

## Book Review

*What is Installation?* ed. A. Geczy and B. Genocchio (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001)

### Sam Spurr

To 'install' is essentially to place an object or objects within a given space. 'Place-ing' is therefore fundamental: the act of placement, as well as the 'place' of this act. The 'placement' of Installation Art is a struggle against the confinements of medium specificity in art—which form or medium gets to exert its authority over the expansiveness of installation practice? In this collection of Australian essays on Installation Art, the editors acknowledge this battle, endeavouring to position their essays in a liminal field, each purporting a different set of defining boundaries.

As heralded by the title, this anthology shows that a single definition of Installation is continually being contested. Despite this, these essays suggest that the contest comes down to two specific forms; architecture and theatre. The collection makes it clear that the language of Installation is constructed out of the solidity of architectural terminology and the ephemerality of the performative. The adoption of such terms as 'site', 'dramatisation', 'staging', 'dwelling', 'inhabitation', as well as the constant references to 'architectural space' and processes of performance, such as 'Happenings', point to an emergent theoretical approach, itself a hybrid construction, where Installation Art resides between the performing body and the built form.

In 'Thrift Store Alchemy; Notes on Installation', George Alexander parallels the growth of Installation Art with the transition from the proscenium stage to theatre-in-the-round. It seems logical to continue that analogy to the disintegration of the distinction between audience and stage in many performance art practices. What remains are the 'installation' of props and sets, and the destabilising of the roles of performer and audience. As Julie Ewington proposes, this instability between the content and subject of the sign, a play between what one sees and how one sees it, is one of the animating forces behind the new medium. Installation Art is not simply a state of presence, rather it seems so often on the cusp of action.

*'Installation eludes like the sea, and like it, is alive with discovery, emotion, adventure, peril, and repose.'* (Alexander: 62)

Delineating the edges—'like Christo' at Little Bay—around Installation as a medium is where this anthology begins, before unfolding into chapters of 'Institutions', 'Environments', 'Objects' and 'Interfaces'. The editors problematise the task in their Introduction by defining the art form as one of 'modes of

appearance and disappearance'(Gezcy and Gennochio: 7). This open approach makes the choice of chapters seem a little restrictive, housing the essays in such limiting categories. Despite this framing, the essays show the medium's embrace of a plethora of possible collaborations, from science and technology, to pop culture and philosophy, as well as the full gamut of different art forms.

In this liminal field of creative enquiry, artists can also relish the 'blurring and loss of limits' (Malloon: 179) to their ideas. Traditional forms like the landscape can become reinvigorated. Susan Best uses the term 'elemental constructions' to describe the collaboration occurring between Australian woman artists and the forces of nature and the environment. While in social, as well as art circles, there is growing understanding of the land through Indigenous artworks, making visible these connections in the particular context of Australia I feel to be one of the most successful aspects of the book.

The essays have been chosen with a dual aim, that of presenting Australian Installation Art, and Australian writing on that subject. This is an important decision by the editors, making the collection as much one of critical thinking in this area, as of descriptive writing mapping the field of practice. Gezcy and Gennochio retain a focus on the thinking that surrounds the field of Australian Installation Art, rather than individual pieces. What is most intriguing is the image the essays as a whole create of the openness of Installation Art as a medium dedicated to its own becoming, in an endless act that deliberately bends and reconstructs its physical boundaries. This continual dis-placement of installation evades the commodification of art's 'objecthood' and gives much of the work an evanescent form similar to performance art.

The spectatorship it presupposes is more than just looking, but involves the entire mechanics of perception. Appropriately, the resonance of Phenomenology, from Husserl to Merleau Ponty and Bachelard, is well documented here. How do we describe the embodied experience? The documentation of any Installation Art work is problematic, since what Installation Art problematises above all is the occupation of the artwork by the viewer. The way in which people connect with this art form is no longer simply a process of viewing. The terms used repeatedly throughout the various essays include: 'experience', 'encounter' and 'occupation'. For instance, in exploring Rosalind Piggot's work, McAuliffe writes of her desire 'to retrieve a mode of looking no longer available in the museum' (McAuliffe: 253), where the frozen state of the everyday so often used in Installation Art is a temporal framing that begs the stare rather than the glance. (The notion is bound in a simple, personal act, as if one had suddenly stopped and looked about oneself for the first time.)

*'Hinterding's works have a tendency to remind viewers of their status as flesh.'*  
(Lumby: 293)

Susan Best takes the term 'flesh' from Merleau Ponty as the essential conduit between body and object. Through flesh 'the dehiscence of the seeing to the visible and the visible into the seeing' (Best: 188), the subject is brought into the world. This state of in-between can be described as a collision of inhabitant and architecture, an everyday collision the experience of which is constantly put to the test throughout the art works reviewed. Through Michael Goldberg's simply conceived historic name-tagging in Elizabeth Bay house, to the furry dots of Alex Danko's suburban nightmare, it is not the architecture that has become story teller, rather the narratives have been built in the footprints, the half-drunk glasses, the boxes stacked quietly in the corner. The objects themselves are never mute, they whisper possibilities into the fleshy air that permeate the buildings and seep into the imaginations of the viewers. The passive spectator is left behind and must in turn become archaeologist, sociologist, cultural theorist, writer, artist.

We can see this collision between body and art as fundamentally an act of creation. The encounter is not only one of corporeal forms, but between the haptic perception of the viewer and the artist's intent. As if a force was generated by the collision of tactile reception, expectation, memory, perception, intention, giving birth to a new form, producing a unique experience of the artwork. In their Introduction Geczy and Gennochio describe installation as 'a state of relative disappearance then reappearance of the art object' (Geczy and Gennochio: 1). In her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1992), Peggy Phelan describes this disappearance of the object as fundamental to the performative act. Installation Art, whose plane resides in the experiential as opposed to the flat surface, more than any other art form defines itself by this play of presence and absence, whether it is Susan Victor's bodily secretions, or a Display House by Critical City Project. Fundamental to this practice is the interactivity of viewer and a work which awaits them.

The disappearance of the object and the body in installation is also a dissolving of architecture into a negative space of bodies and inhabitations, as if the volume of the interior had been separated from the building's form like a Rachel Whiteread sculpture. Where everything a place withheld from view becomes evident, invisible forces and unseen phenomena, find a presence in the artwork. David McNeill aptly describes Michael Goldberg's ambition 'to invite back the ghosts that sanitised history has banished, while turning its own solid matter into ectoplasm'. (McNeill: 161) The traces left behind, history's detritus, build form through what Jackie Dunn describes as 'a "thereness" of things' (Dunn: 140). Trajectories of thought, flashes of emotion. It is the construction of each collage, which in its careful place-ing of ideas, begin to speak in temporal, cultural and historical ways, as well as the personal.

*Hussein Valamenesh leaves a trace of his absent body in the imprint of his shadow rising up from a pair of shoes.*

The negative space where Installation Art resides is the space where body and architecture meet. Martin Thomas writes that Joan Brassil's refusal 'to depict bodies emphasises the one body that completes a Brassil installation: that of the viewer' (Thomas: 132). Brassil's installation works have been honed for several decades to create immersive spatial worlds, using video, sound and text to construct revelations of place, constantly hinting at potential stories for the viewer to fill in. Stepping into the enormous expanse of her 2003 piece, 'Quay Vive', for the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition, *Liquid Sea* (14 March-8 June 2003) was disorientating, its shapes and images shifting and distorting off the curved Perspex and pools of water. I moved through the space with memories of water shadowing my perception, and I was aware of my flesh, skin prickling at the encounter of a sliver of jellyfish light as it passed across my body. Upon leaving I imagined that the room had simply folded open with the glare of an overhead light bulb, to reveal an empty, dry room. Brassil's work is a highly constructed form of interactive absence.

Absence is in the artist's body, allowing, demanding even, the spectator to actively step into the created space. Timothy Morrell simply describes Hussein Valamenesh's installations as 'good public art because to take on their full meaning, they actually need people' (Morrell: 229). Constructed around the loss of presence, the state of in-between is a place of creation, the body an ignition to space and object. Coming to the end of this anthology one is vividly left with an understanding of the essential performance of the spectator.

By presenting us with a series of narratives pondering and considering these artworks, we are left with a sensation of enquiring, if not seeing or experiencing. This is the best that we can expect from a collection of essays on Installation Art, and not the experience itself. For without a nose to smell the honey or ears to sense the hum of electricity and thoughts to ponder why, Installation Art becomes only objects placed in and out of buildings. A space of forgetting, rather than a placing of experienced and future memories.