

Activator

“...if on previous occasions in his march-past in front of the picture-walls, he was lulled by the painting into a certain *passivity*, now our design should make the man *active*. This should be the purpose of the room.” --El Lissitzky

The desire to jolt the museum visitor out of passive contemplation dates back at least to the beginning of the 20th century, when Russian artists El Lissitzky and Vladimir Tatlin broke the two-dimensional plane of the wall with the assemblages that gave the Constructivist movement its name. In the 1960s, performance artist Allan Kaprow attempted to erase the distance he perceived still existed between art and the viewer by creating work that encouraged participation. His “Environments” – room-size multimedia works that could be entered physically – were inherently politically charged, constructed with non-art materials in alternative spaces to promote art as a social, everyday experience. Kaprow’s experiential philosophy is encompassed within installation art, a hybrid form of artmaking that considers the architectural framework, and the realm of viewer experience within it, as key elements. This relationship is a dynamic one, as the six installations in *Activator* attest. Energy is their connective element: with fluorescent-lit Styrofoam, computer-generated sound, vibrant color, humor, tension, playful scale, and directed movement, the artists in this exhibition refocus our attention on the museum space as an active presence.

The theory that the viewer is an integral component of the art object was central to Minimalism, in its privileging of the phenomenology of the viewer’s experience. As Michael Fried discusses in his critique of the movement, “Art and Objecthood,” sculptural forms were meant to relate to the scale of the body, creating a situation in which physical participation was implicit in the distance between subject and object.¹ A work by Robert Morris or Tony Smith could not be understood from any single vantage point, but required – and prompted – movement through and around the form. In a gallery, this activity was shaped by the architectural space. Installation artists further explored the relationship between body, space, and object, as well as the language used to describe the viewer and his or her experience. For Kaprow, interactivity was key to eliminating the divide between viewer and work – and by extension, between art and life.

40+ years after Kaprow’s Environments, the space of viewer interactivity is largely a semantic one. In her historical overview of installation art, *From Margin to Center*, Julie Reiss refers to a “vocabulary of the discourse of participation” in which the viewer is no longer just a viewer, but a beholder, spectator, audience member, actor, or participant.² Critical terminology has varied depending on the level of interaction suggested by the artist or experienced by the author. While the search for the precise terminology to describe the art experience may enhance our understanding of the artist’s intentions, this discourse threatens to widen the gap that Kaprow attempted to eliminate. Exacerbating this concern is the anxiety that installation work can produce: although everyday objects and materials are friendly and familiar, the effect of seeing these in a museum or gallery space can be dislocating, turning the attempt at universality into a bit of an inside joke. It is precisely this discomfort, however, that frees artists from the

¹ 1967, reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172.

² Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

expectations that can encumber traditional artforms, allowing them to both disregard the limitations of traditional media and to pose questions about these boundaries.

Contemporary installation artists continue to engage with Kaprow's theories and push beyond the impersonal forms of Minimalism with an insistence on experiences both communal and individual. The artists included in *Activator* both draw on and critique ideas of mechanization and technology, incorporating the techniques and materials of obsessive handwork, mass production, and industry. Sculpture, sound, video, painting, and drawing are used within the installation format, but the work ultimately transcends these categories. These installations are intended to disorient – to heighten the awareness of one's presence and to create new possibilities for the display and experience of artwork within a space defined by tradition.

Existing somewhere between drawing and sculpture, **Astrid Bowlby's** painstakingly assembled environments are built with thousands of ink drawings layered on walls, floor and ceiling. Bowlby likens her labor-intensive process, the gradual accretion of shapes, to the accumulation of words in a narrative, though one whose ending is undetermined. By creating images that suggest rather than tell, she hopes to do visually what a poet does with words.³ The spare materials of white paper and black ink leave Bowlby open to invention, suggestion, and play: "Like Harold with his purple crayon, if I need something: canoe, spiral, blob, grilled cheese sandwich, patch of grass...I can get it by drawing it."⁴ These minimal tools, and the shapes she fashions with them, are in marked contrast to the glut of drawings that spills out like a stream of consciousness. This disparity is part of the mental exercise in which she hopes viewers will engage—to have to apprehend contrasting states existing simultaneously: "something elegant with a touch of the buffoon, or a coexistence of rigidity and fluidity."⁵

The tension in Bowlby's work is leavened by a sense of humor and play, a balance also found in **Eric Hongisto's** wall mural. *Plaid* evokes the point of conversion from potential to kinetic energy, with balls of yarn spooling threads of paint to bridge the divide between abstract and subject. Previous installations have contained amoeba-like forms wriggling as if under a microscope, shifting the viewer's sense of vertical and horizontal planes. Although forms vary from one piece to the next, each reveals an interest in scientific method and in the communicative properties of color: "Demanding color to act as verbs, nouns and adjectives at the same time is exciting; the spectrum of hues attempts to represent physics, chemical reactions and other paradoxical ideas."⁶ Hongisto uses variations of tone, hue and scale to create areas of rest and motion and to transform walls and floors into topographies of void and mass. In this way, his murals simultaneously rely on their architectural framework and disregard its boundaries, encouraging viewers to reconsider their physical space and to discover a sense of play in the rational.

A similar interest in science, math and probability drives **Amy Stacey Curtis's** experiments in viewer interactivity. "Audience" is listed as a medium in many of her installations, and she considers participants to be part of the process of creating each piece. *Modulation I* consists of

³ Email interview with artist, August 2005.

⁴ Artist statement 2005.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Artist statement.

2,304 aluminum cans, each lined with a computer-generated color spectrum, arranged in a circle on the floor. Viewers are directed by a label that reads “Observe installation as you carefully walk, at least once, around entire form.” As one moves along the perimeter, in a movement that recalls the spiritual practice of circumambulation, colors change and shift in unison.

In concept and aesthetic, Curtis’s work preserves much of Minimalism’s legacy. Her floor pieces invite comparison with the work of sculptor Carl Andre, who encouraged people to walk across his grids of metal tiles, erasing the physical distance between the viewer and the object, and ultimately the idea of the object itself. The use of modular units, industrial or everyday materials, and a rational approach to defining spatial boundaries further connects Curtis to her Minimalist predecessor. Where Minimalism purported to turn away from subjective content, however, Curtis privileges the shared experiences and actions of community, beginning with her own autobiography: “The balance of chaos, order, and repetition that I am exploring through my work is an aesthetic, personal, and collective language I feel resonates physically, emotionally, culturally, and spiritually within and around all of us...my work is also self-portraiture, containing my own patterns, my own history.”⁷

A tension between order and disorder also defines **Nicola López’s** print-based installations, which the artist describes as maps that “represent how our world is structured...on an experiential level.”⁸ In these foreboding landscapes, tangles of industrial and technological detritus loom above and around the viewer, cutting off any potential point of entry. Forms struggle against themselves for dominance, tires, towers and satellite dishes overwhelm diminutive cities, and choking ribbons of superhighways wind in and around, yet lead nowhere. We are all implicated to some degree in the glorification of technology responsible for this scenario, but López resists the notion that her vision is entirely pessimistic. Her awe in the human capacity for building these machines, whatever their potential for destruction, is mirrored in her ability as an artist to construct this world. The human element is present as well in her choice of woodblock printing, a medium that simultaneously refers to the hand of the artist and to the systems of automation and mass production that her work addresses.

The rampant consumerism implicated in Nicola López’s imagery supplies the materials for **Jason Rogenes’s** installations: discarded Styrofoam packing materials used to protect and package electronics equipment. Rogenes leaves the Styrofoam pieces unaltered to emphasize their original form, arranging them in towers that relate in scale to both the viewer and the architectural site. The structures are experienced as a series of unfolding vantage points, suggesting a stroboscopic effect enhanced by the fluorescent lighting that illuminates their interiors. Depending on the site, the space around the constructions is redefined by cardboard microenvironments that further shift the perceptions of scale and environment, object and architecture.

Merging a low-tech material with a high-tech aesthetic, Rogenes transforms a ubiquitous waste product into sculptures that invite comparison with space stations, but resist definition. Rather than dictate a subject for his work, Rogenes is interested in the theatrical possibilities offered by his materials, the fantasy and play of imagination; in his words, the sculptures are “techno-clouds

⁷ Email exchange with the artist, September 27, 2005.

⁸ Artist statement.

of potential... They await the viewer's eye to make them what they might become." Although he doesn't purport to promote an environmentalist stance, he recognizes that his work conveys the negative aspects of consumerism – and thus may offer a potential solution to the fate depicted by Nicola López.

Designed to be experienced in active, public spaces, **N.B. Aldrich and Zach Poff's** new media installations shift the experience of art outside the threshold of the museum. *Observational Soundscape*, installed in the Olin Arts Center lobby, transforms the energy of this transient space into spontaneous audio accompaniment. A video camera suspended from the lobby ceiling records trends of color, mass and motion, while a microphone picks up ambient noise. This material information is converted through a digital synthesizer and broadcast back into the lobby space, where a video monitor displays a corresponding histogram of activity in pixellated color trails. On one level self-referential, *Observational Soundscape* illustrates the "intertranslatability of media" offered by digital technologies: the ability to render sound as color or image and vice versa, made possible by the conversion of all sensory information to common data.⁹ This environment approximates the neurological phenomenon of synaesthesia, wherein stimulation of one sensory modality triggers sensation in another (*i.e.*, the ability to hear color): a current preoccupation of artists negotiating the boundary between art and music.

In addition to dislocating our sensory experience, *Observational Soundscape* asks us to reconsider our environment and our actions within it as the stuff of art. There is no object in this installation; we are the material. By seeking to provide an analogy between the processes that make up daily life and the processes that create aesthetic experience, Aldrich and Poff move a step closer toward the elision of art and life, suggesting, as Allan Kaprow did, that this process is one best attempted outside the museum.

Using architecture as framework, armature, and medium, the six installations included in *Activator* encourage an understanding of the active relationship between viewer, artwork and the shared space we inhabit. Though the eventual acceptance of installation art within the museum tempered its political statement, the model of Kaprow's Environments remains valid. In his adventurous spirit, *Activator* seeks to complicate the role of the museum, as an institution and as physical space, and the experience it provides for the viewer. How can the installation medium encourage us to rethink our interaction with art – and our experience of finding art in the everyday?

Liz Kelton Sheehan
Assistant Curator of Academic and Exhibition Initiatives

⁹ See Christoph Cox, "Lost in Translation: Sound in the Discourse of Synaesthesia," *ArtForum* XLIV.2, October 2005, 236-241.