

Self-disclosure and the ‘staging’ of autonomy in installation art

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of theatrical devices in intermedial art is often characterised in terms of the ‘immersiveness’ of contemporary installations or assemblages. These are described as ‘staged’ precisely because they utilise overt scenographic strategies. Claire Bishop, for instance, employs the symbolically-charged term ‘dream scene’ to characterise a mode of installation resembling an abandoned theatre set, where psychological absorption is achieved through physical immersion. For Bishop, this characterises the ‘total’ installations of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. But might we understand ‘staging’ not merely as scenography (even in its expanded sense) but as a ‘bracketing’ of the represented world in such a way as to reveal its fictionality through self-disclosure? Drawing upon (1) Juliane Rebentisch’s critique of the spatial time of theatrical installation, and (2) Wolfgang Iser’s literary anthropology, I consider the ‘staging’ of autonomy in relation to a work exemplary of Bishop’s ‘dream scene’: Mike Nelson’s *Mirror Infill* (2006). I will explore how its particular form of self-disclosure counters misconceptions of such ‘immersive’ work as context-independent and reveal how Nelson’s work makes available something absent (undisclosed) through representation conceived not as mimesis, but as a performative act.

Keywords

Installation Art/ Reception Aesthetics/Ontology of Art/Theatrical Installation/ Intermedia

Introduction

While the prevalence of scenographic strategies in contemporary exhibition design is beyond doubt, the theoretical implications of such ‘theatrical’ imports is more difficult to ascertain.¹ An expanded notion of scenography might, for instance, encompass a curatorial or design response to a ‘themed’ group show juxtaposing works by multiple artists; at other times, it is the artist herself who has determined to ‘stage’ relations between works (whether, or not, these works were conceived collectively). The 1970s assemblages of Marcel Broodthaers might be thought of in such terms. While, as Broodthaers demonstrates, the use of intermedia can blur the distinction, we need to differentiate between the juxtaposition of related works (‘an installation of art’) through scenographic or other means and a situation where, as Claire Bishop notes, ‘the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity’ (Bishop 2005, 6). My concern in this article is exclusively with ‘installation art’ rather than ‘installations of art’. As such, I will have little to say on the expansion of scenographic strategies to wider issues of exhibition design.

Nevertheless, something needs to be clarified here. The capacity for scenography to operate *independently* from theatre has been the subject of much recent debate around expanded notions of scenography.² Scenography (not unlike installation art) is a contested term, resistant to a clear definition.³ Thus, it has been applied to everything from architecture to urban space, video art to the curation of exhibitions. It is this very fluidity that led Alan

¹ Despite placing the term theatrical in quotation marks, for some this might be thought of as relating scenography to a narrow, ahistorical conception of traditional theatre. However, while expanded conceptions of scenography are clearly relevant to any discussion of performance and intermedial art, it is scenography’s historical roots in theatrical practices that are key to Claire Bishop’s notion of ‘dream space’, where she makes explicit references to theatre or film ‘sets’. Any such ahistoricism is therefore embedded within Bishop’s highly influential position: a position to which I am responding with my alternative emphasis on the ‘staging’ of autonomy as a doubled spatiality and temporality. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for forcing me to clarify my own position on this point.

² See, for instance, various contributions to *Scenography Expanded* (McKinney and Palmer 2017).

³ One of this article’s reviewers suggests that rather than seeing this lack of a clear definition as a flaw, as an ‘inherent quality’ this ambiguity represents its very ‘agency’. We might, however, usefully follow Anne Ring Petersen’s example in thinking of installation art—and, by extension, scenography—as constituting (after Wittgenstein) a series of family resemblances (Petersen 2015).

Read to explicitly reference Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979) in his 2013 book *Theatre in the Expanded Field*. However, Krauss was reacting to pluralist approaches to such an expansion. Her essay was an attempt to delimit a heterogeneous field, concerned that the term sculpture was being stretched to a point where it lacked criticality. And, at least for this author, difficulties emerge—specifically in relation to installation art rather than installations of art—when all notions of 'staging' are dropped, such that we can no longer distinguish between the real and fictive.

Nevertheless, to equate installation art exclusively with scenographic strategies—even in an expanded sense—is to misrepresent a situation where many artists working with installations openly reject 'theatrical' strategies.⁴ Rather, I will focus on what is undoubtedly an important sub-category of installation art. Here, I draw upon Bishop's *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005). Bishop employs the symbolically charged term 'dream scene' to characterise a mode of installation that she describes as resembling an abandoned film or theatre set: a mode that emphasises psychological absorption through physical immersion. This is one of four categories that Bishop uses to describe different ways of approaching the history of installation art—a history she casts as multiple rather than singular.

Bishop traces the 'dream scene' back to its origins in proto-installations such as the 1938 *International Surrealist Exhibition* at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, famous for Marcel Duchamp's coal sacks hanging from the ceiling. And yet it is with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's 'total' installations that staging comes to the fore, constructing a self-contained three-dimensional world that—according to Ilya Kabakov—is, nevertheless, not oblivious to its location in a gallery or museum (something to which I will return). Here, the host space is

⁴ I believe this point holds, notwithstanding the hybrid nature of much postdramatic theatre and performance practices (Lehmann 2006), including, but not limited to, immersive theatre, a term 'attached to diverse events that assimilate a variety of art forms and seek to exploit all that is experiential in performance, placing the audience at the heart of the work' (Machon 2013). It is worth noting that the term 'theatrical' is used here in a sense distinct from the pejorative language of Michael Fried (1998). Fried's problematic adoption of the term to describe so-called literalist art is discussed at length in the introduction to my book *Beholding* (2020a).

transformed down to even the smallest detail, and what makes the installation ‘total’ is ‘the required inclusion of surrounding space in the installation’ (Kabakov 1995, 127).

Bishop contrasts the psychoanalytic approach of the ‘dream scene’ to three other categories of installation art emerging out of distinct philosophical traditions: ‘heightened perception’ (associated with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty), ‘mimetic engulfment’ (associated with poststructuralist notions of the decentred subject), and ‘activated spectatorship’ (associated with poststructuralist critiques of democracy). While Bishop—like Julie Reiss (1999) before her—emphasises the ‘literal’ presence of the spectator as a defining feature of *all* installation art,⁵ her four categories construct different experiences for, and conceptions of, the viewer or (to use a less ocularcentric designation) beholder. Indeed, the chapters in her book are ‘organised around four modalities of experience that installation art structures for the beholder—each of which implies a different model of the *subject*, and each of which results in a distinctive type of work’ (2005, 8).

The ‘dream scene’ shares something with the darkness of spaces of ‘mimetic engulfment’ (think of Yayoi Kusama’s infinity mirror rooms), in that both *efface* the museum; this is in stark contrast with works of ‘heightened perception’ and ‘activated spectatorship’ where the situatedness of the installation is foregrounded either spatially and/or politically—one might think, respectively, of Michael Asher’s 1970 installation at Pomona College, California, where the reconfigured gallery space is opened up to the street by removing the entrance screen, or Santiago Serra’s disturbing take on minimalism in *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes* (2000), which highlights the invisibility of immigrants by paying them to remain hidden inside crudely

⁵ In ‘Art and Objecthood’ Fried writes disparagingly of the notion that ‘someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one’ (1998, 193). Bishop, despite her very different attitude to such work, suggests that ‘an insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguable the key characteristic of installation art’ (2005, 6). For a discussion of this, see my article ‘Installation Art and the Question of Aesthetic Autonomy’ (2020b).

taped together cardboard boxes nevertheless redolent of minimalist art. The wider issue of how these different modes of beholding relate to the issue of staging is something worth exploring at length, but space forces me to focus the current discussion exclusively on Bishop's category of the dream scene.⁶

While one might argue that staging plays a role in *all* installation art, with Bishop's dream scene installations **are characterised as** 'staged' precisely because they utilise scenographic devices (whether taken from film or theatre). This is nowhere more explicit than with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's 'total' installations, with their overt theatrical references, and where the space of the gallery is entirely transformed. However, I want to argue two things. First, that far from being context independent, the most interesting examples of Bishop's dream scene—such as Mike Nelson's *Mirror Infill* (2006) (**Figure 1**), which I discuss in the final section—are in fact deeply dependent upon their situated context, even when the host museum or gallery space is visually excluded from inside the work. Indeed, Nelson's installation makes reflexive gestures toward its institutional context in what might be referred to as a 'staging' of its autonomy. Here, I will draw upon Juliane Rebentisch's consideration of the spatial time of theatrical installation in relation to Kabakov's work in her 2012 book *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, which I then apply to *Mirror Infill*. And secondly, I want to argue that this reflexive relation to context is intrinsic to such work's self-disclosure *as* fiction. Indeed, I want to claim that we might understand 'staging' here not simply as scenography (though this is central to both Kabakov and Nelson's work)

⁶ Bishop's attempt to categorise installation art into different modalities runs into difficulties when faced with works that cross her categorical boundaries. Hélio Oiticicia's *Tropicalia* (1967), for instance, while categorised as a work of heightened perception, uses overt scenographic elements—with its labyrinthine wooden structure 'curtained with cheap patterned materials, set among a "tropical" scenario with plants, parrots and sand' (Bishop 2005, 63)—while also explicitly engaging notions of activated spectatorship. The one-on-one encounter of Vito Acconci's notorious *Seedbed*—where Acconci lay (unseen) masturbating beneath a wooden ramp on which the beholder walked, his voice relayed above through a loudspeaker—is also counter-intuitively identified as a work that heightens perception (placing it alongside the minimalist work it critiques); and yet, it has much in common with Santiago Serra's 'relational antagonism', categorised by Bishop under 'activated spectatorship' (2005, 66-8, 120-3). These difficulties do not negate, however, the value of Bishop's account.

but as a ‘bracketing’ of the represented world that reveals its fictionality through self-disclosure. Indeed, Rebentisch recasts aesthetic autonomy not as the self-sufficiency of the object, as proposed by Michael Fried (1998), but as a semblance (bracketed from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason) that forces us to confront the ethical and political situation *where* we encounter the artwork. This is a factor that Bishop’s chapter on the dream scene surprisingly fails to address, perhaps because of her categorical emphasising of an explicitly *psychological* reading of such work.⁷ In confronting this omission, I draw upon Wolfgang Iser’s literary anthropology to construct a reconfigured notion of the ‘staging’ of autonomy as something that, through an unmasking conceived as a form of self-disclosure, signals to the beholder that a change of attitude is required, highlighting the performative role of the subject.

The Dream Scene and Kabakov’s ‘Total’ Installation

Claire Bishop’s characterisation of the dream scene draws heavily upon a psychological, or, more accurately, psychoanalytical, approach. Indeed, she notes the centrality of Sigmund Freud’s writing on dreams to the aforementioned 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition, which is paradigmatic for work characterised as plunging the beholder ‘into a psychologically absorptive, dream-like environment’ (2005, 10). Bishop notes:

For Freud, the experience of a dream has three main characteristics. The first is that it is primarily visual (‘dreams think especially in images’), although it may include auditory fragments, and presents itself with a sensory vividness more akin to conscious perception than to memory (‘dreams construct a *situation*’ that ‘we appear not to *think* but to *experience*’). The second characteristic of the dream is that it has a composite structure: if taken as a whole, it will

⁷ This omission is all the more surprising in the context of Bishop’s wider writing. See, for instance, *Artificial Hells* (2012).

seem to be nonsensical, and can only be interpreted when broken down into its constitutive elements, rather like a rebus. Most importantly, Freud argues that the dream is not meant to be ‘decoded’, but analysed through free-association—in other words, allowing meaning to arise through individual affective and verbal connections. (Bishop 2005, 16)

Bishop claims that all three features—‘the sensory immediacy of conscious perception, a composite structure, and the elucidation of meaning through free-association’ (2005, 16)—correspond directly to the viewing experience afforded installations exemplary of the dream scene type. And Bishop identifies a primary theoretical antecedent for such an experience in Ilya Kabakov’s 1995 book *On the Total Installation*.

Using explicitly ‘theatrical’ language, Kabakov describes an immersive ‘scene’ into which the beholder enters: ‘The main actor in the total installation, the main center toward which everything is addressed, for which everything is intended, is the viewer’, such that ‘the whole installation is oriented toward his perception, and any point of the installation, any of its structures is oriented only toward the impression it should make on the viewer, only his reaction is anticipated’ (1995, 275). For Kabakov, the installation artist is the ‘director’ of a ‘well-structured dramatic play’ in which the elements perform a ‘plot’ function, enticing the ‘actor’, as participant, to move between one part of the space to another. However, unlike in traditional theatre, ‘the viewer behaves in an entirely different way’, in that ‘he does not sit still, but moves freely around inside of it, finds newer and newer points of examination, viewing either details, or the whole thing, being governed, so it seems, only by his own whims and choice’ (Kabakov 1995, 275). Nevertheless, for Kabakov the artist should anticipate and ‘direct’ the route of the viewer’s movement, in order to consider the ‘spectacle’ through a calculated guidance enacted by the placement of objects and barriers.⁸

⁸ Now clearly Kabakov’s argument does not reflect the diversity of current, postdramatic performance practice, while his emphasis on ‘direction’ is at odds with an essential aspect of the wider adoption of scenographic

The resultant engagement is not only physically immersive, but *psychologically* absorptive (Bishop 2005, 14). Indeed, Kabakov draws upon Freudian notions of free-association when he claims:

Familiar circumstances and the contrived illusion carry the one who is wandering inside the installation away into his personal corridor of memory and evoke from that memory an approaching wave of associations which until this point had slept peacefully in its depths. The installation has merely bumped, awakened, touched his ‘depths’, this ‘deep memory’, and the recollections rushed up out of these depths, seizing the consciousness of the installation viewer from within. (Kabakov 1995, 278)

In Kabakov’s solo and collaborative work (with Emilia Kabakov) this free-association is not simply personal, but culturally specific, drawing upon the institutional spaces of Ilya and Emilia’s own early experiences of Soviet life. This even includes an overt science fiction element juxtaposed with the everyday realist narratives of remembered communist life of the 1960s and 70s. Examples include Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* (1985), where behind a boarded-up door we see into a chaotic bedroom where a catapult-like contraption is suspended below a ceiling with a gaping hole. The room is plastered with political posters and a series of preparatory drawings of the contraption and the anticipated trajectory of the figure flung into space. There is a sense that the would-be cosmonaut, escaping the squalor of his communal apartment, has *just* departed (though this, in turn, is contradicted by a text that informs us that the authorities have boarded the space up to prevent entry). There is a situation here to be ‘grasped’ by the beholder conceived as ‘a witness who accidentally winds up near another person’s life’; and yet the installation’s

strategies in exhibition design that often refuses such calculated guidance. Again, I am grateful to a reviewer for obliging me to point this out. However, as will be revealed later, I think this overt use of *traditional* theatrical language forms part of a deliberate artificiality.

artificiality is not intended to be surmounted, such that ‘the viewer should not forget that before him is deceit and that everything has been made “intentionally”, specially, in order to create an impression [such that] everything should remind him of the stage in a theatre, when the viewer goes up onto it during the intermission’ (Kabakov 1995, 246).

Indeed, this artificiality is a crucial element for Kabakov in disclosing the work’s status as fiction. This is reinforced by an accompanying text that acts as a prompt, prefacing the experience, while refusing to explain the installation. A purposeful tension is constructed between the explicit text integrated into the installation and an unstated, underlying ‘text’ or ‘script’ that informs the work:

Objects in the installation connected internally by the plot, already exist in it in such a way, that it’s as though there is a ‘text’ behind them which explains and provides for their presence. Often it’s as though this text floats to the surface, like salt from an oversaturated solution. (Kabakov 1995, 293)

Taken together, the artificiality of the ‘set’ and the presence of an explicit/implicit text play an important role in what I am calling, after Iser, the work’s self-disclosure *as* fiction, in that not ‘for a minute’ should the beholder forget the ‘orderly dwellings of the museum [which] precede the installation’ (Kabakov 1995, 246). Nevertheless, unlike the separation of the time and space of a theatrical performance with the actual experience of the audience, Kabakov believes that ‘what is particularly interesting in the total installation is how naturally time and space are united in it’ (1995, 247). However, one might argue that rather than synthesise time and space, Kabakov rather creates a tension *between* the implied temporality of the virtual world of the installation and that of the aesthetic experience. Drawing upon Rebenitsch, in the following section we shall see that the failure of this unity raises interesting questions as to what ‘theatrical installations’ reveal, more generally, about the

ontology of (traditional dramatic) theatre. Here, we might rethink ‘bracketing’ in the light of Iser’s notion of staging as self-disclosure, explored in the penultimate section. In the final section, I will then apply this argument to Nelson’s *Mirror Infill*.

Juliane Rebentisch on Kabakov

The German philosopher Juliane Rebentisch offers an intriguing take on Kabakov’s self-disclosed adoption of theatrical devices in relation to the issue of time and space. Rebentisch finds certain connections/disconnections between Kabakov’s installations and the aims of Gertrude Stein’s ‘landscape theatre’. The latter is a response to what the novelist and playwright humorously characterises as the peculiar problem of ‘nervousness’ arising from ‘the different tempo there is in the play and in yourself and your emotion’ (Stein 1985, 94). As Rebentisch observes, this emotional ‘syncopation’ begins with the curtain that, in pre-Brechtian theatre, separates the events on stage from the audience: ‘The curtain and the other people in the audience are manifest signs of the ontological and therefore irresolvable separation between the events on stage and the space of the audience’ (2012, 146). This not only has spatial but temporal implications. So, while ‘the empathic convergence of the “emotional” time of the audience with the time of the events on stage is indeed the implicit aspiration of traditional dramatic theater [...] the audience, Stein claims, will inevitably become nervous’ (2012, 147). This is, at least partly, the result of a *doubling* whereby the spectator in the theatre is ‘compelled to make the “acquaintance” not only of the characters but simultaneously always also of those [actors] who represent them’ (Rebentisch 2012, 147). Unlike with literature, this takes place in the actual, predetermined time of a traditional theatrical performance. Nervousness arises from the *simultaneity* of various visual and auditory theatrical signs, ‘whose perception, as it were, stands in the way of any one-dimensional linear attention to the plot’ (2012, 148). Stein’s response to such ‘nervousness’ is

manifest in the characterisation of her theatre as ‘landscapes’ which highlight atmosphere over dramatic and narrative forms of progression. Stein, herself, explains:

I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so the play being written the relation between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it. (Stein 1985, xlvi)

Now, it might initially be thought that the doubling Stein seeks to avoid is automatically cancelled in the spatial time of the Kabakovs’s theatrical installation, not only because the characters are absent but the fact that there is ‘no development that might produce a relation with the internal temporality of the aesthetic experience’ (Rebentisch 2012, 156). However, there is a vital difference and a hidden tension. With Stein’s landscape theatre, the scene is still looked at from the audience’s perspective; by contrast, Kabakov’s “total” installation [which] is comparable to a stage set whose fourth wall closes behind the viewer—a “total” closure that may well feel quite oppressive’, not least in that ‘it is accessible only from within; it cannot be viewed from some neutral position outside of it’ (2012, 157). In other words, here we enter *into* the abandoned scene conceived as a stage set where there is an absence of performers. Therefore far from overcoming nervousness, Kabakov’s installations emphasise the resulting, unresolved tension (which, as Rebentisch states, the true nature of which he seems unaware). Our movement through the installation only appears to be dictated by ‘whim and choice’, in that the beholder finds herself controlled by the installation which dictates her prescribed movement. Rather than creating a theatre *beyond* drama, therefore, the Kabakovs replicate the dramatisation Stein pointedly rejects by ‘explicitly incorporating the viewer’s *trajectory* into the artistic calculation’ (Rebentisch

2012, 159). Kabakov thus describes the passage from one space of the installation to another as creating a dramatic effect: a chronologically organised story where the viewer ‘grasps’ the essentials of a plot, such that meaning is generated by the consecutive experience of spaces in order to generate a before-and-after effect (where we have *already* seen or are *yet* to see).

However, like theatrical tableaux in a theatrical performance these elements are ‘literally not immediately accessible’, even if the viewer ‘goes backward or forward or passes through the installation a second time’ (Rebentisch 2012, 160). Rebentisch draws out the hidden implications: ‘In analogy to the tension that arises in the theater between theatrical signs unfolding in spatial juxtaposition on stage and theatrical events that occur in temporal sequence, Kabakov’s multiple-room installations engender [an unacknowledged] tension between the spatial juxtaposition of the elements of the installation on the one hand and the succession of the encounter with these elements directed by the spectator’s own movement on the other’ (2012, 160). Indeed, Kabakov falsely allocates dramatic qualities to the ‘total’ installation through the role successive scenes operate relative to a plot, rather than the fact that they never permanently form into a *scenic totality*: ‘The anxiety that is sometimes caused by Kabakov’s installations is thus a consequence not primarily of their depiction of disturbing stories, but of the fact that they continually subvert any narrative “explanation” of the objects in a disturbing way’ (Rebentisch 2012, 164). This failure of synthesis introduces an *aesthetic* uncertainty beyond narrative content, ‘unsettling not only the viewer’s relation to the individual objects in the installation but also that to the space of the installation itself’ (2012, 165). This presents a similar, though inverse, phenomena to Stein’s ‘nervousness’, a point which holds regardless of whether (as some might suggest) she is considered a marginal figure within the history of theatre. It constitutes a tension between the ‘time of the aesthetic experience and the time of walking through an installation—and precisely where we assumed that he seriously intended to synchronize them by evoking a dramatic plot’ (2012, 167). This

has important consequences for our consideration of scenographic techniques, in that it is a failure that is, in and of itself, instructive. In a crucial passage, worth citing at length, Rebentisch argues:

Because drama cannot have a more than supplementary status in the installation, the ‘total’ installation highlights those aspects that in traditional theater already work against the experience of an exclusive presentness of the dramatic events: the dual structure of aesthetic signs and the tension between the simultaneity of different theatrical signs on the one hand, and the dramatic development on the other. The latter is even heightened by the fact that theatrical development is replaced in the installation by a literal ‘course’ directed or navigated by the viewer himself. To this extent one might say that the structural problems of the dramatic theater emerge precisely as the latter is adapted by another art form. In this sense, Kabakov’s installations can indeed be taken to exemplify the reflective potential of an art that gains its strength from working on the structures of another. (Rebentisch 2012, 169)

Now, despite referencing Hans-Thies Lehmann, Rebentisch is perhaps guilty here of equating contemporary visual arts with a traditional ‘dramatic’ theatre that is never positioned historically. Nevertheless, this needs to be seen in the context of her wider commitment to intermedial art, a position that is only strengthened when, in turn, one considers the impact of installation art (itself a hybrid form) on contemporary immersive theatre.

Regardless of such worries, Rebentisch brings attention to the reflective potential of such installations to thematise an inherent structural problem of theatre (albeit in its traditional dramatic form). In the final section, I will return to this issue in relation to a work of another artist Bishop associates strongly with the ‘dream scene’, Mike Nelson. But for all the similarities with the Kabakovs’s work, including the invitation to imagine the absent occupants of the abandoned spaces we experience, there is a major difference in Nelson’s

work. For all its interest in narrative (and borrowings from literature), with Nelson's work we inhabit more an *idea* (and an often marginalised ideology) rather than a theatrical set associated with a didactic dramatic plot to be grasped (Figure 2). As Roger Atwood writes in *ARTnews*:

With a Nelson installation, the viewer physically enters a place where an ideology is born and lives, but is often half-hidden behind the clutter of objects. The ideology—like the viewer—becomes part of an open-ended narrative that stretches out over many rooms, Nelson explains. 'I'm looking to make installations that allow the viewer to walk in and occupy an idea, rather than have the idea imposed on you'. (Atwood 2011, no pagination)

Nelson's installations resemble not so much abandoned theatrical sets (with all their disclosed artificiality), experienced sequentially, but labyrinthine cinematic sets where there is no prescribed sequence, and where we are deliberately disoriented. But before exploring the implications of such a difference, I want first to return to the issue of the self-disclosure of fiction as a 'staged autonomy'.

Wolfgang Iser's Alternative Notion of 'Staging'

Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology, as set out in his 1993 book *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, is an astonishing attempt to understand the wider cultural role of literature: to explain the human need for the particular form of make-believe that we term literature. Key to Iser's position is that if literature 'permits limitless patterning of human plasticity, it indicates the inveterate urge of human beings to become present to themselves' (Iser 1993: xi). For Iser, literature, and more widely art, is indispensable because of its possibility for self-exegesis. And for Iser, 'play' performs a vital structural role in regulating the interplay between the fictive and imaginary:

First, it enables the interplay to take on different forms, and since no one form can ever determine the fictive, the imaginary, or their interaction, every form bears the mark of historical conditioning. This means that the text as a space for play is always open to the imprint of history. Second, the special features of each of the forms reveal both a determinate patterning to which human plasticity has been restricted and the urge of human beings to become present to themselves. In consequence, the text as a space for play can provide answers to questions concerning the human need for fictions. (Iser 1993: xiv)

The great merit in Iser's position is that rather than re-presenting the old fiction/reality dichotomy, Iser conceives of the fictive 'as an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world' through what he calls 'boundary-crossing which, nonetheless, keeps in view what has been overstepped', such that 'the fictive simultaneously disrupts and doubles the referential world' (Iser 1993: xiv-xv). Iser thus takes this 'doubling', so crucial to Rebetisch's aesthetic argument, not as an *escape* from a work's social and historic context, but as a potential to open up another perspective on what might otherwise be habitual: to confront dominant modes of thought. This involves (1) the arrangement of 'the selected extratextual conventions, values, allusions, and the like within the text', (2) the organisation of semantic enclosures within the text (which 'give rise to intratextual fields of reference, themselves brought about by the relationship between and among external items encapsulated in the text', and (3) a situation where 'the literal meaning of words is faded out in the same way as their denotative function', such that 'language's function of denotation is transformed by the relational process into a function of figuration' (1993: 9-10). This constitutes a form of 'bracketing' that, in the most critically relevant cases, is self-disclosed:

Besides requiring a changed attitude, the fictional text contains a large number of identifiable items from the outside world as well as from previous literature. These recognizable ‘realities’, however, are now marked as being fictionalized. Thus the incorporated ‘real’ world is, so to speak, placed in brackets to indicate that it is not something given but is merely to be understood *as if* it were given. In the self-disclosure of its fictionality, an important feature of the fictional text comes to the fore: it turns the whole of the world organized in the text into an ‘as-if’ construction. In light of this qualification (implicitly accepted the moment we embark on our reading), it is clear that we must and do suspend all natural attitudes adopted towards the ‘real’ world once we are confronted with the represented world. (Iser 1993, 12-13)

Representation is thus conceived as having a dual nature, having both a denotative and figurative reference, where in the latter case denotation ‘has to be divested of its original function if the world designated is to be taken *as if* it were real’ (1993, 15). Only in such circumstance does the dual nature of the represented world move into focus, such that a world emerges as semblance that is ‘concrete enough to be perceived as a world and, simultaneously, figures as an analogue exemplifying, through a concrete specimen, what is to be conceived’ (1993, 15). There is always a slippage between these two. For Iser, representation, arising out of this doubling structure of fictionality, is therefore reconceived not as mimesis, but as a performative act. The virtual realm of the artwork—bracketed from the reality in which it is normally embedded—is subject to processes of negation, challenging habitual dispositions we bring to it by problematising our orientation (in its deepest sense). Thus, fiction is conceived as the staging of a constant deferment of explanation (Iser 1989, 245), requiring the active role of the reader (the beholder’s share) as we navigate the blanks or disconnections placed within the text by the author. And as Iser argues:

Whenever bracketing occurs, a purpose makes itself felt that can never be a property of the world represented, not least because the represented world is built up out of selection of items from the world outside. In this overarching purpose the pragmatic function of the fictional work is adumbrated—for fictions are inextricably tied to their use. The reality represented in the text is not meant to represent reality; it is a pointer to something that it is not, although its function is to make that something conceivable. (Iser 1993: 13)

But how might such bracketing play out in installation art? It is clear that Kabakov is asserting precisely such an ‘as-if’ construction through his insistence on the expressed artificiality of the ‘total’ installation, conceived as an abandoned theatre set where objects serve the function of props (albeit imaginative props, in that as pure signifiers they no longer are ‘potentialities for interaction’ with a performer).⁹ Here, gaps and blanks certainly play an important role, and one might talk of a slippage between the ‘literalness’ of the host space and the work’s semblance or virtual realm. Boris Groys, for instance, notes that in Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* a gap is opened up through the juxtaposition of an imaginary narrative of flight—conceived as a kind of impossible appropriation of a collective Soviet project to conquer space—and the urge to escape the drudgery of the Soviet life. The staging of the work’s fictionality through the prop-like nature of the catapult device (reduced to a pure signifier) allows us to contemplate the work’s figurative reference. But, perhaps more interestingly, this engages the problem of representing Kabakov’s own cultural non-identity, shared by other Soviet artists of the

⁹ One reviewer argues that Kabakov’s likening of installations to abandoned theatre sets points to a misconception of theatre sets. While I agree that with Kabakov’s work the potentiality for interaction is removed—reducing the set and props to pure signifiers and rendering any interaction with a ‘performer’ redundant—the point is that (1) the set is ‘abandoned’, removed from its theatrical context, and (2) the interactive element that remains as we wander through the installation is no longer mediated, but directly enacted by the beholder. This points to an important distinction between scenography and installation, in that (as the reviewer states) ‘scenography exists in dialogue with an “other” (actresses, dancers, directors, choreographers, music, text, theme, curators, etc.)’.

period: ‘a radical inner division within their own artistic and intellectual practice that was both Soviet and non-Soviet at the same time’ (Groys 2010, 108).

However, there is another tension manifest here in terms of Kabakov’s own authorship of the installation. Groys refers to Kabakov’s keeping of the beholder in the dark about the authorial status of his art, such that ‘even when he does not explicitly attribute his works to such fictitious artists’, he presents the works as a ‘documentation of someone else’s life and someone else’s aesthetics, and not as his own creations with the purpose of providing insight into the personal, individual, “inner” world of the artist’ (Groys 2010, 105). And in installations such as *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988), where we are presented with a meticulously catalogued collection of multiple, valueless objects gathered by the character of the work’s title, this takes on a ‘pseudo-ethnographic’ aspect that further absences the author from his own fiction. (Of course, this installation also plays with reflexive notions of cataloguing prevalent in the museum environment in which the work is located.) Crucially, here self-disclosure is not only manifest in terms of the artificiality of the scenography (the abandoned ‘set’), but in a blurring of the roles of artist and curator, implied author and actual author. Indeed, as Groys notes:

That is the true source of pseudonymity that characterises Kabakov’s work as a whole.

Kabakov acts as an artist and curator at the same time—but by doing so he does not erase the difference between artist and curator; quite on the contrary, he makes this difference, this split, this division within contemporary art practice the central topic of his own art and of his theoretical reflection on art in general. (Groys 2010, 109)

And here we might note that *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, like *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, was originally part of an ambitious 1988 installation called *Ten Characters*, conceived as a communal apartment. Like the implied author of

literary criticism, each section of the installation was inferred as being the product of a separate ‘authorial character’ as a construct distinct from Kabakov as actual artist/author.

As we shall see, Nelson also, plays with issues of implied authorship of his spaces, often attributed to a fictional ‘other’. But I want to argue that his ‘staging of autonomy’, unlike the Kabakovs’s relative indifference to the neutrality of the museum context, is conceived as confronting the ethical and political situation *where* we encounter the artwork.

Revisiting the Dream Space: Mike Nelson’s *Mirror Infill*

In bringing together (1) Rebentisch’s notion of the staging of autonomy and (2) Iser’s idea of fiction’s self-disclosure through bracketing, can this shed a critical light on installation art’s adoption of scenographic strategies? In particular, can it help establish the importance of context in works conforming to Bishop’s notion of the dream space, despite their seeming presentation of a self-enclosed world?

Taking her lead from Alex Potts (2001), Rebentisch (2012, 222) has referred to the ‘double localisation’ of installation art as a context sensitivity to both host space *and* the social frameworks that influence reception. I want to ally this to Iser’s notion of a ‘bracketing’ that must be disclosed, also conceived as a form of doubling, and involving a constant slippage between the work’s material presentness and its semblance.¹⁰ Together, this generates an uncertainty (or unsettling) that is an integral component of installation art’s broader aim (consistent with Bishop’s wider argument) to displace and decentre the beholder. This has spatial and temporal consequences. As Potts states: ‘Modern installation presents a

¹⁰ This might be said to parallel a similar oscillation that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht observes between ‘presence effects’ and ‘meaning effects’, which ‘endows the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest’ (2004, 108). Indeed, I would claim that Iser’s position has the potential to complement Gumbrecht’s position in such a way as to consider a parallel bracketing dependent upon the ideational and imaginary activity of the beholder, both involving an oscillation with the unbracketed physical presence of things, and dependent upon the recipient’s performance to endow the semblance with its sense of reality.

whole scenario, which one does not look at so much as view from within, and which purports to be envelopingly immediate and then induces unexpected sensations of disturbance and displacement' (Potts 2001: 20). In this light, I want to (1) argue that self-disclosure as fiction is crucial to examples of the dream scheme that address wider political themes and institutional critique, and that (2) despite the presentation of, ostensibly, an enclosed world, the threshold between such a virtual world and the work's institutional context becomes vital to the work's framing and disclosure of its staging.

In order to make this argument, I want to focus on a single, concrete example. Unlike Rebentisch's highlighting of Kabakov's obliviousness to the 'tension between the spatial juxtaposition of the elements of the installation on the one hand and the succession of the encounter with these elements directed by the spectator's own movement on the other' (2012, 160), this is a tension that Nelson's work explicitly sets out to exploit. If Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's installations present a virtual realm that relies on its museum context to prime the beholder, such that it provides a certain 'status'—a place that 'must be wittingly perceived by the viewer to be significant, highly artistic, extremely respected' (2012, 246)—then Nelson's work offers a sharper critique of art's commodification by the gallery system, that both draws upon while challenging this very 'priming'. It reminds us of the contribution of a work's situated context in heightening our sensitivity to the spaces encountered, and the work's capacity to both register and confront the institutional priorities of the host space.

Mirror Infill was a site-specific installation at the 2006 Frieze Art Fair, held in a specially constructed temporary structure designed by the architect Jamie Forbert, in London's Regent's Park. The spectacle and financial excess of the art fair itself was crucial to the work's affect. Through an unmarked door, one entered into a multi-room, labyrinthine world concealed by the uniform gallery stands (Figure 3). Indeed, when inside the enclosed parallel world of the installation, there was a sense of disbelief that such spaces could thus be

concealed, in that the extensive sequence of internal spaces had no outward expression, integrated seamlessly into the neutrality of the exhibition architecture. On passing through the door, the brightness of the fair immediately receded as one was plunged into darkness, and into a series of literal ‘darkrooms’ dominated by the red light associated with such spaces. As James Wilkes describes the work in *Studio International*:

It inverted the rules of the fair: aseptic white walls were replaced by dusty workrooms and abandoned institutional corridors, bright lights exchanged for the shadowy red of a dark room, the green glow of an exit sign, or a low-wattage extension bulb in its metal cage. The detritus that littered the benches and floor was that of an obsessive photographer, and pegged to lines across the low ceiling were hundreds of photos of the marquee under construction, ranging from piles of scaffolding to shots of the almost-finished temporary galleries. (Wilkes 2006)

This obsessive photographic documentation of the construction stages of the very structure of the Frieze art fair constituted a reflexive mirroring that Nelson has employed elsewhere; and yet it also opened up authorial questions, implying a fictional character making these photographs distinct from Nelson himself. And the reflexive elements were multiple. The photographs documented the construction stages of the purpose-built structure conceived to house the art fair (with all the associations with art’s commodification), concealed by the installation itself. But there was also the implication that these photographic prints were developed in the very space we occupied (reinforced by the smell of the developing chemicals) (**Figure 1**). Moreover, as Nelson has indicated, the work was given an urgency rendered by the disappearing technology the installation ‘laments’ with its presentation of increasingly outdated darkroom technology.¹¹ And unlike the ascetic display of art objects in

¹¹ There is a certain irony here, no doubt intended, in that photographs of the installation itself singularly fail to capture the profound experience of disorientation the installation imparts.

the fair itself, removed from the reality of processes of making, this was a work that staged the sheer messiness of production.

These experiences were communicated not just visually but proprioceptively (as one struggled to negotiate the confusingly arranged dark spaces) and olfactorily, through the overwhelming smell of developing fluid. Indeed, these sensory aspects (constituting a presence effect) might be said to have been in tension with the disembodied feeling of our ‘ghosting’ of an abandoned film set, the narrative of which is unclear (Figure 2). And other beholders were looked at suspiciously, uncertain of their status within the work’s virtual realm.

So, while Nelson’s work, with its use of narrative, is often compared to that of Kabakov, as Bishop notes, Nelson’s work ‘represents a return to some of the values that were originally associated with installation art when it came of age in the 1960s: its engagement with a specific site, its use of “poor” or found materials, and its critical stance towards both museum institutions and the commercialisation of “experience” in general’ (2005, 44). And Bishop also makes clear:

Like Kabakov, Nelson adopts a narrative approach to installation, creating scenarios that are ‘scripted’ in advance from a complicated web of references to film, literature, history and current affairs; his scope is therefore more ambitious, both intellectually and narratively, than Kabakov’s world of imaginary characters perpetually locked within Soviet Russia of the 1960s and 1970s. (Bishop 2005, 44)

Mirror Infill, in contrast to the Kabakovs’s theatricalisation of Soviet life, forced us to confront the very spectacle of commodification of the building we occupied. Nelson presented us with a ‘bracketing’ of the represented world that revealed its fictionality through a self-disclosure involving our blundering through its dark space; but this was no longer

achieved through overt theatrical devices. Indeed, Nelson's work was entirely consistent with Rebentisch's recasting of aesthetic autonomy not as the self-sufficiency of the object, but as a semblance—bracketed from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason—that forces us to confront the ethical and political situation *where* we encounter the artwork. The work's particular form of self-disclosure counters misconceptions of such 'immersive' work as context-independent, and reveals how Nelson's work makes available something absent (undisclosed) through representation conceived as a performative act demanding acts of ideation and imagination on the behalf of the beholder.

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