3.7 Installation and Performance Art

Artists create **two-dimensional** images, such as photographs, to help us see the world around us in a new way. As you've read earlier in this chapter, sculptors shape raw material to create **three-dimensional** objects that occupy space and are defined through the dimensions of height, width, and depth. Traditionally, sculpture has focused on the naturalistic portrayal of the human body. As modern extensions of traditional sculpture**,** installation art and performance art focus on three-dimensional art that engages the viewer's senses and invites the viewer to experience the art by moving through space, hearing sounds, touching props, or even tasting. Often these works are **time-based**, meaning they change over time, happen in real-time, or last for a defined period of time, effectively blurring the boundaries between visual art and performance. These modern artistic explorations encourage the viewer to consider the ways that art can make lasting change even if the work itself does not last.

A. Installation Art

Installation art incorporates multiple objects, often from various media, and takes up entire spaces. Installations may use sound, light, movement, and live performers. They may be generic or site specific. Because of their relative complexity, installations can address aesthetic and narrative ideas on a larger scale. The genesis of installation art can be traced to the Dada movement, during and after World War I. Proponents of this movement cultivated a new aesthetic by their unconventional natures and ridicule of established tastes and styles.

One of the earliest and well-known examples of installation art is the work of German artist Kurt Schwitters. In 1923, he began a creative project to transform his family house into several rooms-sized sculptural constructions collectively called *Merzbau* (figure 1).

One of the three existing photographs from 1933 shows a room overtaken by black and white forms that protrude from the walls and ceiling. No photograph can truly capture the totality of installation

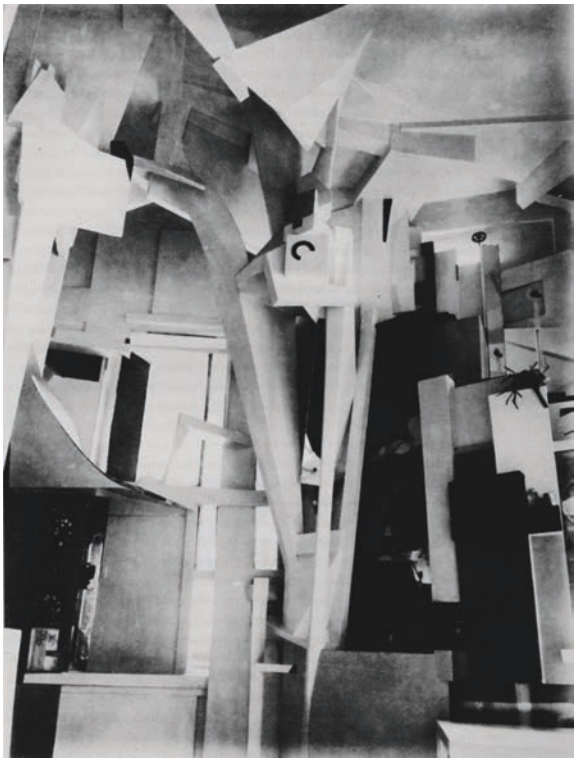

Figure 1.
Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau* [detail], 1933. Installation, Hanover, Germany.

art, which comes alive only when the viewer is surrounded by and can become part of the work of art. The idea of *Merzbau* has inspired artists with its innovative hybrid of sculpture and architectural construction, but regrettably, nothing remains of the original, which was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid in 1943.

A present-day example of installation art can be seen in Georgia artist Christina West's installation *Shadows and Fog* (figure 2).

On display in 2008, this exhibit filled the gallery with portrait-quality, unnaturally painted, nude figures. Imagine walking through the gallery as you encounter these salmon-colored humans. Witnessing their intimate, awkward, and sometimes humorous expressions and poses produces a mix of vulnerability and voyeurism. The figures, slightly reduced from natural scale, draw attention to the way their bodies — and your own — exist in space: they are like us and at the same moment very much *not* like us. Turning a corner, you come face-to-face with an agonized grimace, a human figure, reduced and bared. How an installation piece takes up space, and how you move through the constructed environment, make up the aesthetic experience just as much as do the formal elements or compositional principles we studied in Chapter 2.

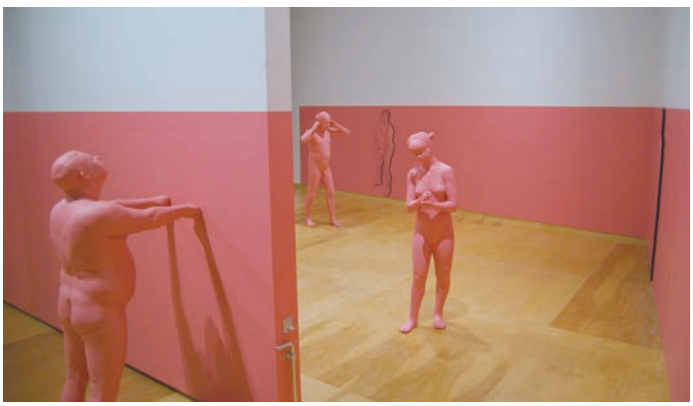

Figure 2.
Christina West, *Shadows and Fog* [detail], 2008. Hand built sculpture and mixed media installation, Average height 48 in. Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo, New York.

B. Performance Art

Performance art goes a step further, involving not just the viewer but also the artist as part of the work itself. Similar to installation works, performance art had its first manifestations during the Dada art movement, which began as a reaction to the horror and absurdity of the First World War. Live performances were deliberately chaotic and confusing. They included nonsense poetry, visual art, dance, random noise, and music — often simultaneously. Performance art still focuses on social and political issues. The heart of the medium is its ability to use live performance in the same context as static works of art: to expand our understanding of human experience.

The German artist Joseph Beuys was instrumental in introducing performance art as a legitimate medium in the post-World War II artistic milieu. *I Like America and America Likes Me*, from 1974, finds Beuys co-existing with a coyote for a week in the Rene Block Gallery in New York City (figure 3). The artist is protected from the animal by a felt blanket and a shepherd's staff. Performance art, like installation, challenges the viewer to reexamine human history and experience.

Figure 3.
Oriol Tuca, Illustration of Joseph Beuy's *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 2012. Ink drawing. Collection of the artist.

In the 1960s, Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" in upstate New York invited viewers to be participants. These events, sometimes rehearsed and other times improvised, begin to erase the line between the artist and the audience. One example of participatory performance art is Japanese artist Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* from 1965. In that work, Ono sits on a stage in a black dress with a pair of scissors beside her. Audience members take turns coming onto the stage and using the scissors to cut her clothing. As time progresses, her garments are slowly cut away a scrap at a time. In this piece and many others, the artist's body and the breaking of taboos surrounding social interactions become the subject of the art.

Argentine artist Marta Minujín referred to her performance works as "livable sculptures." In her 1965 happening, *Reading the News*, she squirmed into the Río de la Plata, an Argentine river, wrapped in newspapers (figure 4).

Figure 4.
Marta Minujín, *Reading the News*, 1965. Performance documentation. Costanera Sur, Buenes Aires, Argentina.

In another work, *La Menesunda*, Minujín combined aspects of both installation and performance. Participants were asked to go through sixteen chambers, each separated by a human-shaped entry. Led by neon lights, groups of eight visitors would encounter rooms with television sets at full blast, couples making love in bed, a cosmetics counter and its attendant, a dental office that required dialing an oversized rotary phone in order to exit, a walk-in freezer with dangling fabrics suggesting sides of beef, and a mirrored room with black lighting, falling confetti, and the scent of frying food. In this case, the viewers became both the performers and the consumers of the art.

Another example of a participatory performance is *Capital Cleanse* by Massachusetts artist Tereza Swanda. She cast fifty bars of soap that resembled American twenty-five cent coins (figure 5). These were then installed in public restrooms.

The total amount of these "coins," twelve dollars and fifty cents, represents the "bride price" or money exchanged for one girl sold to Nigerian Boko Haram militants in April 2014. The artist intends the soaps to be used, to change, and to disappear, inviting reflection on the fate of these girls and the role of money in human trafficking. The viewer's participation completes this time-based performance work.

Figure 5.
Tereza Swanda, *Uncertain White III, Capital Cleanse Series*, 2014. Carved and cast soap, 2 × 2 × 0.5 in.

Today we see a new form of performance art happen unexpectedly around us in the form of **flash mobs**, groups of people who gather in public spaces to collaborate in short, seemingly spontaneous events that entertain and surprise passersby. Many flash mobs are arranged in advance through the use of social media. One such event coordinated through social media is this flash mob pillow fight that took place in Lausanne, Switzerland (figure 6).

C. Installation, Performance, and the Viewer

In 1969, performance artist Vito Acconci followed random people he encountered on the streets of New York and documented their movements and reactions over a period of three weeks. You would not be the first to wonder what differentiates this performance piece from stalking. Does it really require that much creativity to sit in a chair and stare silently at strangers for 736 and a half hours as Marina Abramovi did in her 2010 performance piece, *The Artist is Present*? What distinguishes a publicity stunt from true art? Where do you draw the line?

These questions bring us back to the beginning of this textbook, where we suggested that art is always shifting and being reshaped by cultural changes, artistic preferences, and innovation. Installation art and performance art defy traditional notions of art and encourage viewers to participate in the creation of meaning. Artists invest their time, thought, and energy in developing concepts and performances. They can be serious social commentary, as in Tereza Swanda's work, an investigation into human behavior, as in Yoki Ono's *Cut Piece*, or absurd and fun, like a pillow fight. Sometimes, if the concept that drives the installation or performance falls flat, the work can seem self-serving, purposeless, or simply bizarre. But successful performance and installation pieces challenge viewers and connect to questions surrounding our most basic human instincts. At times uncanny, absurd, or uncomfortable, these pieces encourage us to reflect on our behaviors, our values, our fears, and our ideas about others, art itself, and the world in which we live.

Figure 6.
Flash Mob at Lausanne, Switzerland, 2011.