition is being held in the First GB Logistics warehouse (figure 1) and is made up of four rooms, each relevant and often contradictory to the piece within. Ultimately, it is what Henri Lefebvre refers to as an “abstract space” as each room attempts to “relate negatively to that which perceives and underpins it” (Lefebvre, 1991, p.50) by drawing “its power ... from the subtle sources of juxtaposition and arrangement” (Obrist, 2014, p.32). The audience will walk through each space, and enter the next at the other end, with the entire warehouse acting as a sort of corridor. The warehouse – that has “an

absence of the place from itself” (Augé, 1995, p.69)- acts as what Augé and Certeau refer to as a “non-place” (1995, p.69); a place without any connotational meaning, leaving the individual rooms to each create their own environment. These spaces will force the perceiver to question their initial reactions to the pieces and allow comparison to how the average audience member behaves in its usual display space, thinking about Obrist’s ideas on “the encounter between the spectator and one work dominated” (2014, p.29). When discussing Michel de Certeau’s definitions of ‘place’ and ‘space’, Marc Augé summarises “it is the pedestrians who transform a street into a space” (Augé, 1995, p.64), as “space, for [Michel De Certeau], is a ‘frequented place’”. This theory can be related to the idea that art does not become art until there is an observer, just as a space is not such until it has been entered.

In the first room you will see Yoko Ono’s performance ‘Cut Piece’ in a large room that appears as an historical Monastery. Most monasteries require people – particularly women – who enter to keep a lot of their bodies covered. Viewers will be met with a sign requesting this upon entry, that will make the expectations of this setting clear. The intention is to create contrast between the piece and its instructions, and what the spectator deems appropriate in a space like this.

Next, in the second room, is a hospital wing containing ‘Rhythm 0’ by Marina Abramović. Both these pieces have previously been performed on stages or in gallery spaces, however, Obrist has more recently discussed how “artists [have begun] to treat sets of rooms or entire museums as the context for a work” (2014, p.29). This is one of the ideas that these curated spaces intend to focus on, and this room will showcase that well.

The audience can then move into a room much more familiar to the viewer; “reduced to a minimum, resulting in a clean, spare gallery space” or better known by Obrist as “The White cube” (2014, p.29). This room contains another performance piece by David Blaine known as ‘Above the Below’. Originally held in public above the river Thames, this room acts as an almost reverse of the previous two, and takes it out of its context rather than putting it into one.

The fourth and final room will insert the audience into the piece ‘Cayote’ by Joseph Beuys using projected imagery, where *they* will be inside the cage with Joseph Beuys observing from the outside. This forces “the viewer, [to become] the works’s performer as well as its observer” (Obrist, 2014, p.17), breaking down the boundary between the art and its audience.



Figure 2: Cut Piece (Photographed, Ono, 1964)

As put in the book 'Art and Feminism' (Reckitt and Phelan, 2012, p.60), *Cut Piece*, as shown in figure 2, explores "how viewing without responsibility has the potential to harm or even destroy the object of perception." It depicts the artist herself on a stage, fully clothed, where she invites the audience to come and cut away parts of her clothing, and they did so until there was nothing left. This draws attention to the relationship between the viewer and the art subject, and how Ono is no longer seen as a person, but the object of a piece. This piece was first performed on July 20, 1964 (Phaidon, 2015), a time where the female body was much more censored, and so it is interesting that the audience still exposed her entire self, despite the then current social expectancies. This exhibition aims to question how a public audience would react to this piece now, when given "a measure of power in the making of it" (Obrist, 2014, p.17) and in a setting that questions how far is too far. Placing this piece within a monastery inserts a moral compass into the audience (as we live in a largely Christian society – 46.2% according to the 2021 census (Office for National Statistics, 2021)) by drawing from Augé's ideas on how "memory [is] attached to certain places" that - in relation to "ritual activity" – "underline their sacred character" (1995, p.48); people's previous perceptions of a monastery/ church transform this space into what Lefebvre calls a "representational space" (1991, p.39). He defines this as "space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.39) and questions "what would remain of the Church if there were no churches" (1991, p.41)? This suggests the values of religion are prevailed by the existence of physical spaces and are therefore projected onto whomever enters.



Figure 3: Rhythm 0 (Photographed, Abramović, 1974)

Figure 3 depicts a moment of the piece *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramović that entailed the artist standing beside a table of 72 items from a feather to a gun and bullet with instructions as follows:



Figure 4: Rhythm 0 Instructions (Abramović, 1974)

“Instructions.

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.”

The performance “that included not only objects to be displayed, but instructions to be executed” (Obrist, 2014, p.17) lasted 6 hours (according to an article in the Guardian by Hessel, 2023) in which the audience ended up cutting her, ripping her clothes and, finally, pointing a gun at her. Stefanie Graf, a writer for the magazine, ‘The Collector,’ gives an analysis of Marina Abramović’s performance *Rhythm 0*, as well as a recounting of the series of events. A notable moment that Graf quotes from Abramović was ““The experience I drew from this piece was that in your own performances you can go very far, but if you leave decisions to the public, you can be killed”” (Graf, 2022). This piece

highlights how far a person will go when promised no consequence, something maximized by the way it is curated in this exhibition. In the book 'The Production of Space', Henri Lefebvre discusses the concept of "repetitious spaces" as "the outcome of repetitive gestures" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.75). A hospital wing presents itself as one such space, and is "shot through with a knowledge" of its purpose (Lefebvre, 1991, p.41). This room counts on the audience's awareness of the hospital as a safety net to this performance and acts as an experiment on how this will alter their behavior. Is it easier to reach the limits when one subconsciously believes that help is available, or does this encourage the viewer to think twice?



Figure 5: Above the Below (Photographed, Blaine, 2003)

While he refers to himself as a 'magician', it can be argued that *Above the Below* by David Blaine is a performance art piece similar to those previously seen in the exhibition. In a feat of endurance, Blaine was suspended 30 ft above the river Thames in a glass box for 44 days with only 4.5 litres of water per day to sustain him. Originally displaying this piece in public led to "Blaine [being] pelted with eggs and paint-filled balloons" as well as having "golf balls ... struck in his direction" (Hooton, 2018), an aggressive reaction from the piece's observers. This room has removed the piece from its original context, and placed it within an empty, white room: 'The White Cube'. While this space attempts to be neutral, O'Doherty argues in his book 'Inside the White Cube' that this "apparent neutrality is an illusion" (O'Doherty, 1976, p.79), and suggests "the wall becomes a membrane through which esthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange" (1976, p.79). He claims "its content is composed of mental projections based on unexposed assumptions", more simply put, "the wall is our assumptions" (O'Doherty, 1976, p.80). This suggests that within this space the perceivers first thoughts are reflected onto them, and the white walls give space to think more deeply about what they are looking at. However, it could be considered that within the context of the first two pieces being interactive, the audience is then more inclined to act on

their feelings towards this piece. Either outcome is interesting, as the aim of this exhibition is to have effect on the viewers actions towards the art.



Figure 6: Cayote/ I like America and America likes me (Photographed, Beuys, 1974)

The fourth and final room contains Joseph Beuys' piece 'Cayote', with the roles of the artist and spectator reversed, i.e., the audience will be in the cage with a realistic projection of the cayote with Beuys on the outside, as the observer. Placing this piece at the end after viewing three pieces where the audience has, or had the potential to, become violent creates an impactful ending to the exhibition. It will prompt the viewers to think about the "collapsing of the distinction between symbolic and actual violence" (Mitchell, 1990, p.883). Theorists have often talked about "the confusion between the animate and inanimate (object and spectator)" (O'Doherty, 1976, p.99) and the breakdown of an artist as a person and not just the subject of their art. Seeing this piece from another perspective, and being made the observed rather than the observer adds another depth to the exhibition, where the spaces are no longer physical, but a space of memory and consideration within the viewers' minds.

Obrist says "the very idea of an exhibition is that we live in a world with each other, in which it is possible to make arrangements, associations, connections, and wordless gestures" and this exhibition consists of that in every room and could have the potential to alter how the audience views art in the future.

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Figures

Figure 1

Airbus, Bluesky, Infoterra Ltd & COWI A/S, Maxar Technologies, Map Data (2024). [Satellite image]. Google Maps. Swansea. (23.04.2024). Available at: https://www.google.com/maps/place/First+GB+Logistics+-+Warehousing+%26+Distribution/@51.6153454,-3.9260719,215m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m10!1m2!2m1!1sfirst+GB+logistics+warehouse+!3m6!1s0x486e8be35e0ae78b:0xaf0547c0fcbebc97!8m2!3d51.614832!4d-3.924243!15sChxmaXJzdCBHQiBsb2dpc3RpY3Mgd2FyZWVhdXNlkgEUGlzdHJpYnV0aW9uX3NlcnZpY2XgAQ!16s%2Fg%2F11stz4_2bl?entry=ttu (Accessed 23.04.2024)

Figure 2

Yoko Ono (1964) *Cut Piece* [Performance piece]. Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto. (05.05.2024). Available at: <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2015/may/18/yoko-ono-s-cut-piece-explained/> (Accessed 05.05.2024)

Figure 3

Marina Abramović (1974) *Rhythm 0* [Performance piece]. Studio Morra, Naples. (05.05.2024). Available at: <https://www.thecollector.com/rhythm-0-by-marina-abramovic/> (Accessed 05.05.2024)

Figure 4

Marina Abramović (1974) *Rhythm 0 instructions*. Studio Morra, Naples. (05.05.2024). Available at: <https://blogs.uoregon.edu/marinaabramovic/category/rhythm-series/> (Accessed 05.05.2024)

Figure 5

David Blaine (2003) *Above the Below* [Performance piece]. Above the river Thames, London. (06.05.2024). Available at: <https://davidblaine.com/above-the-below/> (Accessed 06.05.2024)