

Installation and Creation

Barbara Formis

Barbara FORMIS (PhD) is a Lecturer in Philosophy of Art in the Department of Plastic Arts and Sciences of Art at the University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. She is a member of the Institute ACTE (Arts Créations Théories Esthétiques), UMR 8218, Paris 1-CNRS. In 2010, she published *Esthétique de la vie ordinaire* (Aesthetic of ordinary life) in the series “Lignes d’art” for Presses Universitaires de France. She has also edited two anthologies: *Gestes à l’œuvre* (Gestures at work) (L’Incidence éditions, 2008) et *Penser en corps* (Thinking in bodies) (L’Harmattan, 2009). She is the co-director of the Laboratoire du Geste (Gesture Laboratory), a platform which promotes research, publication and creation in the field of the live arts. She has directed external seminars at the Collège International de Philosophie and she has been a research in the Theory Department of the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. She has published various articles in reviews and journals such as *Art Press*, *La Revue d’esthétique*, *Multitudes*, *Alter*, *La Part de l’œil*. She was a dancer, and currently also works on occasion as a dramaturge (notable with Richard Siegal on the work *©opirates*, 2010).

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Table of contents:

1. Introduction	p.3
2. Dead things and living gestures	p.4
3. Installation and Dance	p.7
4. The principle of extension: for a materialist thesis of aether	p.8
5. Footnotes	p.11
6. Bibliography	p.12

Abstract:

This article {{This article is based on a text of a conference that I gave at the Théâtre National de Chaillot, the 11th of February 2012, in the cycle of La Petite université populaire de la danse.}} aims to grasp the intellectual and practical similarities between the concept of installation, which is traditionally assigned to the visual arts, and that of dance-movement, which is often considered as ephemeral and transitory. Through this comparison one can draw up an innovative definition of the concept of artistic creation. At first sight there is nothing in common between the choreographer's process of creation and the productive action of artistic installation. However, the distinction between the two is blurred in certain exemplary works by Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, Christian Rizzo, Boris Charmatz and Mette Ingvarstsen. This could be explained by the influence of practice of happenings (Allan Kaprow) on contemporary art, in which artistic creation takes the form of a process, an event, a work in progress. By following this association of installation and dance one discovers that the element of air is presented as a genuinely plastic matter, a source of inspiration for artists that generates creative procedures.

I. Introduction

Under what conditions and to what extent could artistic creation renew our understanding of matter, and more particularly of the concrete materials used by artists during the creative act? How can this material via its own particular properties affect the artistic act itself? It would appear that choreography and installation are quite different as creative acts, yet through their comparison it is possible to detect a common practice between dance and the visual arts. But does this common practice belong to artistic creation *per se*?

From a philosophical point of view, creation is defined in the strict sense as the passage from non-being to being. Genuine creation only occurs in the case of something that previously did not exist now gaining material existence. The intellectual association between the general idea of creation and the more specific activity of the artist can be sourced in Plato: "Diotima: You know that poetry (*poïesis*) is more than a simple thing. For of anything whatever that passes from not being into being, the whole cause is composing or poetry (*poïesis*), so the production of all arts are kinds of poetry, and their craftsmen are all poets" (Plato, *The Symposium*, 205b-c). Plato associates the craftsman's technique with the ability of pure creation, thereby inaugurating, almost despite himself, the Western cultural tradition's concept of 'art'. The craftsman becomes a creator.

However, in Plato's work, and in Aristotle's, this association is subject to a split. The artisan, the poet – called an 'artist' in the modern epoch – cannot 'create' in the strict sense of the term, he or she can only imitate the process of creation and thus is distanced from the ideal truth that characterizes any creative movement. Whether this imitative capacity of the artisan is judged as a major civic and ethical fault (as it is in Plato) or as the very vehicle for the purification of harmful social drives (as in Aristotle), it is clear that in the early days of the conceptualization of artistic creation, the association between art and creation took place at a purely metaphorical level, and never at a literal level. The artisan and the poet are only creators via an effect of idealization, via a convenient but necessarily inaccurate comparison with divine creation. From this standpoint, the maker of the work or the object does not actually create; rather it should be said that he or she transforms what has already been created previously. The maker modifies the apparent surface of things, his or her activity is limited to bringing about changes within the sensible in which the Idea is materialized, the idea being the only unchangeable form of being. The Platonic dichotomy between matter and the idea is founded on an unshakeable separation between movement and immobility: ideal forms are eternal and unchangeable, in contrast to the sensible, which is characterized by movement and finitude. In a certain sense the disciplinary distinction between the arts is always grafted onto this dichotomy: there will be arts that are more or less changeable than others, arts which participate in a more intense manner in the eternal fixity of ideas, and other arts which approach more the incessant transformations of matter by joining the movement of the sensible. The first category of art is that of the so-called 'visual' arts, which are forged in concrete tangible matter as an image of the immobile eternity of ideas. The second category is that of the so-called 'live arts', which are considered to be ephemeral and transitory forms. The 'visual' or concrete artwork is thus made to last and to inscribe the signature of its author in History, whilst the living work is made to be experienced and to signify change through its various possible interpretations which take place within the repetition of its performances.

According to this dichotomy, installation can be understood as a practice closer to the 'visual' arts, whilst dance is a form of artistic creation closer to the 'live' arts. One could even hold that dance is the contrary of what is called 'installation' because it does not install anything, rather it embraces transition and change. Dance involves movement, the ephemeral and the fleeting moment; everything that cannot be installed, everything that does not stop. Dance embraces the life and dynamism of bodies and space. In contrast to installation, dance does not stop at a precise place, it does not turn space into a habitat, rather it involves a perpetual voyage, a continual mutation. This seems obvious: dance resists installation and immobility – it does not stop. However, as philosophy teaches us, we should not trust appearances: things that seem obvious are often the source of profound misunderstandings and deeply rooted conflicts. Are we so sure that dance does not install anything at all, that it does not stop?

If one approaches the question from the other direction, one immediately remarks that in order to install anything – an object, a setting, an arrangement of forms – there must have been a movement that enabled that installation to be set up. That is to say, there was an original action that led to the completion of the installation, and that thus countered the natural movement of things. Everything that ends up installed has not always been installed: installation requires a set-up, preparation, construction. It requires the organization of a series of actions that are not, themselves, 'installed', but which in contrast possess a dynamism that precedes immobility. To investigate the action of 'installing' is to encounter a paradox since the action of installing contradicts its final result. This paradox, known since Aristotle, is composed of two apparently irreconcilable phenomena: movement and immobility, the dynamic and the static; or, to be more precise, immobility *within* movement, the static *within* the dynamic.

What is at stake here is thus a fundamental conceptual shift with regard to the very definition of creation. If the notion of artistic creation inspired by the Platonic theory (Plato, *The Symposium*, *The Republic*, book X) is based on a participative dialectic between being (the immobility and eternity of the ideal form) and non-being (the mobility and transitoriness of the sensible), this dialectic is reconfigured by the Aristotelian categories (Aristotle, *Poetics*, book IX and book IV; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book I and book IV) which attempt to grasp the sense of a composite form like the human body, made up of both the sensible and the intelligible. From Aristotle's point of view creation is thus no longer conceived as a passage from non-being to being; rather it is defined in terms of the transformation of sensible matter by the intellectual force that animates it. The role played by the notion of *animation*, which would appear to be specific to dance, here becomes an integral part of the very process of creation, thus reconfiguring the traditional artistic categories.

2. Dead things and living gestures

Within the paradox of the action of installation one can find echoes of the supposed dichotomy between visual arts and live arts, between the world of death and the world of life. As a disciplinary category, installation belongs to the world of visual arts, to the world of dead things, of static forms. Installation however causes some trouble because it invokes inter-disciplinarity, it mixes several disciplines that are traditionally considered to be separate: video, sculpture, sound and light.

Yet here there is a surprise (the first surprise). In the spectator, installation produces the exact inverse of the effect that characterizes itself: since it dis-installs the work of museum walls and partitions, dis-installs the aesthetic experience, by inviting the movement and free choice of the spectator, who is otherwise confined to a seated place or a fixed standpoint predetermined by the artist. What installation does is introduce play and mobility into the fixed and eternal world of the visual arts. Installation encourages the spectator to move, it gives the spectator a score to follow, a series of activities that stimulate his or her relation to objects and to space. In the domain of the visual arts, installation is felt to be an experience, a narrow relation between a work, multiple and varied, and a spectator who is mobilized. This experience is one way of dancing.

As Michael Fried says with regard to minimal art, installation is guilty of sacrilege; it inserts theatricality into the museum, it introduces life in a place where there were only ruins. It brings dance into the heart of the visual arts. Thanks to its design of including the spectator – often by proposing an itinerary to follow – installation is conceived and presented as an artistic typology that resists the capitalist laws of the market. Installation cannot become a product, it is neither an object, nor an image, but remains above all an experience. Difficult to buy, and often elaborated *in situ*, installations have to be reconstructed in an identical manner each time yet also adapted to the particular space with the artist's agreement. More precisely, the reconstruction of an installation requires a conceptual and practical reworking of what is held to be a simple gesture, that of 'exhibiting' (which belongs to the classic procedure of making an artwork public) with regard to the gesture of 'installing'. To exhibit (*exposer*) means to pose something outside oneself in order to show it to a gaze. To exhibit means to raise, to put an object on a pedestal, beyond its ordinary existence and functional use. To exhibit is to create a distance for contemplation between the work and the spectator. Indeed, the action of exhibiting prevents any direct relation with the object, any proximity. The museum instruction "do not touch the artworks" is an essential part of this extraction of the object from the real world, itself a necessary condition for contemplation and aesthetic disinterest.

The action of installation works in the opposite sense. To install is to treat the exhibition space as an indivisible whole, to make no distinction between ground and figure, set and stage, or stage and audience. To install is to evoke the idea of a *total art* with all of its utopian connotations; it entails a total investment of space and a dilation of time. To install is to strike the chords of perception that transcend the physical place of exhibition and shape our memories. To install does not simply mean 'to hang', rather it means 'to creatively arrange' or 'pile/accumulate/assemble objects on top of each other', or 'fill the white gallery walls from floor to ceiling', or 'ask the spectator to stroll, move, crane her neck, touch'. To install thus means, above all, 'to install the spectator in the middle of the work, to make him or her an agent, a subject of his or her experience'.

If the action of installing is quite opposed to the action of exhibiting, then 'installing' produces new conditions of aesthetic experience. If to exhibit (*ex-poser*) is to bring the object outside oneself, to install is to interiorize, to create proximity with the work, to allow it to be touched, felt, used, finished off. Installing means finishing with any contemplative distance so as to incorporate aesthetic experience. This is true from the pioneers of installation onwards. In 1923 at the Berlin fair, El Lissitzky, the Russian constructivist, decided to invade the entirety of the exhibition space. Within installation, space escapes the laws of contemplation since with each movement of the spectator the perceptual effect of the walls shifts. On the basis of the spectators' walking

an optical dynamic emerges, such that looking is no longer passive but active. Installation requires activity on the part of the spectator, his or her complete involvement, with his or her body. One could recall other proto-installations, like the Surrealist exhibitions for example, from 1938 onwards, which gathered together heterogeneous works by Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst and André Masson so as to create an effect somewhere between a show and a museum of curiosities. In these exhibitions, each singular work was sidelined in order to foreground the living experience of these multiple and varied environments. Installation creates an atmosphere through a total invocation of mind and body.

Yet, quite apart from these historical references, all the specialists agree in situating the birth of installation in the 1960s between pop art and minimalism. At that time the terminology was still oscillating between 'installation' and 'environment', the latter used to signify the open and spatial aspect of these new creative processes. An environment is the staging of an aesthetic experience that surrounds (*environne*) the spectator. The term was used by Allan Kaprow, an American artist known as the founder of happenings, and as one of the promoters of an investigation into the limits of art in its relation to life. At an artistic level, this enquiry implied a critical attitude towards the past, towards traditional art based on notions of spectacle, representation, of a separation between the artist and the spectator, and especially of the autonomy of art. The creative practices of art could no longer claim autonomy because they entwined themselves with ordinary experience, they entertained a relation of continuity between art and life that Kaprow called *blurring* (Kaprow, 1993), a term that evokes the confusion, mixing, and blending of the co-substantial relation between art and life. Kaprow explains, "The term 'environment' refers to an art form that fills an entire room (or outdoor space) surrounding the visitor and consisting of any materials whatsoever, including lights, sounds and colours" (Kaprow as cited in Henri, 1974, p. 11). This method is present in all of Kaprow's art, but in a very simple and explicit manner in one of the first *Environment*, entitled *Fresh Air* from 1957 (Kaprow et al., 1992) [1]. In a room school chairs are placed along the walls. Opposite each chair, hung on the wall, there are square mirrors. On the chairs there are fans, one per chair. The spectator is invited to sit down and contemplate her or his reflection in the mirror (Henri, 1974, p. 32).

In these circumstances, "What this means is that the artist need not to be the only responsible for a creative action" (Henri, 1974, p. 172). In *Fresh Air*, spectators are considered as chance elements, as 'variables' who can change, through their personal experience, the development of the *Environment*. This art form must take into account the frequent product of variables, that is, "accidents are a trigger of the unconscious" (Henri, 1974, p. 174). Yet, one of the fundamental consequences of the principle of chance, of the accident, is that anything can be linked to anything. This means opening up the work to raw matter. In an environment, raw untreated matter can be either the object of artistic creation – as in traditional theory and practice – or the subject as creator, as participant. This activity on the part of matter underlines the critical vocation of Kaprow's art. Matter must act in art as it does in life. To do that, it must be directly introduced into the process of production, of creation. Matter as it is commonly understood is solid, static, frozen and immobile. However, and in quite a surprising manner, to introduce raw matter into aesthetic experience is to introduce movement and dance. This hypothesis is confirmed by the use of matter and of the principle of installation in dance. The principle of creation is thus renewed in that the work is no longer associated with a solid immobile form, but becomes ephemeral and variable matter, ceaselessly altered, fundamentally unfinished and incomplete in time and

space. To create thus means to open oneself to the transformation of the sensible, by dissociating the artist from the created work, and placing the work in an open relation to its participants, spectators and actors.

3. Installation and Dance

The very idea of the process of creation is redefined by means of installation and its peculiar kind of practice or action: creation becomes transformation, variable alteration of matter, formal opening and temporal extension. These creative criteria are also visible in installation's infiltration of choreographic processes. We have been able to detect the presence of a kind of dancing movement inside the creative methodology of installation. We could thus attempt an inverse hypothesis and see whether we can detect the presence of a process of installation in the heart of choreography. One paradigmatic dance work from this standpoint is Anna Halprin's *Parades and Changes*. In the original 1965 version, this work presented the staging of a metallic structure similar to scaffolding upon which the dancers climbed. Next to this structure an enormous white balloon was inflated. The repetitive and continuous whistling of air created a sonic background; the horizontal and rigid lines of the scaffolding were juxtaposed with the dancers bodies, which evolved on the structure. The spherical and white form of the plastic balloon contrasts to the metallic installation on stage. The balloon is like a dream, a miraculous vision, whilst the scaffolding, a home for dance, becomes metallic flesh, a plastic body. Three years later, Trisha Brown presented *Planes*, a work now famous, in which dancers evolved vertically on a wall pierced with holds, in which images taken from an airplane are projected, the airplane's noise being integrated in the soundtrack (the original performance was filmed by Jud Yalkut, and the music was by Simone Forti). The title evokes the double meaning of the word 'plane' via reference to the flatness of the surface and the presence of the topographic vision of an airplane. Trisha Brown also presented another dance/installation entitled *Floor for the Forest* (1970), whose original cast was made up of Trisha Brown herself and Carmen Beuchat. Its setting is a frame made out of pipes, three and a half metres by four, to which ropes are attached, clothes being hung off those ropes. The sleeves and the legs of trousers are sewn together so as to form a solid rectangular surface. The spectators are free to march around the grid, whilst the performers evolve within the structure by getting dressed and undressed. The everyday activity of getting dressed and undressed, which is normally performed in a vertical position, here plays with the phenomenon of elevation and gravity. The presence of clothes as a source of elevation is central in another exemplary work with regard to installation in dance: *100% polyester* by Christian Rizzo (1999). Two pieces of clothing are hung in the middle of a series of fans that lightly moves them. Through the use of a repetitive and hypnotic movement over music characterized by undulating oriental rhythms, the work evokes the poetics of sexual relationships and the inseparability of two bodies, in an entire absence of human bodies. Here installation succeeds in totally replacing dance.

Following this idea, the usage of immobility in dance can progress to the point of treating the body as a corpse. This is the case in Boris Charmatz' work *Réji* (2005) where the performance is managed via an imperious machine, given the task of organizing encounters between passive weak bodies. To this somber usage of the activation of the verb 'to install' in dance one could immediately juxtapose one of the most enjoyable works of the last few years, namely Mette Ingvartsen and Jefta van Dinter's work *It's in the air* (2008). The installation of large-scale objects like two trampolines, as well as the use of the body as a material that is apparently inert can also go in a direction diametrically opposite to that of corporeal immobility. The elastic band of the

trampoline appeared to be the activating agent for the bodies; the repetition of the bouncing up, the projection, combined with the corporeal release, the letting go and abandon of self gave the illusion of a giving up of all control. In reality, what one is watching is a masquerade of subjection, in which the subtlety of the noise and the precision of matter is accompanied with a joyful control of the loss of self. This mechanical materialization of movement incited Mette Ingvarstsen to subsequently create an explicit installation entitled *Evaporated Landscapes* (2009), in which the choreographer uses a machine to produce effects of evaporation, dissolution and swaying. This work is intended to lack any image or any way of representation and documentation.

This enquiry into the use of installation in dance has revealed the presence of a specific material element – all of these paradigmatic dance works share a common element: air. The inflation of the balloon in *Parades & Changes*, the noise of the aeroplane with its topographical videos in *Planes* and the gravitation of bodies in Trisha Brown's *Floor for the Forest*, the fan in Christian Rizzo's work, the elevation of bodies in *It's in the air*, whose title is quite explicit, and the vaporization in *Evaporated Landscapes*. This discovery deserves a thorough examination inasmuch as it is air that seems to be the material element common to both dance and installation.

4. The principle of extension: for a materialist thesis of aether

The importance of the usage of air within the creative process characteristic of installation as used in dance is confirmed by the treatment of installation in the plastic arts evoked at the beginning of this article. The odour of coffee diffused during the surrealist exhibition organized by Duchamp, but also the first environment, Allan Kaprow's *Fresh Air*, in which the first raw material the spectator encounters is quite simply air, fresh air. Indeed, what is more fundamental to an environment, what could be more surrounding (*environnant*) than air? Air is everywhere and nowhere: it is everywhere because materially it extends throughout every nook and cranny that separate solid objects, but it is also nowhere because it remains invisible. Its installation in space is so present that air appears to be an absent matter, a void. At the same time, and not without contradiction, air is also what is the least installed, that which evaporates and escapes from the very principle of a final stop, a finishing off which is proper to installation. One could even argue that in a certain sense air is the metaphorical matter of the very act of creating. Air changes shape, varies its position, extends throughout space according to a principle of radical mobility which could elegantly represent the concept of creation presented here; that is to say, a practice in which material is not created out of nothing, but rather undergoes a process of transformation, extension and metamorphosis.

Installation, environment, transition, passage, evaporation: what is common to these plastic usages of air can be grasped via a classic philosophical concept, extension. Extension is exactly what characterizes air, the most immaterial element that exists, the element which possesses a maximum power of extension, a plastic and elastic matter, forever in movement. The ethereal matter par excellence, air is the factor that triggers a chance transformation, which is necessary for an aesthetic experience to escape the conventional laws of creation, by introducing some play. In the language of the philosophers, this means to embrace a mechanist thesis concerning the world. The presence of air as matter confirms that the void does not exist, which Descartes demonstrated in his time in his definition of matter as extension, as *res extensa*. Descartes explains:

“The impossibility of a vacuum, in the philosophical sense of ‘that in which there is no substance whatsoever’, is clear from the fact that there’s no difference between the extension of a space or internal place and the extension of a body. A body’s being extended in length, breadth and depth is enough to establish that it is a substance, because it’s a flat-out contradiction to suppose that a *nothing* could have length, breadth and depth. And the same line of argument applies to any space that is supposed to be a vacuum, concluding that since there is extension in the space there must necessarily be substance in it as well. The term ‘empty’ in its ordinary use doesn’t refer to a place or space in which there is absolutely nothing at all, but simply to a place in which there are none of the things we think ought to be there. That would be on a par with thinking that there’s nothing substantial about the air in a water-jar because the jar is said to be ‘empty’ when it has air in it! (Descartes, II, § 16-17)”. Here we find in a place where it is least expected the contours of a mechanist and materialist thesis of artistic creation, precisely because we earlier invoked the invisibility and volatility of plastic material through the metaphor of air.

This materialist these also functions as a good antidote to the thesis of the dematerialization of art, a thesis inherited from Lucy Lippard and quite widespread in our times. Following the artists presented here, and in direct lineage with Descartes, one could posit a counter-thesis: the thesis of the materialization of the ether. In other words, a principle grasping the creative process, which describes the concretization of matter in its most ephemeral, ethereal and invisible form. To understand the difference between the materialist thesis and the dematerialist thesis, one could simplify and say that the thesis of de-materialization takes its point of departure from the plastic arts in order to arrive at their animation, their enlivening: in short, it goes from objects to gestures. The thesis of materialization takes the opposite route, and it adds a return trip. It takes its point of departure from live arts in order to materialize them via a process of objectivisation. It does not simply go from gestures to objects, but it departs from gestures, passes via objects, and returns to gestures, in view of a plastic materialized comprehension of the body’s movement. To plastically and material comprehend the body’s gestures means above all to have a real somatic experience, although gestures might appear to be as invisible and volatile as air. As such, to consider air as the material metaphor of the principle of extension, so important to installation, helps us establish some measure of equality between the plastic arts and live arts, each of which would be as material as the other. Indeed, this allows us to understand the methodological borrowings and cross-overs present in these two supposedly distinct types of creative procedure. Air incarnates the process of living interaction which allows us to perceive what often passes by unperceived, and yet which surrounds us. Aesthetic experience thus begins when matter is installed in gesture, when the aerial volatility of movement is no longer considered as evanescent and concretizes itself in sensible lived experience.

Finally, from these arguments, one could deduce that the type of materiality specific to air, this modulating creative mobile sensible thing, redefines the very idea of artistic creation. Air thus no longer allows us to think creation as a passage from non-being to being, but rather as a modality of existence which modifies itself and secures resources for itself within its own transformation. Installation and dance, initially or primarily considered as heterogeneous if not opposed artistic procedures, end up revealing a common operational modality. This common practice defines creation as an activity of transformation which joins matter and movement. It is not only a question of detecting the essential movement of visual arts, or, inversely, of unveiling the frozen and solid materiality of the live arts, but more subtly of understanding that the essential relation between

matter and movement constitutes the motor behind the construction and creation of both the live arts and the plastic arts. The creative act is thus defined as a dynamic operation of transforming matter in which the movement of the sensible comes to constitute the work. According to this dialectic, the products and traces of the creative operations of the plastic arts are no longer to be mistakenly considered as 'stopped' or finished works. Reciprocally, choreographic works lose their ephemeral and evanescent qualities. The plastic work becomes as mobile as the danced work, and inversely, the danced work becomes as immobile as the plastic work. Inevitably, this dynamic procedure of creation induces the emergence of an active aesthetic experience on the part of the spectator, who can experience perceptual and emotional states as receptive as they are participative. A set of sculptures in space will no longer be exclusively a solid construction captured in a frozen form, but will become rather the living archive of a world that can always be reactivated by the spectator's gaze or gesture. Just as a dance work will no longer be a transitory moment or a unique experience, but will become a plastic work as repeatable as the visit to a work in a museum. In the end, the definition of artistic creation as a dynamic transformation of matter incites the artist just as the spectator to become responsible subjects in aesthetic experience, and perhaps, also – and this is a hypothesis to be verified – actors consciously engaged in society.

6. Footnotes:

[1] Unfortunately in this text there is no precise reference to the date and place of the first version of Fresh Air. We know that the period is between 1957 and 1958, and thus one could deduce that it was installed either at the Hansa Gallery or at the Smolin Gallery or, more probably, at the Judson Gallery, of which Kaprow became the director in 1961.

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