INTRODUCTION
INSTALLATION ART AND EXPERIENCE

What is installation art?

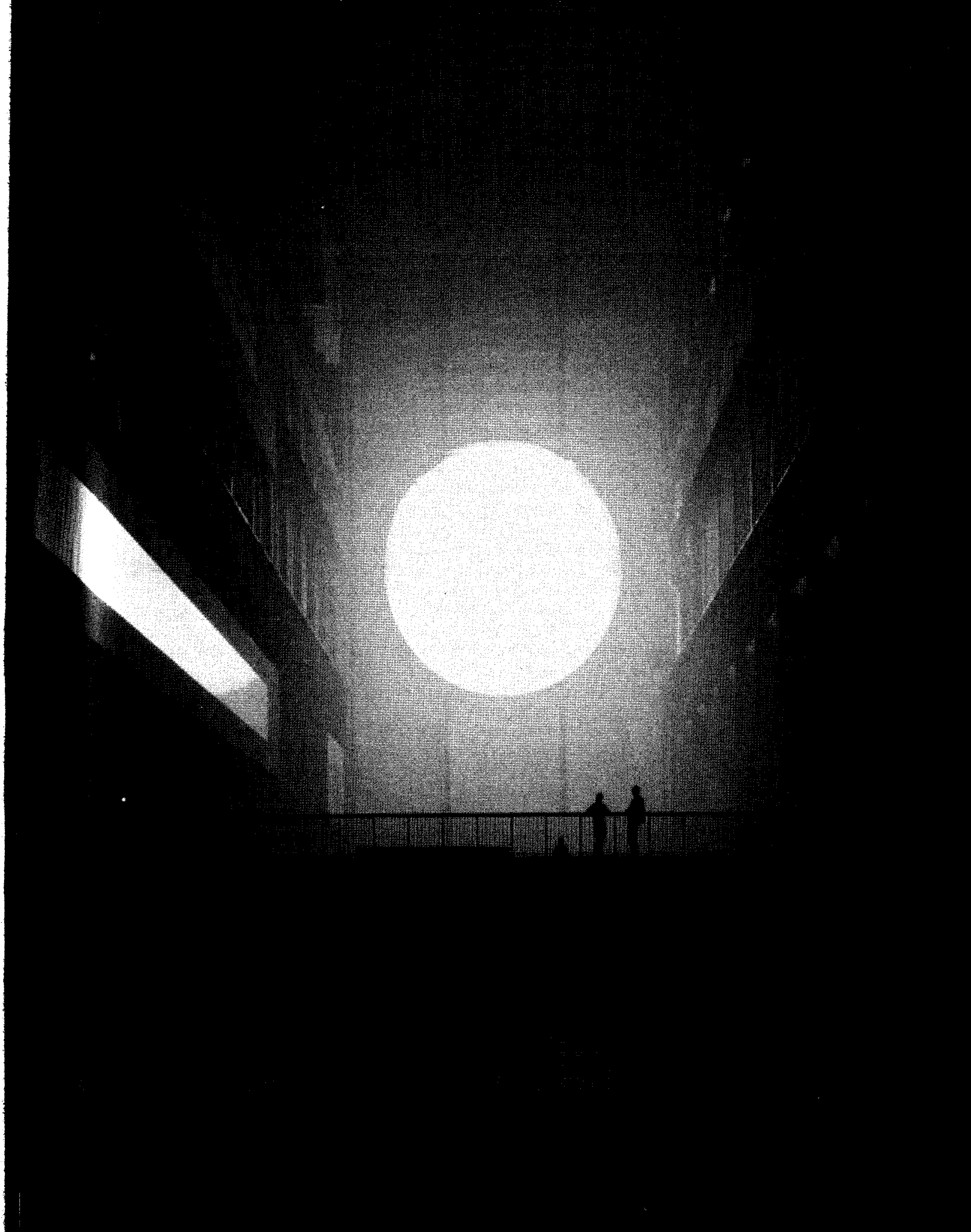
'Installation art' is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as 'theatrical', 'immersive' or 'experiential'. However, the sheer diversity in terms of appearance, content and scope of the work produced today under this name, and the freedom with which the term is used, almost preclude it from having any meaning. The word 'installation' has now expanded to describe any arrangement of objects in any given space, to the point where it can happily be applied even to a conventional display of paintings on a wall.

But there is a fine line between an installation of art and installation art. This ambiguity has been present since the terms first came into use in the 1960s. During this decade, the word 'installation' was employed by art magazines to describe the way in which an exhibition was arranged. The photographic documentation of this arrangement was termed an 'installation shot', and this gave rise to the use of the word for works that used the whole space as 'installation art'. Since then, the distinction between an installation of works of art and 'installation art' proper has become increasingly blurred.

What both terms have in common is a desire to heighten the viewer's awareness of how objects are positioned (installed) in a space, and of our bodily response to this. However, there are also important differences. An installation of art is secondary in importance to the individual works it contains, while in a work of installation art, the space, and the ensemble of elements within it, are regarded in their entirety as a singular entity. Installation art creates a situation into which the viewer physically enters, and insists that you regard this as a singular totality.

Installation art therefore differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art.

This idea is not new: at the start of her book *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (1999), Julie Reiss highlights several recurrent characteristics that persist in attempts to define installation, one of which is that 'the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work'. This point remains undeveloped in her book. Yet if, as Reiss goes on to remark, spectator participation 'is so integral to Installation art that without having the experience of being in the piece, analysis of Installation art is difficult', then the following questions are immediately raised: who is the spectator of installation art? What kind of 'participation' does he or she have in the work? Why is installation at pains to emphasise first-hand 'experience', and what kinds of 'experience' does it offer? These are the kinds of questions that this book seeks to answer, and as such it is



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as much a theory of installation art – of how and why it exists – as it is a history. Besides, installation art already possesses an increasingly canonical history: Western in its bias and spanning the twentieth century, this history invariably begins with El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp, goes on to discuss Environments and Happenings of the late 1950s, nods in deference to Minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, and finally argues for the rise of installation art proper in the 1970s and 1980s. The story conventionally ends with its apotheosis as the institutionally approved art form par excellence of the 1990s, best seen in the spectacular installations that fill large museums such as the Guggenheim in New York and the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern.

While this chronological approach accurately reflects different moments in installation art's development, it also forces similarities between disparate and unrelated works, and does little to clarify what we actually mean by 'installation art'. One reason for this is that installation art does not enjoy a straightforward historical development. Its influences have been diverse: architecture, cinema, performance art, sculpture, theatre, set design, curating, Land art and painting have all impacted upon it at different moments. Rather than there being one history, there seem to be several parallel ones, each enacting a particular repertoire of concerns. This multiple history is manifested today in the sheer diversity of work being produced under the name of installation art, in which any number of these influences can be simultaneously apparent. Some installations plunge you into a fictional world – like a film or theatre set – while others offer little visual stimuli, a bare minimum of perceptual cues to be sensed. Some installations are geared towards heightening your awareness of particular senses (touch or smell) while others seem to steal your sense of self-presence, refracting your image into an infinity of mirror reflections or plunging you into darkness. Others discourage you from contemplation and insist that you *act* – write something down, have a drink, or talk to other people. These different types of viewing experience indicate that a different approach to the history of installation art is necessary: one that focuses not on theme or materials, but on the viewer's *experience*. This book is therefore structured around a presentation of four – though there are potentially many more – ways of approaching the history of installation art.

The viewer

Like 'installation art', 'experience' is a contested term that has received many different interpretations at the hands of many different philosophers. Yet every theory of experience points to a more fundamental idea: the human being who constitutes the subject of that experience. The chapters in this book are organised around four modalities of experience that installation art structures for the viewer – each of which implies a different model of the *subject*, and each of which results in a distinctive type of work. These are not abstract ideas remote from the context in which the art was produced, but are rather, as will be argued, integral both to

Mike Nelson
The Cosmic Legend of the Uroboros Serpent
Turner Prize installation,
Tate Britain, London
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the conceptualisation of installation art as a mode of artistic practice in the late 1960s, and to its critical reception. They should be considered as four torches with which to cast light on the history of installation art, each one bringing different types of work to the fore.

Chapter One is organised around a model of the subject as psychological, or more accurately, psychoanalytical. Sigmund Freud's writings were fundamental to Surrealism, and the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition is paradigmatic for the type of installation art discussed in this chapter – work that plunges the viewer into a psychologically absorptive, dream-like environment. Chapter Two takes as its starting point the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; the English translation of his book *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) was crucial to the theorisation of Minimalist sculpture by artists and critics in the 1960s, and to their understanding of the viewer's heightened bodily experience of this work. This second type of installation art is therefore organised around a phenomenological model of the viewing subject. Chapter Three turns back to Freud, specifically to his theory of the death drive put forward in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), and to revisitations of this text in the 1960s and 1970s by Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. The type of installation art discussed in this chapter therefore revolves around these different returns to late Freud and his idea of libidinal withdrawal and subjective disintegration. Finally, Chapter Four looks at a type of installation art that posits the activated viewer of installation art as a political subject, examining the different ways in which poststructuralist critiques of democracy – such as that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – have affected installation art's conception of the viewer.

The argument, then, is that installation art presupposes a viewing subject who physically enters into the work to experience it, and that it is possible to categorise works of installation by the type of experience that they structure for the viewer. Of course, it is possible to say that all art presumes a subject – insofar as it is *made* by a subject (the artist) and is *received* by a subject (the viewer). In the case of traditional painting and sculpture, however, each element of this three-way communication (artist – work of art – viewer) is relatively discrete. By contrast, installation art from its inception in the 1960s sought to break radically with this paradigm: instead of making a self-contained object, artists began to work in specific locations, where the entire space was treated as a single situation into which the viewer enters. The work of art was then dismantled and often destroyed as soon as this period of exhibition was over, and this ephemeral, site-responsive agenda further insists on the viewer's first-hand experience.

The way in which installation art structures such a particular and direct relationship with the viewer is reflected in the process of writing about such work. It becomes apparent that it is difficult to discuss pieces that one has not experienced first-hand: in most cases, you had to be there. This problem has substantially affected the selection of examples included in this book, which are

a combination of those that I have experienced first-hand and those works that have become the focus of particularly strong or interesting observations from others about the experience of viewing them. The inevitably subjective streak in all these accounts once more asserts the fact that works of installation art are directed at and demand the presence of the viewer.[1] This point is further reinforced by the problem of how to illustrate installations photographically. Visualisation of a work as a three-dimensional space is difficult via a two-dimensional image, and the need to be physically *inside* an installation renders photographic documentation even less satisfactory than when it is used to reproduce painting and sculpture. It is worth bearing in mind that many artists turned to installation art precisely through the desire to expand visual experience beyond the two-dimensional, and to provide a more vivid alternative to it.

Activation and decentring

There is one more argument that this book presents: that the history of installation art's relationship to the viewer is underpinned by two ideas. The first of these is the idea of 'activating' the viewing subject, and the second is that of 'decentring'. Because viewers are addressed directly by every work of installation art – by sheer virtue of the fact that these pieces are large enough for us to enter them – our experience is markedly different from that of traditional painting and sculpture. Instead of *representing* texture, space, light and so on, installation art *presents* these elements directly for us to experience. This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer must walk into and around the work), and on a heightened awareness of other visitors who become part of the piece. Many artists and critics have argued that this need to move around and through the work in order to experience it *activates* the viewer, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached). This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory, since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world. A transitive relationship therefore comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena.

The idea of the 'decentred subject' runs concurrently with this. The late 1960s witnessed a growth of critical writing on perspective, much of which inflected early twentieth-century perspective theories with the idea of a panoptic or masculine 'gaze'. In *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924), the art historian Erwin Panofsky argued that Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical 'world' depicted in the painting; the line of perspective, with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, was connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it. A hierarchical relationship was understood to exist between the centred viewer and the 'world' of the painting spread before him. Panofsky therefore equated Renaissance perspective with the rational and self-reflexive Cartesian subject ('I think therefore I am').

Franceso di Giorgio Martini
Architectural View
c.1490–1500
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Artists throughout the twentieth century have sought to disrupt this hierarchical model in various ways. One thinks of a Cubist still life, in which several viewpoints are represented simultaneously, or El Lissitzky's idea of 'Pangeometry' (discussed at the end of Chapter Two). In the 1960s and 1970s the relationship that conventional perspective is said to structure between the work of art and the viewer came increasingly to attract a critical rhetoric of 'possession', 'visual mastery' and 'centring'. That the rise of installation art is simultaneous with the emergence of theories of the subject as decentred is one of the basic assumptions on which this book turns. These theories, which proliferate in the 1970s and are broadly describable as poststructuralist, seek to provide an alternative to the idea of the viewer that is implicit in Renaissance perspective: that is, instead of a rational, centred, coherent humanist subject, poststructuralist theory argues that each person is intrinsically dislocated and divided, at odds with him or herself.[2] In short, it states that the correct way in which to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and *decentred* – by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures. This discourse of decentring has had particular influence on the writing of art critics sympathetic to feminist and postcolonial theory, who argue that fantasies of 'centring' perpetuated by dominant ideology are masculinist, racist and conservative; this is because there is no one 'right' way of looking at the world, nor any privileged place from which such judgements can be made.[3] As a consequence, installation art's multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the Renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work.

With such theories in mind, the historical and geographical scope of this book should be addressed. Despite the vast number of installations produced in the last forty years, the majority of the examples featured here date from 1965 to 1975, the decade in which installation art comes of age. This is because it is at this time that the main theoretical impulses behind installation art come into focus: ideas of heightened immediacy, of the decentred subject (Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida), and of activated spectatorship as political in implication. This decade also witnessed the reconstruction of proto-installations by El Lissitzky, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Kurt Schwitters, and some of these modernist precursors are discussed in order to stress the fact that many of the motivations behind installation art are not uniquely the preserve of postmodernism but are part of a historical trajectory spanning the twentieth century.

This is also why this study's field of investigation stays more or less within Western horizons, despite the fact that installation art is now a global phenomenon – witnessed in the contribution of non-Western artists to biennials worldwide. In order to keep this book focused on one aspect of installation, its viewing subject, there is no discussion of the work of those non-western artists whose desire to immerse or activate the viewer springs from different traditions.