

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

"INTIMATE ARENAS"

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Karen Klee-Atlin

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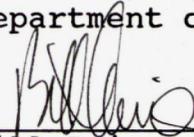
The undersigned certify that they have viewed and read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, respectively, a Thesis Exhibition and a supporting written paper entitled "Intimate Arenas": An Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition, submitted by Karen Klee-Atlin in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



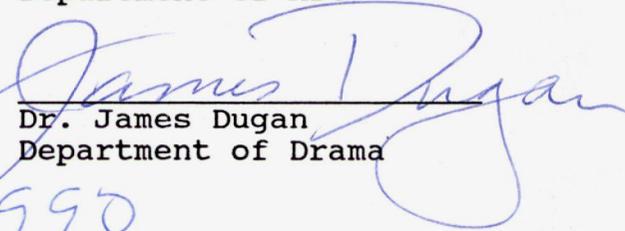
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ABSTRACT

Intimate Arenas is the title of the collection of individual works presented for my thesis exhibition and is the title for this paper, which supports the exhibition. Intimate Arenas also serves as the title for one of the works within the exhibition. Other works included are In Times of Danger I Seek Refuge in My Father's Mouth, Swallowing Stones, Proof: The Words and Marks Below Indicate Your Desires, and Emphasis added. All of the pieces in this exhibition are linked both conceptually and formally, and all can be considered as inter-media and/or installation works, with emphasis on the latter.

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Special thanks must go to the friends I have found during my two years in Calgary. Without the help and friendship I received from faculty, fellow graduates, technical, secretarial and support staff and students the growth of my work would certainly have been diminished.

Finally, thanks go to my family for the love, understanding and inspiration they have continuously given me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page no.
Approval Page...	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction	1
Installation: what is it, where did it come from, and why do it?	
Definition of Installation	2
History	3
Reasons for Using Installation	9
Problems in Installation	14
Alternatives	16
Personal Background	18
Exhibition	
Works	21
Materials	30
Context	33
Narrative	35
Conclusion	37
Endnotes	39
Bibliography	40

Intimate Arenas

Introduction

In recent years Canadian curators have sent many installations to international exhibitions, an indication that these art works, as art critic Nancy Tousley writes, are of "...a contemporary form particularly strong in Canada..."¹ Many artists have found that, as a form of communication, installation art can be very effective because it can demand active viewer involvement. As well, installation art can encompass many artistic disciplines, including painting, sculpture, video, theatre etc., thereby offering versatility and scope to the artist.

This paper will begin with a brief discussion of installation art and its history, followed by a description of the works in this exhibition and, finally, will discuss my reasons for pursuing this art form.

Installation: what is it, where did it come from, and why do it?

Definition of Installation

Although there are no hard rules in installation work I have found Lesley Johnstone's definition of installation, in her contribution to the catalogue for Aurora Borealis, the 1985 exhibition of installation works, useful in describing an artform which challenges description. Often, an installation is a collection of disparate objects brought together only for the duration of the exhibition. The impermanence of the work is central to the concept of installation. Time is also important in terms of how the artist, working in this art form, can control the movement and the attention of the viewer within a piece. Installations are either created for a specific space or can be made to involve the space that is available; the installation artist exploits the fact that the context derived from the exhibition space will affect the final meaning of the work.²

Within a given installation, each component is often of a different medium. According to Johnstone, the term installation may be used to define works whose only links "...tend to be grounded in non-formal characteristics," and that "the criteria for classification within the "category" must be located primarily in conceptual similarities."³ "Other equivalent terms," Johnstone continues, "'paintings," "sculpture," and "photography" regroup certain kinds of art works which share formal characteristics and have similar means of production. Installation has no such precise significance and the works denominated by the term share few purely formal elements."⁴ These

objects with "conceptual similarities" create a kind of visual and metaphorical resonance among themselves which can ultimately include the viewer.

History

Lesley Johnstone has traced the first time the term "installation" was used to describe something other than a kind of photographic documentation of an art work to a 1964 neon work by Dan Flavin. "However," she notes, "there are a number of earlier works which, while never characterized as such, were in fact installations..." Johnstone lists Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau (1923-43) as one of the forerunners.⁵ Merzbau was, essentially, the interior of Schwitters' home and, beginning in 1923, he created space, added wall panels and objects to it in a form of three-dimensional collage or assemblage until it was destroyed in 1943.⁶ In his Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Brian O'Doherty writes that, with Merzbau, Schwitters built what could be considered to be the first viewer-implicating art work. In terms of installation Merzbau fulfills the aspect of impermanence, both in having been changed and added to over time and secondly in its final destruction which, while not the artist's intent, causes current viewers to have to rely on documentation to "see" the work. O'Doherty states that in Merzbau "we are brought to a space we can only occupy through eye-witness reports, by walking our eyes through photographs that tantalize rather than confirm experience..."⁷

However, although the viewer was surrounded by the art work, Schwitters failed to truly include the viewer within the piece. This may have been because art audiences at that time had not been exposed to a work like this and were unclear

about how to approach it. O'Doherty writes, "Witnesses don't report on themselves in the Merzbau. They look at it, rather than experience themselves in it." In other words, people viewed Merzbau much as they would view a painting. O'Doherty informs us that "the Environment was a genre nearly forty years away, and the idea of a surrounded spectator was not yet a conscious one."⁸

One notable aspect of installation work is its involvement of space in what can be a somewhat theatrical arrangement and lighting of objects. Rene Blouin, in his introduction to the Aurora Borealis catalogue, feels that this may come from the influences of certain Pop artists. In the 1960s, Blouin writes, "Surfacing after two decades dominated by abstraction, Pop Art brought content back to the centre of the artwork: a socially-connotated content featuring emblems and icons of popular culture and of our consumer society." At this time, some "Pop Art works began to move towards theatricalization."⁹ One of the examples he uses is Bedroom (1963) by Claes Oldenburg, a black and white zebra-striped confection, complete with night-table and lamp, depicting a Manhattan boudoir. Blouin finds that in their use of real objects and movement into space without illusion or artistic expression, "...limits..." in art works like Bedroom "...overflow the frame's periphery and shatter its core. The work thus becomes three-dimensional and its language projects into space."¹⁰

Works like Bedroom and pieces by American artists Edward Kienholz and George Segal have been defined as tableaux (faithful, graphic representations). In the late 1800s "tableaux vivant" was a form of entertainment among the well-to-do. Participants were dressed in period costumes and arranged to depict famous scenes or paintings in three dimensions. An excellent description of this activity can be found in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth pp. 133-34. Those tableaux were "living"

because although the characters remained motionless, in keeping with the static quality of a painting or illustration, they were peopled by living persons. This is not so with the works of Kienholz or Segal. As Harold Osborne writes, in Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth-Century Art, with regard to these artists, "Tableaux by some modern artists...consist of situations assembled from real things...Their appeal depends upon their expressive impact, and sometimes images are created of haunting, almost terrifying vivacity."¹¹ Kienholz peoples his works depicting cafes and squalid apartments with polychrome, lifelike renditions of the human form while George Segal uses "rough plaster casts of real figures associated with real furniture, doors, windows,... mirror[ing] the human isolation and spiritual disengagement of modern life with an almost unendurable pathos and virtually without artifice..."¹²

It is interesting to note that while "tableaux vivants" attempt to recreate scenes or paintings, the tableaux of Keinhholz and Segal, for all their faithfulness to the objects and to the people they are portraying, might as well have been paintings of the same subjects. The viewer is not invited to enter the works, which have been made only to be looked at. This may be because these settings are already filled with characters. O'Doherty writes that the viewer's position within the pieces "...is partly preempted by the figures." Segal's tableaux are "...a very sophisticated form of "realism." Segal's white plaster is a convention of removal which also removes us from ourselves."¹³ O'Doherty contends that these tableaux are really paintings which are framed by the gallery itself.¹⁴

At this same time an effort was begun, on the part of Minimalists, Conceptualists, and Environment (Land or Earth) artists, to move out of the museums and galleries and, in the tradition of the Dadaists forty years before, to place less emphasis on the

object, the art market "commodity." This move was seen as a bid for freedom from the strictures placed on artists by the art market to produce showable and saleable art. As Johnstone writes, "The minimal artists' strategy was to produce works whose form and materials were so simple and ordinary (rows of fire bricks, square white cubes) that it became ridiculous to think of buying or selling them."¹⁵ The Conceptualists on the other hand, writes Osborne, by-passed the object altogether by presenting "texts, photographs, maps, diagrams, sound cassettes, video, etc. [which were] used to refer the spectator to happenings, events, or situations removed in time and place from what [was] presented in the gallery as a means of reference."¹⁶ Since, as Johnstone writes, Conceptual artists were "creating artworks which were first and foremost ideas... buying and selling became difficult..."¹⁷ O'Doherty writes that in producing ideas and refusing to produce art objects Conceptual art brought the spectator closer to the objective of art: to receive "meaning" from the artist's method of communication.¹⁸

During this time, viewer involvement was of a rarified sort. Osborne finds that, in general, the art of the 60s "...makes little or no attempt to seduce or charm an audience. It is a deadpan art of the literal and matter-of-fact. The art object may be banal, obvious, boring - this is not regarded as a demerit. Its merit is that it is what it is seen to be, that and nothing else...The new art of the 1960s was intellectual rather than sensuous in its impact, conceptual rather than perceptual."¹⁹ However, while the "seduction" or "charming" of an audience was not the intention of Conceptual artists, neither did they wish to repel their viewers. Osborne found a description of Conceptual art in the Biennial Report of the Tate Gallery for 1972-4, which stated that this art was "...a logical continuation of two further important trends, the tendency to direct the attention of the spectator increasingly upon the process by which an art

work comes into being, that is, the idea of the work, and the tendency to demand an ever-increasing measure of spectator involvement not only in the form of appreciation but by actual participation in the process of production."²⁰ It should be mentioned here that recently there has been renewed interest in the Conceptual mode of working but with a notable change. Work that is derived from the Conceptualists is now termed either neo- or post-conceptual. R. C. Morgan defines "post-conceptual" art as "'idea" art with a narrative tendency, often reflective of media culture..."²¹ Some examples of this type of art would be the poster works of Barbara Kruger and Gran Fury and the electronic signs of Jenny Holzer. Morgan feels that the neo-conceptualists, however, have completely reversed the 60s Conceptualists' endeavours to reduce the value of the art object and have, instead, "invested their sources of information back into objects." Morgan includes within this group the artists Haim Steinbach, Gretchen Bender and Jeff Koons. "What [distinguishes] these artists," continues Morgan, is "the fact that they [indulge] in the commodity, supposedly from a critical vantage point. Corporate glut - a concept clearly synchronous with the eighties - [becomes] the raw material for these artists in one form or another..."²²

The inclusion of the viewer in a piece of art is an idea that was pursued to some extent in the Happenings and Environments of the early 1960's. And as in Minimal and Conceptual art, another driving force behind Happenings and Environment and Performance art was the concern to dispense with the object and therefore obtain some freedom from the museums and galleries.

Happenings were a collage of action, sound and art and included a temporal aspect in the work; a Happening occurred over a given length of time and produced no end-product (other than the ubiquitous photographic documentation) save the

recollections of the viewer/participant. However, Happenings, while on the surface spontaneous events, were in fact orchestrated, choreographed and performed by the artists. Their involvement of the viewer was chiefly in the placement of the action in relation to the viewer. As Michael Kirby writes in Happenings: an Illustrated Anthology, Happenings "...rejected the proscenium stage [of theatre] and the conceit that everyone in the auditorium sees the same "picture.""²³ Viewers were made to stand, look through slots and in some cases actors used "...insistent methods of forcing themselves into the awareness of the spectator in ways that could not be avoided or dismissed. The roaring lawnmower pushing at the people in A Spring Happening and the girl crawling on the floor in World's Fair II, untying a spectator's shoelaces, are obvious examples."²⁴

Environment art, on the other hand, involved space and therefore anyone within that space. Johnstone writes that, "The land artists' initial move out of the gallery and into natural and often inaccessible sites rejected the existence of the gallery and museum space altogether."²⁵ However, in an effort to pull away from museums, much of Environment art was(is) geographically so remote and inaccessible as to preclude viewer involvement except through photo-documentation.

Performance art shares a common pedigree with Happenings and Environment art, in being largely a "...rebellion...against the commodity orientation of painting and sculpture..."²⁶ Michael Dean, in writing a review of Performance art at Mercer Union, states,

"The history of Performance by Artists usually begins with the Italian Futurists in 1910 and continues with the Constructivists and Dadaists, re-emerging in the 50s with the Fluxus in New York and the Body Art of individual artists like Acconci, Oppenheim and Beuys. Throughout this

history Performance Art has remained outside the identified (mainstream) development in modernism...¹²⁷

However, as its name indicates, Performance art is produced on behalf of an audience and the audience generally sits and watches.

The temporal emphasis, the attempt at including the viewer, and the lack of a permanent end-product are aspects of art-making which installation art has absorbed from various disciplines. Johnstone writes that although the criteria which define art were expanded by Minimal, Conceptual, and Land art (and I would add Happenings and Performance art to the list), perhaps their greatest bequest to future art forms was in questioning the premise of marketing art. "By contesting the fundamental marketability of art and thereby attempting to undermine the commercial gallery system, "dematerialized" art initiated an extremely vital restructuring of the art system."¹²⁸

Reasons for Using Installation

What are the features specific to installation that have led to its adoption by artists? One reason may be the variety of formats that installation may take. Installation work can be considered to be a logical extension of Post-Modernism, which, according to Craig Owens, " ...is characterized by appropriation, site-specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization ..."¹²⁹ Inherent in Post-Modernism is a blurring of disciplines, a deliberate layering of media, metaphor, and meaning. And one reason for this compulsive layering may be that, in this age of visual pollution (advertisements, billboards, television commercials), the viewer is

constantly being bombarded by visual stimuli in daily life, all vying for his/her attention. Fela Grunwald and Diana Nemiroff write the following on media overload and representation: "...artists are surrounded by a veritable supermarket of images through the productions of television, advertising and news magazines. Through reproduction, society is engaged in a compulsive process of representing itself."³⁰ Within this context, installation work, employing any number of sources and media, seems particularly well-suited to the job of addressing the concerns of contemporary artists, who must, perhaps, work harder than their predecessors had to in order to engage the viewer. The installation artist tries to achieve a form of communication that rivals and reveals the sources of dynamism in mass media. M. A. Staniszewski, in an article on the Spanish installation artist Antonio Muntadas, discusses what is driving artists today to use mass media for their art:

"In the image industry - movies, T.V. publicity, publications, which includes the commercial circles of artistic production and the art market - the goal is to capture the audience, readers, consumers, rates, and sales. And it is part of the function of the artist today to be concerned with making the invisible part of these images visible. This so-called conceptual approach to making art entails taking into consideration the context of an image's production and reproduction. Emphasizing these techniques and strategies makes visible the political, social, and financial interests that are located behind the images."³¹

Muntadas was at the Banff Fine Arts Centre in 1989 and produced a large installation, Stadium IV, for the Walter Phillips Gallery there. He is interested in exposing the subtle and obvious forms of control and persuasion inherent in stadiums of any description and, according to Daina Augaitis' contribution to the accompanying catalogue, "...he highlights not only the stadium's architecture and its events, but also isolates details of the infrastructure that are less visible signs of corporate, political and cultural intention. Through layers of images and sounds, the installation underlines the

stadium's function as a public architectural form, one that is instrumental in determining ideology."³²

Artists often tend to deal with the dissection and depiction of culture. The objects included in installation pieces tend to be culture-bound and therefore familiar to the viewer, allowing an entry into the concerns of the artist through a process of identification and recognition. As Rene Blouin stated, in an interview with art critic Nancy Tousley, "Installation in contemporary art [is] very probing...The obsession in 80's art to analyze and be critical of the culture needs many tools - sociology, linguistics, political science, anthropology. You need complex tools to deal with the cultural fabric and installation allows for this."³³ Culture as a topic for art is not new, but any discussion of contemporary culture must be tentative, complex, and constantly under revision. Blouin writes in Aurora Borealis, "Culture and its models have become art's dominant issue. Current art is demonstrating unprecedented relentlessness in its critical analysis of culture's structures and operating mechanisms, and in making visible their underpinnings."³⁴

Artists have found that the nature of society in flux can be mirrored for today's viewer in installation works - a transitory, pluralistic, temporary and ultimately adaptable art form, often physically including the viewer. In many artistic disciplines we view the result of a closed confrontation between artist, concept and medium, whereas in installation, the viewer can be transformed from spectator to actor or simply into another component within the work. Installations which include the viewer can be seen in the work of Canadian Vera Frenkel. In one of Frenkel's on-going works, The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story (begun 1979) Part One: Her Room in Paris, Frenkel arranges furniture, clothing and other articles to present the

viewer with the room of a fictitious ex-patriate Canadian novelist. We never meet Lumsden but her story is told to us by various characters appearing on the television screen on the bedroom bureau. John Chandler wrote the following, describing Frenkel's viewer-interactive works and their reliance on video as the hook; "...[With] Frenkel's use of video...the possibility of [including the spectator] exists and is realized. The video monitor and its tape are objects in a room. The spectator does or does not watch, comes and goes, moves about the room, becomes part of the work itself. More than that, the spectator becomes implicated in the drama itself..."³⁵ In speaking about drama Chandler underscores a characteristic of the use, in certain installation works, of identifiable "props" to prepare expectations within the viewer. Chandler noticed that, in Frenkel's fabrication of Lumsden's room, when "we enter her room we enter a 'set'; we are 'on stage.' Perhaps we have lines to speak, but have forgotten them? No matter, there is no audience there, only other actors (and sometimes one is alone)."³⁶ Chandler introduces the point that the number of viewers present within an installation can also affect how the individual viewer will read the work. Chandler writes: "I have been there alone and with others. It is good both ways. When alone I pry and snoop around more. I look at her books, look in her trunk, see the view out the window. When with others, I tend to sit and watch TV."³⁷ The dynamism of installation is perhaps most importantly manifested in the rate of movement of the viewer through the work. The viewer's movement through an installation, necessarily slow due to the need to navigate around and, in some cases, under, over, and through objects, contrasts sharply with the short viewing period normally afforded a single art object. This extension of time spent may give opportunities for proportionally greater

communion between artist and viewer. The increasing employment of installation by contemporary artists can be understood as an effort to exploit these opportunities.

Another reason some artists are choosing to work in installation is because they are women. Painting has been the domain of male artists for so long that some women are choosing installation because it doesn't have that history. As Laura Cottingham writes,

"...painting still belongs to the boys. During this decade, where quite a few women artists achieved visible careers as painters (Susan Rothenberg, Jennifer Bartlett, Elizabeth Murray) none achieved the high critical or market status of, in New York for example, Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Ross Bleckner, or Leon Golub.

The exclusion of women from painting's most privileged sphere is accompanied by the challenge to painting implicit in so much post modernist work."³⁸

Cottingham goes on to suggest that perhaps women are choosing to work in "alternative media...still resisting painting and the assumptions of originality and commodification that surround it..." in the tradition of feminist art of the 60s and 70s. But Cottingham finds that "...a different aesthetic distance is evident in today's art that reflects feminist concerns." This appears, to Cottingham at least, to be a move towards a "more aestheticized" art and a move away from the "rough, nature-based, funky and...[the] didactic, pointed, and overtly 'political'" making this art "more readable to an art literate audience and, on another level, less antagonistic to (the same) patriarchally-informed audience."³⁹

Problems in Installation

There are, however, limitations associated with installation art. These problems mainly involve its production and reproduction. Because much emphasis in installation has been on its impermanence and non-commodity aspects, the work produced is not self-sustaining. It is very expensive to produce objects without even realizing the cost of the materials that went into making them. There is little non-government support for these works, which, in their complete forms, demand a large amount of space. Therefore, when discussing installation in Canada, attention should be paid to the role of government funding, for the peculiar explosion of installation work in Canada may be partly due to the existence of government support for artists and artist-run galleries. As Gillian Mackay writes, "Installation art has evolved in the past decade from the conceptual movement, which stresses the primacy of ideas over objects and rebels against the dictatorial power of the art market...In Canada the policy of funding artists through government grants made it easier for them to circumvent the commercial system - and helped installation art to flourish."⁴⁰ This support has been critical for the development and dissemination of an art form that does not normally have the characteristics of art market commodities.

The proliferation of installation works seems only to have been possible because of the loosening and blurring of disciplines and the de-emphasis on the value of a marketable art form. This re-evaluation was also responsible for the movement out of museums and galleries and into alternative spaces like P.S.1 in New York. Alanna Heiss wrote in an introduction for Rooms, the opening exhibition of mostly site-specific installations at P.S.1 in 1979,

"Rooms represents an attempt to deal with a problem. Most museums and galleries are designed to show masterpieces, objects made and planned elsewhere for exhibition in relatively neutral spaces. But many artists today do not make self-contained masterpieces; do not want to and do not try to. Nor are they for the most part interested in neutral spaces. Rather, their work includes the space it's in; embraces it; uses it. Viewing space becomes not frame but material. And that makes it hard to exhibit."⁴¹

Johnstone writes that alternative spaces like P.S.1 in New York, and the government-sponsored parallel gallery system in Canada, were needed because of the nature of the work being produced. The alternative spaces determined the kind of art they supported. "Less conceptually loaded and more physically charged than traditional galleries and museums, the alternative spaces were fundamental to the exploration of the relationship between the context and the content so important in installation art."⁴²

Many of the drawbacks in installation art are in the difficulty of reproducing a piece for subsequent exhibitions. Johnstone writes about those problems as seen in a 1980 Vito Acconci retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago,

"Acconci often produced pieces with respect to, or in reaction against, the particular social, political and economic conditions of the time and place of their exhibition...Neither the documentation nor the reconstruction could convey the particular conditions nor the temporal or ephemeral elements and as a result the works lost much of their impact. This problem is of course true, to some extent, for most works of art. The reflections they make on the society with which they are created are often lost to future generations. However, the inherent relationship between context and content so fundamental to installation art creates more acute problems than have previously existed."⁴³

In some cases (Johnstone cites Walter de Maria's Earth Room situated in a Soho gallery as one example) institutions such as the Dia Foundation contribute funds and property to ensure the survival of certain works. But for most artists working in

installation, choices determining materials and sites have to be made without such backing.

Alternatives

Some artists have tried to find ways to circumvent the drawbacks of working in installation. Johnstone tells us that installation artists have now begun to sell off individual components of their works. While this ensures that at least part of the work will remain intact, the meaning of the remaining pieces in the installation is altered. Because there may be a market for components within a work there may in fact be more attention to craft, detail and materials than was needed in works intended to be impermanent. The meaning of the individual components is charged with this extra weight and value. Johnstone, writing on this trend, notes,

"The works still tend to be comprised primarily of interrelated objects, whose relationships may be formal, perceptual or symbolic. And yet each element now tends to be conceived independently and may be relatively easily withdrawn from the integral whole and sold separately."⁴⁴

Johnstone states that not only does this change the original meaning of the work but can also lead to a devaluing of the meaning. Critic Germano Celant bemoans this state of affairs in the artworld in general, stating that as the price of a certain work increases, "It loses whatever disquieting and critical qualities it might have had and the result is that the value no longer rests in the meaning of the work but in its price."⁴⁵ Johnstone can see this occurring in installation works as "...the critical role that installations have fulfilled in the past seems to have diminished. The reasons for the 'compromises' are probably, for the most part, economic. The prohibitive cost of

producing and exhibiting installations, the months of work involved in creating a piece which exists for a predetermined, often quite short period of time, and the difficulty in accepting its inevitable destruction have led artists to seek alternatives.¹⁴⁶

Personal Background

My choice of installation as preferred medium has been influenced by all the factors described above: the versatility of the medium to address issues of interest to me; the ability to include the viewer in the work, either through surrounding him/her or through inviting active participation; and, lastly, the absence of a client (i.e. collector, museum, gallery) as opposed to a viewer to be satisfied. The influence of these factors on my work can be explained by my own personal history.

I began my undergraduate work in the biological sciences. I worked as a lab technician for several years while continuing studies toward my science degree and was engaged in a number of menial and repetitive tasks involving measurement and cataloguing. For interest and self-preservation I began to take evening courses in photography and drawing at a local community college while trying to decide on an alternate vocation. Deciding to follow my interest in art, I entered the Ontario College of Art and majored in Communication and Design. It was there that I was introduced to client and market demands, the need for work to be eye-catching and communicative, and the power of images to sell an idea or product.

Following the completion of my studies, I travelled and lived in Peru for two years. While there I worked on a volunteer basis for a small agricultural project and was responsible for the design, production, and distribution of agricultural, health and nutritional information aimed at peasants in villages in the highlands. Much of my time was spent researching methods of presenting information in a form accessible to a semi-literate or illiterate target group, and on acquiring low-tech or appropriate technologies for the efficient reproduction and printing of the information. While I

felt, at the time, that my skills were being put to a good use, it seems to me now that an inordinate amount of energy was spent in getting the information out, with little time spent on evaluating the worth or appropriateness of the information that we were giving. This behaviour stemmed from our assumption that we held some kind of key to a better life, and I felt that I was being placed in a superior and uncomfortable position. I began to question the authority by which Western nations attempt to determine the best interests of, and dictate the path of development for, other countries. In addition, I saw the parallels between the methods of disseminating information (marketing) to peasants in Latin America and to urban dwellers in Toronto. Facing a difficult question of ethics in how, what, why and to whom mass media is used to communicate, yet unable to articulate it, I returned to North America and entered an M.A. program in graphic design. Within the year, however, and on the basis of my concerns with mass media, I decided to leave graphic design to pursue fine art. Having had little exposure to fine art materials and traditions, I found the openness of my new area of specialization (drawing, painting, and printmaking) an aid to my development as a fine artist. The works I produced then were large, expressionistic paintings and prints done in several media. In a retreat from my former endeavours, their purpose was not to deliver a message to anyone but to be my vehicles for self-exploration. As well, this period marked my move from work having only two dimensions to works with tangible surface qualities. Although the content of the works was emotional, and their meanings were largely closed to viewers, the sheer size of the paintings had the effect of including, surrounding and implicating the viewer, albeit in a passive role. I did not achieve a more active involvement of the viewer until I began the MFA program at Calgary.

On returning to Canada I found myself able to vote in a federal election for the first time in years. At the polling station, I experienced a strong feeling that I had missed being a part of, and having a voice in, a community; this feeling was intensified by the memory and meaning of the elections I had seen held in both Peru and the U.S. As well, I was aware of not only having a voice but of having something to say, this being my culture, after all. On entering the gym where I was to vote, I saw the polling stations standing in a row; these flimsy structures seemed a remarkable mixture of the public and the private aspects of our culture. This vision, joined with the healthy atmosphere for installation work described earlier, and with encouragement from my peers, enabled me, four months later, to produce my first installation, Proof: The Words and Marks Below Indicate Your Desires. My satisfaction with this piece, in conceptual and formal terms, led me to continue to produce more installation works, of which this current exhibition is a compendium.

Works

"Actuality is a relative word...Actuality is a matter of social agreement."
Francesco Clemente

Intimate Arenas names a context or setting for discussion about how and why I work. I think of the phrase as a term for environments (e.g. those centered on learning, religion, entertainment, sports, and the home) within which our private selves are subjected (subtly or not) to pressures to conform. An intimate arena can also mean that place in ourselves where we go when struggling to make a decision. More likely than not our interior place has already been influenced by exterior forces to aid the decision-making process in a manner which will be acceptable to society.

I specifically choose socio-political institutions from which to draw themes for my work because we are all subjected to similar social constraints within these institutions. However, I am more concerned with exploring and cataloguing aspects of social conditioning than in mourning those affected by that conditioning. My purpose is to ask "Who is in authority, and by what means is power exercised?" By using the same tools as those held by people in power and placing them, via the installation format, in an unusual context, my purpose is to alert the viewer to the power inherent in these tools. My concern is to investigate facets of social existence while placing emphasis on how power is obtained and used. I do not consider myself an iconoclast, however. My main purpose in making these works is to explore and present the small degrees of freedom available to participants within a social institution.

The works consist of a series of three paintings and five mixed media installations which are linked through content, materials, images, and composition. They range

from austere to complex and viewer-involving, but all consist of components which, when arranged in a space, interact with each other to produce many levels of meaning.

The following descriptions are given in the order in which the viewer will probably encounter them. The actual components, layout, and arrangement of the pieces at the Nickle Arts Museum are yet to be finalized; one aspect of installation is its flexibility within a given space, which can allow for spontaneous adjustments among its various parts. For this reason the support paper can only approximately describe the final presentation of the works.

Intimate Arenas

Approaching my section of the gallery one faces a wall on which there is a series of three paintings. One begins at this point because the paintings, collectively titled Intimate Arenas, act as a preface for the other works in the exhibition. They are the only truly non-installation work in the group and are presented and lit for viewing in the manner most often used for paintings in a gallery. They only depict spaces made to hold viewers, and these spaces are, perversely, empty.

Intimate Arenas consists of three 4' x 4' plywood panels which incorporate encaustic paint and enlarged photocopies of found images. The panels carry manipulated images of various theatre settings, with the focus in each case placed on the seating provided for the viewer.

The purpose of the work, with its stark black and white forms obliterating much of the original image, is to create pictures of spaces for gathering large groups of people in the anticipation of some form of "spectacle." The obvious lack of an

audience and, for that matter, players, imbues the paintings with the feeling of anticipation similar to that found in an empty theatre. They provide a point of departure for the remaining pieces, most of which depict routine environments almost as stage settings.

We Are Whispering Lions; We Eat Other Creatures

The next piece is a video installation and while not a painting neither does it have the spatial qualities of the installations which follow it and acts, therefore, as a link between the two. We Are Whispering Lions; We eat Other Creatures consists of a lone video monitor running a continuous tape. The repeating image presented is a radically slowed version of a three second segment of film my father shot in Copenhagen nearly thirty years ago. It shows two women dressed in blue uniforms covered with white aprons pulling and pushing a low cart carrying a number of small children. The children's heads bob and sway to the motion of the cart but one or two children see and return the camera's stare throughout the sequence. There is a regularly spaced sound track of a woman's voice singing a children's song and reciting a riddle in German which accompanies the video images. This piece involves the viewer primarily through the use of sound and rhythmic imagery and touches on certain aspects of childhood which are explored further in the following two installations.

In Times of Danger I Seek Refuge in My Father's Mouth

This piece consists of sheets of clear vinyl, 45" x 10', hung from their top edges by clear push-pins pressed into the gallery walls, with their vertical edges slightly overlapping each other. They cover three walls, each about 15' long. The lower edges of the vinyl sheets fall approximately 6" above the floor of the gallery. The vinyl is silkscreened with a repeating pattern, taken from the endpapers of a children's songbook (the same book from which the song and riddle in We Are Whispering Lions: We Eat Other Creatures was taken), depicting children engaged, together and singly, in various activities. Placed within the space enclosed by the vinyl sheets is a plywood cutout of a figure. The figure is of a construction worker dressed in khaki, wearing a fluorescent vest and carrying a construction roadmarker. The figure is an enlargement of a felt-pen drawing of mine and is painted in enamels.

The figure in In Times Of Danger I Seek Refuge In My Father's Mouth, being two-dimensional and made of wood, recalls similar figurines made for placement on the wall in a child's room. Its exaggerated size, and that of the wallpaper print, is an attempt to approximate the relative sizes of these to a child's eye view. On viewing the pattern on the vinyl one is made highly aware of the surface because that is all that can be perceived aside from the gallery wall which provides the background. The clarity and toughness of the vinyl creates the tension of looking and yet not wishing to see. Everything in this piece is on the surface - plastic is presented as plastic, with all its qualities of convenience (hardwearing, washable) and its liabilities (coldness, the potential of suffocation). I have tried to evoke the choices we make for our children,

the trade-offs between what is safe or nurturing for them and what is convenient for adults.

In many of my works I start with a set of facts and present them in various guises (sound, objects). I then rely on the viewer's own perceptions, based on previous experience, to allow the work to flower within the mind and memory. For example, the wall-paper in this installation is oversized and printed on clear vinyl hung from the gallery walls with push-pins. While not a true wallpaper it nonetheless evokes one. In this case, the choice of a medium aids in the interpretation of message. As Roskill and Carrier write in Truth and Falsehood in Images, "...a photograph or a painting may turn out to be staged, in the artificiality of its arranged components and yet it may give an effect of truth that stays with us or even grows stronger."⁴⁷

The element of time is evident in this work but in a more traditional, sculptural mode of arrested time. On a more personal level, it recalls the hours I spent, as a child, tracing the wallpaper pattern beside my bed. Most importantly for me, the images are out of an old songbook from which my grandmother used to sing to me. If one looks closely at the children there seems to be only one child in the whole pattern who is smiling. All the others, whether playing or working, do so with an air of concentration or anxiety which makes them seem older and more worn than their years. They are not the carefree souls that we mean our children to be. These children are, in fact, dealing with a world full of fears and disappointments. Robert Cole, in his The Political Life of Children, remembered a comment made by Anna Freud concerning how and what children remember and how early memories can affect their actions as children and as adults: "We are not yet fully aware of all the various influences which affect the growth and emotional development of children. The

instincts don't exist in a vacuum; their effect on a child depends on who the child is, where the child lives, what kind of world the child has to face."⁴⁸

Swallowing Stones

Moving from In Times of Danger I Seek Refuge In My Father's Mouth the viewer enters the next installation, Swallowing Stones. The work is comprised of 2' squares of brick panelling as support for thirty-two paintings of elementary school children. The figures are depicted either with one arm raised or with both arms on the table in front of them. In both cases the child's head is bent down to rest on a forearm. The complete wall stands approximately 9' high and 17'2" wide, allowing for 2" of space between squares. A stack of prepared squares of panelling is placed approx. 6' away from and in front of the center of the wall. To complete the work, an 8' x 7' painting of a child, consisting of enlarged photocopies of a pencil drawing and black and white encaustic paint on plywood, is placed approx. 12 ft. in front of the center of the wall. The final presentation of the piece will be altered to accommodate the dimensions of the available gallery wall.

I attempt to address my concerns about public and private choices and social pressures in Swallowing Stones. The child facing the barrage of uniform(ed) schoolchildren has been singled out for some purpose. It is not clear whether this child is in an authoritative or submissive role. The expression on the child's face is neither commanding nor fearful but accepting of the vote of approval/condemnation. Either role requires some singling out, which is what the children in Swallowing Stones are desperately trying not to do to themselves. The title is taken from the fact

that alligators will swallow stones to take on ballast and by decreasing their buoyancy can manage to swim just under the water's surface to avoid detection. Anonymous, and with their heads down, the children's arms, raised or lowered, act as marks of their scant individuality.

Emphasis added.

Components of this work were originally shown in November 1989 in the Little Gallery in the Art Department of the University of Calgary in a different configuration, entitled No More Pretty Hockey. Elements of this work have now been reassembled to produce a new work.

Upon entering, the viewer faces the broad back wall of a shallow but wide room. The wall containing the entrance is separated from the back wall by a distance of approximately 12', and the entire length of the room is also approximately 12'. Stationed almost halfway between the viewer and the back wall is a painted gray wooden bench facing the back wall. On the wall which provides the entrance, behind the bench, are three fluorescent light fixtures hung vertically in a line, each separated from its neighbour by 12", with the lower edge of each light beginning at the height of approx. 3'6". The wall which the viewer faces upon entering is blank except for a line of photocopies of hands. If viewers climb up to sit on the benches the sitters' shadows will be cast on the back wall and the line of photocopied hands will occupy, approximately, the vicinity of the sitters' hands in the shadows. Hanging from the gallery's ceiling in front of the wall and at the height of 10' is a black and white

monitor running a video-tape of hands clapping irregularly interspersed with the image of a white screen and silence.

In beginning a work I try first to determine what methods may engage the viewer in my environment. Because my environments are not exact copies of the institutions they depict, I rely on the familiarity of certain items to evoke memories of our common experiences. For example, in using the monitors in this piece (an inspiration derived from watching a hockey game at the Saddledome and, in particular, its animated video-screened score box) in conjunction with the wooden benches, I have evoked a form of crowd control used at real games, without explicitly including hockey in the piece. The sound and presence of the TV monitors are, in this case, the trappings of authority, and I use the fact of our daily experiences with television, as a source of information, to tap into receptivity which has already been prepared in the viewer. The title, Emphasis added., is a term used to indicate a writer's emphasizing, through the use of underlining or italics, certain words in a quote by another author, thereby changing its meaning. The title acknowledges the manipulative purpose of the display.

Proof: The Words and Marks Below Indicate Your Desires

This piece has been shown at both the Little Gallery in the University of Calgary in May 1989, and in the Heatwave Exhibition for Emerging Artists at the New Gallery in July 1989 in an edited form.

In the current configuration, the viewer enters the enclosure to find a 4'x8' painting leaning against the lefthand wall. The painting is an expressionistic depiction of a polling booth and is done in acrylic paint, gesso, and charcoal on masonite. Along the back wall there is a six foot polling booth made of lumber, hinged along one side and covered with factory cotton. The booth is lit from above by a hanging incandescent fixture. On going behind this booth the viewer finds that it bears a low table with the word "UTENSILS" painted on it. The table carries a pencil stub and a stack of ballots. On each ballot there is only the word "PROOF" and a column of three empty boxes. On the floor in front of the table is a plastic-covered pillow. On the righthand wall are three framed collagraphs of single X's, each lit by a portrait lamp. Finally, outside the enclosure and to the front of the exit is a wooden table bearing a locked, wooden ballot box and instructions for filling out the ballots. Each "voter" can define on his/her ballot what the choices are and then mark the appropriate box. This is the work I referred to as my first installation in the autobiographical section of this paper. It depicts some aspects of the scene in the school gym where I went to vote and emphasizes details of the experience. The painted booth is a depiction only and cannot shelter one in the act of making a decision. The "true" polling booth is lit to project the occupants' shadows on the cotton covering, belying the right to privacy in the voting procedure. The ballots have only empty squares with no indication of what choices are to be considered. The collagraphs are ink impressions of simply marked Xs, transformed into art objects by virtue of their being made on Japanese paper, framed and lit by portrait lamps. Finally, the ballot box, although locked, offers no clues as to how its contents will be tallied or for what purposes the results will be used. The ballots become, simply, the property of the installation.

Materials

In all of the pieces the passage of time is evident. Either the work presents this indirectly through evidence of craft or labour, or directly, through some time-based medium such as video. The repetition of components within, for example, Swallowing Stones, gives the piece a sense of marking time while underscoring the content - a rhythmic heartbeat or breathing pattern coupled with the insidiousness of repeated drills, learning by rote, or the mindless practicing of scales. Even the potentially fluid medium of video in We Are Whispering Lions; We Eat Other Creatures or in Emphasis added is restricted to the monotonous replay of a virtually static image. Because the works can be numbing in their constrained stillness, any dynamism which occurs within them is primarily through the choice of materials and the placement of components in relation to the viewer.

One constant in my work is the use of repeating images. At this point I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Minimal and Post-minimalist art, and particularly the work of Eva Hesse. Hesse developed as a sculptor in the Minimalist era. She studied with Joseph Albers at Yale - "a principal agent" in the dissemination of geometrical abstraction.⁴⁹ The effect of Minimalism is seen most clearly in the use of the idea of series in her sculpture and in her largely geometric drawings. Robert Pincus-Witten described Minimalism in sculpture, in "The Disintegration of Minimalism: Five Pictorial Sculptors," as being

"...elemental geometrical forms...presented as isolated wholes or in multiples of non-variegated elements...each element within a serial presentation remain[ing] constant, and adapt[ing] easily into comprehensible patterns - horizontal sequences, vertical ones, grid formations, and variations of these arrangements.

Minimalism, at least in its sculptural state, is a presentation closed in upon itself, conserving its energies, making no reference outside itself."⁵⁰

However, Hesse, while she was in tune with Minimalist theory, was an "Expressionist in a Non-Expressive Time," and this aspect of her art is most clearly seen through her choice of materials.⁵¹ Hesse, and other artists of her time, began to debunk the inhuman aspect of Minimalism and heralded the beginning of Post-Minimalism by consciously choosing impermanent and discarded materials.

"These artists, in order to cut through Minimalism's solemn atmosphere, adopted a self-mocking stance...[with] the growing use of highly colored, emotionally associative materials...the rejection of the geometrical tradition of Constructivism. The limp, the pliable, the cheap were sought, the hard, the polished, the expensive became suspect. Unanticipated methods of seaming and joining were emphasized - sewing, lacing, grommeting. Rags, vinyls, street detritus came to be choice materials surpassing even welded Corten steel."⁵²

While continuing the Minimalist love for series and regularity, Hesse violated a major aspect of the school with the calculated absurdity of unstable and "ugly" media. This imbued her work with a very human quality. Her works are human in their scale, often being a size which could easily be picked up. Hesse's materials took and held the imprint of her hands and left a sense of human endeavour.

My use of repetition resembles that of Post-Minimalists like Hesse, in that certain components of the works are comprised of a series of image but are not exact copies of an original image but are irregular, and show the process by which they were made. In Swallowing Stones, an otherwise regular and repetitive piece, one is made aware of the artist's fingers having actually produced the work; I allowed the integrity of the material to remain. The surfaces are more textural and retain more emphatic marks than in the preceding work. The slight relief of the bricks and the handling of the paint recalls the found textures of the Intimate Arenas paintings. In completing Swallowing Stones in the brick panelling I strove for a fluidity and irregularity within

the serialized form. One of the reasons I use repetition within my works is to underscore the re-production of images, the re-presentation of concepts through various manual and/or mechanical means.

The choice of a medium does not only depend upon its ability to make tangible an artist's ideas. A medium's versatility can, on occasion, help to establish a kind of dialogue between the artist and itself. The manner in which it can or must be handled directly involves it in, and in some cases can be the reason for, evolution in an artist's work. In dealing with and exploring her materials the artist may have to struggle to balance her idea or concept against the intuition or inspiration provided by the medium. Although perhaps not realized on a conscious level, the choice seems to be whether to begin with a concept and produce art in which the medium is largely secondary or to produce art that is heavily influenced by the qualities of the medium. In my mind the most successful works tend to be meldings of the two approaches, in which there is no clear distinction between the concept and the medium in which it is executed. The success of this dialogue will ultimately determine the extent to which a viewer will be included and satisfied by the piece.

I am drawn to use non-traditional materials and have, occasionally, been guided by my media to produce the art. Since I generally use common construction materials to carry and make my work, it might be the solidity of these media which gives my work a feeling of simulated reality as opposed to the ephemeral quality of an "art object". The surface of a material can give important clues to the reading of a work, and since much of my work tends to deal with the standardization of people I therefore use standard building materials (standard lumber sizes, industrial and house paint, factory cotton, industrial vinyl) and simple methods of reproducing images (silk-

screening and photocopying). I elaborate these materials' surfaces while also, conversely, trying to bare the facts.

While I use and mix various media and artforms, I choose to create all the pieces by hand. I occasionally use "found" images, as in the photocopied images and old film stock, but usually alter or translate the original surfaces or materials to produce new meaning. The history of an individual object is not alluded to unless it is a history accrued after I have already completed it. In defending her own use of "things" familiar to the viewer as devices for understanding society, Vera Frenkel writes,

"Things ... hover on the edge of being animate; works hover on the edge of being things, manipulable, with portable histories, attributions and prospects. This acknowledgement of artifice is both method and subject; a code form for revealing the mechanisms of cultural continuity."⁵³

The work is unified by my constant awareness of surface. I invite the viewer to come close, to sense the tactility of whatever medium I am using , to try to look through it and around it, to explore the hidden parts, to search out what I am trying to communicate.

Context

The context (gallery) of the works is important to the reading of these installations. I try to give enough information in the objects I choose to present to indicate which institutional situation (home, school or public space) I am dealing with. The meanings of these situations are, of course, specific to the viewer's own experiences. However, by being undertaken in an unusual context, the depiction of issues and situations can

often open the viewer to meanings hitherto camouflaged by familiarity. In speaking of the use of mass media in art Marshall McLuhan states,

"One of the peculiarities of art is to serve as an anti-environment, a probe that makes the environment visible...The artist provides us with anti-environments that enable us to see the environment... In an age of accelerated change, the need to perceive the environment becomes urgent. Acceleration also makes such perception of the environment more possible. Was it not Bertrand Russell who said that if the bath water got only half a degree warmer every hour, we would never know when to scream? New environments reset our sensory thresholds. These in turn, alter our outlook and expectations."⁵⁴

My hope is that by offering clues to an issue without exactly depicting it, the machinery or purpose behind it may be exposed.

To produce these evocative environments, I choose objects or materials from everyday life and use them to conjure up familiar situations. I do not reproduce the setting exactly but rather choose one or two items which can stand for a situation, thereby allowing for a much wider interpretation of the finished work than would be possible with a more faithful rendering of a particular place. While nominally real, it is the simulated authenticity of these few items which root the entire installation in common experience and provide the primary point of contact for the viewer. As Vera Frenkel states,

"The deliberate context-shifting and context-juxtaposition in Postmodernist multidisciplinary work causes new metaphorical spaces to open up in the viewer in response to these contradictions and layerings of different kinds and levels of meaning. It is an art which moves us safely into the voids between existing classifications of meaning..."⁵⁵

As well, because the works are not exact representations of specific institutions they can be also be read to refer to institutions in general. As Frenkel put it, when speaking of one of her own installations, "Lies and Truths are the same facts in different contexts."⁵⁶

Narrative

The works in this exhibition are interpretations of experiences I myself have had, or have experienced the telling of, and are therefore of a narrative nature. To define the narrative aspects of my work I turn to Arthur Danto's The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. In describing how one could approach the Breugel painting Icarus, Danto explains that, without the clue of the title, the white legs disappearing into the ocean near the bottom of the painting could be misinterpreted, or indeed missed altogether. Knowing that the painting is called Icarus and knowing the story of the boy with the waxen wings flying too close to the sun, we can re-tell the story, in our minds, which the painting proposes to narrate.⁵⁷

In telling a story my installations seek to provide an experience for the viewer which will ultimately include him/her in the piece in some way, the first point of contact, in many cases being the work's title. While installations are not "narrative" in a traditional and temporal sense (possessing a beginning-middle-end) as one would find in narrative media such as film, drama or novels, they offer sufficient information for a story to be constructed. Lynne Tirrell writes in her article "Storytelling and Moral Agency,"

"Articulation is not simply a matter of putting one sentence after another until one has set out a series of events in some sort of logical order...The bone and blood of the story is in the structure of significances the storyteller imparts. The decisions the teller makes about what to say and what not to say, about what is central and what is peripheral, about who is central and who is not, and so on, are all part of the process of articulation..."⁵⁸

This can be done in installation by providing certain key images or concepts to the viewer. The "blood and bones" of a setting, the structure, has been provided, as have

some of the characters within the story. The viewer's identification with another individual's experience can be accomplished by presenting a frame of reference, an environment which will awaken memories of similar events the viewer may hold in his or her own personal history. In that way the viewer may become both teller and listener.

Conclusion

"Techniques of displacement, alienation, depersonalization, invented selves and so on (elements of humour as well as of art) are a way of expressing a shared dilemma for an artist-viewer team. We are in this together..."

Vera Frenkel

All of my work straddles various media (painting, sculpture, video, printmaking, xerography), uses some form of narrative, involves space, and uses media in a manner which can be defined as installation work. However, the role of the viewer is seen and treated differently in each of my pieces.

I have been discussing at length my preoccupation with the viewer's involvement in installation work and, in particular, the relative degree of viewer involvement in my works. To say that a viewer is necessary for a piece to be finished is, of course, simplistic. Someone has to take the part of viewer to complete a painting, sculpture or installation work; if there is no viewer, why make art? The distinction I wish to make is that the relative degree of involvement on the part of the viewer varies among individual works and among disciplines. As Osborne writes,

"Interest in spectator response has become progressively more complex and more sophisticated, advancing from a simple desire for acceptance to complicated theories of 'co-creation' on the part of the recipient. And in general the desire to close the gap between 'art' and 'life', becoming articulate, has come to mean much more than the demand for functionality or relevance of subject-matter and has sometimes led to explicit repudiation of the traditional art object."⁵⁹

By controlling his/her progress through the work, installation can involve the viewer from the beginning. Effort expended in this area can result in great rewards in installation work, particularly in permitting the viewer to reprise the artist's creative

process. I feel that my works are most successful when I exploit this facet of the installation mode most fully. In most of the works contained within the exhibition Intimate Arenas I hope that, through being surrounded by objects acting as messages from me, the viewer experiences understanding or at least some familiarity or acknowledgement of the truth of what is being presented. Of course, a sense of understanding of some aspect of the artist's process isn't restricted to installation work; anyone who looks at a painting by Jackson Pollock may feel in his/her body what it is to do action painting. The unique attribute of installation is that the viewer may be moved through time and space to recapitulate the development of the artist's idea about the work. My hope is that something in the viewer's mind will open, and some sense of order and insight resembling the process of the artist will be gained and the piece brought to completion. Through the arrangement of meaningful components I ask that the viewer not be a passive observer without any outward or physical connection with the piece but rather a person who claps with the video or chooses to ignore its command; who enters the polling booth and makes a choice; who places him-/herself in the position of the ostracized child and contemplates the "others"; who empathizes with the children in the cart; or feels diminished in a forbidding child's room inhabited by an ambiguous guide.

ENDNOTES

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