

PRACTICABLE

The Work of Art as *Dispositif*: Setting the Stage for Audience Participation

A Research Project of The University of Valenciennes and Lille (Calhiste, Ceac and Geriico Laboratories)

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Coordination: samuel.bianchini@univ-valenciennes.fr

Since the 1960s artists intent on breaking with the traditional model in the visual arts have been exploring ways of substituting the production of artistic situations for the making of art objects. These strategies have included the creation of installations, in situ work, environments and, more recently, interactive settings.

Albeit in very different ways, Minimal Art and Happenings simultaneously fostered the active engagement of the beholder in the work of art. Creating a new kind of theater, Happenings called for direct participation on the part of the audience. Minimal Art, on the other hand, was based on the idea that viewer and object coexist in the same space-time and that the piece itself is located in their interrelation. Closed circuit video installations developed this notion further by placing the image of the viewer at the center of the work. Today interactive technology has made it possible to directly integrate the movements and gestures of the beholder.

The network of media that informs our world has made interactivity a pervasive model. It affects all aspects of contemporary creation, and while artists are obviously free to use it or not, they cannot ignore its influence. Our research project investigates both works that specifically use interactive technology and works that, although not interactive in the technical sense, elicit active and operational participation on the part of the beholder. Works, in other words, that call for some sort of “practice” on the part of the audience.

Audience participation can take on a number of forms, none of which are self-evident. The viewer may be cast in the role of visitor or spectator. He may be prompted to use or utilize the work, become an actor or agent, or, to borrow from Michel de Certeau, be considered a “practitioner.” He may also be asked to perform or enact the work. These and other ways of involving the beholder need to be clearly identified and fully analyzed, a task which has not been carried out systematically until now and which necessitates both a theoretical and an experimental approach.

Following are some topics of investigation for our project:

How can situations of an aesthetic, reflexive, as well as a pleasurable nature that are based on the physical participation of the beholder eschew the trap of producing a merely “useable” piece, whose false proximity is just another source of alienation? What are the guidelines for designing a *dispositif* in which the beholder actually shares a role in activating the work? How can such a *dispositif* be made truly performative, setting the beholder into action and prompting him to conduct a certain number of operations by a kind of chain reaction? How does one set the stage for audience participation? This question in turn leads to another range of problems: Is the audience, in this case, truly active or passive? Is the spectator staging the action or is he, in fact, being staged? How do you configurate and take hold of these hybrid situations which we have termed “practicable” and which are both human and object-based, and can also include mechanical constructions? What is the status of these “practicable” works? What new modes of display and experience do they call for?

Practicable is a pluridisciplinary research project. It will be carried out through practical experimentation and theoretical analysis in the fields of art history, aesthetics, communication and information sciences and sociology applied to plastic arts, choreography and music.



Franz Erhard Walther
The forehead, 1963 from the «1. Werksatz 1963-1969»
Exhibition view at the CAC Bretigny, 2008
Courtesy Jocelyn Wolff Gallery