

**Advanced 1**  
**Unit 5 Reading**  
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**WHEN IS A ROOM NOT A ROOM?**

A

There was a bit of a fuss at a Tate Britain exhibition of modern art a few years ago. A woman was hurrying through the large room that housed an intriguing work entitled *Lights Going On and Off in a Gallery*, in which, yes, lights went on and off in a gallery. Suddenly the woman's necklace broke and the beads spilled over the floor. As we bent down to pick them up, one man said, "Perhaps this is part of the installation." Another replied, "Surely that would make it performance art rather than an installation." "Or a happening," said a third.

B

These are confusing times for the visual arts audience, which is growing rapidly. More and more of London's gallery space is being devoted to installation what we need is the answer to three simple questions. What is installation? Why has it become so ubiquitous? And why is it so irritating?

C

First question first. What are installations? "Installations," answers the Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art and Artists with misplaced self-confidence, "only exist as long as they are installed." Thanks for that. The dictionary continues more promisingly: installations are "multi-media, multi-dimensional, and multi-form works which are created temporarily for a particular space or site either outdoors or indoors, in a museum or gallery." As a first stab at a definition, this isn't bad. It rules out paintings, sculptures, frescoes, and other intuitively non-installational artworks. It also says that anything can be an installation so long as it has a status conferred on it. So the flashing fluorescent tube in your kitchen is not an because it hasn't got the nod from the gallery.

D

The only problem is that this definition is incomplete. In some cases, installations have been bought and moved out of the gallery for which they were intended and re-installed in a different context. Also, unlike looking at paintings or sculptures, you often need to move through or around installations to appreciate the full impact of the work. What this suggests is that we are barking up the wrong tree by trying to define installations. They do not all share a set of essential

characteristics. Some will demand audience participation, some will be site-specific, some will be conceptual jokes involving only a light bulb.

E

This brings us to the second question: why are there so many of them around at the moment? There have been installations since Marcel Duchamp put a toilet in a New York gallery in 1917 and called it art. This was the most resonant gesture in twentieth-century art, discrediting notions of taste, skill, and craftsmanship, and suggesting that everyone could be an artist. But why has the number of installations been going up so quickly?

F

American critic Hal Foster thinks he knows why installations are everywhere in modern art. He reckons that the key transformation in Western art since the 1960s has been a shift from what he calls a "vertical" conception to a "horizontal" one. Before then, painters were interested in painting, exploring their medium to its limits. They were vertical. Artists are now less interested in pushing a form such as painting or sculpture as far as it will go, and more in using their work as a terrain on which to evoke feelings or provoke reactions. True, photography, painting, or sculpture can do the same, but installations have proved most fruitful—perhaps because with installations there is less pressure to conform to the demands of a formal tradition and the artist can more easily explore what concerns them.

G

Why are installations so irritating, then? Perhaps because in the many cases when craftsmanship is removed, art seems like the emperor's new clothes. Perhaps also because installation artists are frequently so bound up with the intellectual history of art and its various "isms" that they forget that those who are not educated in this neither care nor understand.

H

But, ultimately, being irritating need not be a bad thing for a work of art since at least it compels engagement from the viewer. Take Martin Creed's *Lights Going On and Off* again. "My work," says Martin Creed, "is about fifty percent what I make of it, and fifty percent what people make of it. Meanings are made in people's heads—I can't control them."

I

Another example is Double Bind, Juan Munoz's huge work at the Tate Modern gallery in London. A false mezzanine floor in the massive main exhibition hall is full of holes, some real, some trompe-l'œil. A pair of lifts chillingly lit go up and down, heading nowhere. To get the full impact, and to go beyond mere illusionism, you need to go downstairs and look up through the holes. There are gray men living in rooms between the floorboards. installations within the installation. I don't necessarily understand or like all installation art, but I was moved by this. It's creepy and beautiful and strange, but ultimately you, the spectator, need to make an effort to get something out of it.

**Sample Summary:**

An incident at Tate Britain, where a woman's necklace broke in a gallery with lights going on and off, sparked a discussion about whether it was part of the art. This highlights the confusion surrounding the rise of installations in galleries. Installations are temporary, multi-media artworks created for specific spaces, differing from traditional art forms like paintings and sculptures. They often require viewers to move around them to fully appreciate the art. Their popularity has increased since Marcel Duchamp's 1917 toilet artwork, as they allow artists to explore ideas without traditional constraints. Critic Hal Foster believes modern art has shifted from focusing on specific mediums to evoking feelings and reactions, making installations more popular. However, installations can be irritating because they sometimes lack craftsmanship and are too intellectual for general audiences to understand. Despite this, being irritating can engage viewers, as seen in Martin Creed's "Lights Going On and Off," where the meaning is partly created by the audience. Another example is Juan Munoz's "Double Bind" at Tate Modern, which requires effort from the spectator to fully experience its eerie and complex nature.

**Source:**

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