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Light Art Installations – A Representation of Memory, History and Nostalgia

Abstract: This article explores the ontological shift of the contemporary artwork from a static, autonomous object toward a "device" that generates aesthetic experiences, with a particular focus on installation art and the use of light. Drawing on Yves Michaud's concept of "gaseous aesthetics," the author analyzes how art has volatilized into an aesthetic ether, where the viewer's experience prevails over materiality. The paper examines the fundamental role of the spectator, who is no longer a mere observer but an active participant completing the "art coefficient" through immersion and interaction. In its second part, the study focuses on the mnemonic dimension of light installations, analyzing works by artists such as Christian Boltanski, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Monica Alonso. It demonstrates how light functions as a mechanism for activating collective and individual memory, transforming the exhibition space into a site of negotiation between presence and absence, history and nostalgia, and life and death.

Keywords: Installation art, Gaseous aesthetics, Memory and Nostalgia, Aesthetic experience, Immersion, Interactivity.

Some aesthetic consideration on installation art

Yves Michaud states that contemporary art has volatilized into an aesthetic ether and, as is known, ether was to the physicians and philosophers after Newton a subtle environment that impregnated all bodies. The disappearance of artworks to leave room for a world of diffuse, gas-like beauty occurs through several processes. The disappearance of the artwork as an object or pivot of the aesthetic experience, of which the author speaks, may become similar to the mysterious nature of a spiritual experience. (Michaud, 2003, 9)

Artworks were replaced in art production by devices and procedures that function as artworks and produce a pure artistic experience, the purity of the aesthetic effect, without being attached to any support. Contrarywise, it can be a configuration, a device for techniques that generate these effects. A video installation, either in a gallery or a shop, is a prime example of this type of device that generates aesthetic effects. Thus: "the creator of artworks gradually becomes a producer of experiences, an illusionist, a

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magician or an effects engineer, and objects lose their stable artistic characteristics. Intentions, attitudes, and concepts become substitutes for artworks. (...) It is the end of the regime of the object.” (Michaud, 2003, 10-11)

As Michaud lets us know, it is time to acknowledge that we have entered another world of aesthetic experience and another art world than that attached to political ideas or autonomous representations, one in which the aesthetic experience tends to color all experiences, where they have to present themselves in a beautiful manner, where art becomes like a perfume or a collection of jewelry. (Michaud, 2003, 18)

Speaking about contemporary art, Michaud specifically mentions the transformation of artworks into mere opportunities for more or less intense and pleasant experiences, due to the artist's building certain *aesthetic devices* in the artwork's exhibition space, whether this is a gallery or public space. To the French author, the installation can be related to an aesthetic machinery, which is not accidentally linked to the machines and media calculated to produce visual, sound, and ambient effects: "These complex assemblies can be made from items taken from the everyday world – restored, destroyed objects, packaging, posters, industrial materials, decoration or furniture items, everyday products, signs of popular culture or of luxury culture (...), sounds, music, lighting, video cameras and monitors". (Michaud, 2003, 34)

Added to these are also the still or moving images mounted in the perceptive device, projected on objects. As Michaud notes, the configuration thus obtained references the older optical and aesthetic devices of the panorama, it references phantasmagoria, cinematic projection or the sensory conditions of an amusement park.

We can thus draw a direct comparison between these features of Michaud's visual-aesthetic device and the show of lights or video projections. The established term for generically describing this type of device is installation. Michaud often held this term to be intertwined with that of *multimedia*. If the installation is set in motion directly or through the artist or actors integrating the device, it thus becomes a performance or action, and it is close to the theatrical act, choreography, or religious rituals: "What matters, more than the materiality of this complex object is the device that makes it possible to generate a range of effects - an experience of a particular type - amusement, perplexity, fascination, repulsion, distaste, horror (...) and why not?, boredom, anaesthetized sight." (Michaud, 2003, 34-35)

The experience generated matters, despite the materiality of the object. The aesthetic experience prevails. In this context, there is a return to terms such as diaphanous, associated by the French author to a *gaseous aesthetic*. By way of these two notions, Michaud declares the immateriality of the installation, extended to include the light installation.

The artistic device must generate an experience stressing not the artwork but its effects and its interaction with the viewing audience. It is not to be omitted that the device can easily be identified as belonging to art – and what is related to art is the effect produced. The aim is "to eliminate the artwork in favor of experience, the object in favor of a volatile, vaporous, diffuse aesthetic quality, sometimes with a comic disproportion or, on the contrary, with a tautological near-equivalence between the means used and the effect sought for" (...). (Michaud, 2003, 35)

Michaud analyses Benjamin's essay, *The artwork in the age of its mechanical replicability*, noting, one at a time, the clear distinctions Benjamin makes between – *the auratic artwork*, charged with its unique and magical aura, belonging to the art of the past and the fundamentally reproducible artwork of our time. This opposition reoccurs, Michaud noted, in a second couple of concepts – one involving the cult and the exposure (exhibition) value. This leads Benjamin to a distinction between seriousness and play, attention and ease dealt with in what he calls *the aesthetic of entertainment*. This aesthetic of entertainment, which can be understood in two ways, as pleasure and as distraction, announces an aesthetic experience we can call *non-aestheticized*. It is similar to the visual and corporal experience we have with architecture, the absent-minded experience of the flaneur and of the walker, as opposed to that of the connoisseur and the initiated. (Michaud, 2003, 111)

In experiencing contemporary art this step has been taken, and as a consequence of consumer society, we are no longer dealing with artworks, but with fun and relational installations. We are integrated into the aesthetic experience as in the vapors of a *hammam*, without being focused on the object, on a program. The installations include the viewer in the center of devices, where a floating and fluid experience occurs, which depends on the artist's intentions on the one hand, and on the viewer's own itinerary and the fluctuations of his attention on the other hand.

Concerning the transformations technology brought about in the means of artistic perception and in sensory stimuli, Michaud also mentions that video and television are, in everyday life as in art, the vehicles of an aesthetic of self-representation and of intermittent vision.

Installation art, light and the viewer experience

The evolution of art installations as an intermedia visual formula probably has its origins in architecture and performance but is equally influenced by painting, sculpture, or conceptual art. Despite their long history, installations have only recently gained acceptance and recognition as a distinct form of art on the contemporary art stage.

Marcel Duchamp, in the article *The Creative Act* from 1957, stated that to understand the phenomenon of artistic creation it is necessary to be aware of the two poles of creation – the artist on the one hand, and the viewer on

the other hand, who refines the artwork by getting hold of the message and completing it. He also mentions the difference between intent and achievement, a difference that the artist is not aware of most of the times. The difference is due to the absence of a "link", and this gap, created between what the artist wanted to achieve and what he actually achieved in the end, represents the artwork 's very own "art coefficient". In other words, this "coefficient" is like an arithmetic relationship between the unexpressed but intended and the expressed but not intended. "The art coefficient" thus becomes a personal expression of art "in its raw state". In its turn, this raw shape is in fact modelled by the viewer who provides the final artistic material.

The creative act takes on another aspect when the viewer experiences the phenomenon of transmutation, and in the end his role is to determine the weight of the work on an aesthetic scale, he is the one who brings the work into contact with the outside world by decrypting, interpreting and personally contributing to the creative act. The viewer thus gains an increasingly important role, and his direct involvement in the act of creation is not something abnormal but a correct practice. The interpreter carries significant weight, and the work frequently serves as a pretext under which an artistic action with an often-unforeseen finality begins.

The exploration of these new media made the viewer face a new way of understanding the role that getting close to an artwork play. This went beyond physical proximity, requiring participation in the creative process by immersion in the environment suggested by the artist. Installations, as a working technique, are acquainted with and make full use of these principles. More than a form of artistic expression, the installation, as we know it today, has, above all, enabled and facilitated a development – from the object to the environment, from the object to the surrounding space, to the context and the concept.

Installations are not necessarily limited to gallery spaces but can involve any material intervention in the ordinary public or private space. They include almost any medium (modality or material) to create a visual and/ or conceptual experience in a particular environment. The materials used in the installations created nowadays can range from every day or natural materials to new media such as video, sound, performance, computer, or the internet. Some installations are site-specific works of art, in the sense that they are designed specifically for a certain space.

Space, light, surface, shape, structure, context, and constituent elements are some of the features to consider when discussing an installation, whether it is placed in a context such as an urban space or an art gallery. Most often, installations have a finite existence, so elements such as temporality, interaction or photo documentation become increasingly important and of greater consequence for the outcome.

The most basic definition of the installation as a contemporary artistic genre is provided by Claire Bishop, who starts by remarking that the installation originated from the "art of installing the object in the exhibition space" (Bishop, 2005, 6). More exactly, in modern art it derives from the increased awareness of how the object is displayed to the viewer under specific reception conditions and how these conditions influence the perception of the object or the artwork. Today, it has come to signify "any arrangement of objects in a given space, which can be successfully applied even to the conventional exhibition of a painting on a wall". When analyzing the installation as a specific artistic genre, Bishop focuses on the viewer's experience. Thus, she states that "the installation creates a situation that the viewer physically enters into, and insists that all space and its elements be perceived as a singular totality" (Bishop, 2005, 6), unlike the traditional exhibition of autonomous artistic objects in which objects arranged in space take precedence separately over the assembly. (Bishop, 2005, 7-8) Thus, in defining an installation, Bishop emphasizes the "participative" character of the audience's experience, a key element in defining the installation, which she shares with Julie Reiss (Reiss, 2001). So, the installation is characterized by the physical and necessary presence of the viewer in a given space, while his/her aesthetic experience within that space, and sometimes his/her action in that place and depending on the other participants to that work of art are constitutive of the installation as a work of art (Bishop, 2005, 10-13). In other words, according to Bishop, the installation is dependent both on the space in which it manifests itself and, on the viewer, or the art audience who are tasked with experiencing that space.

Pursuing the route of the experiences of the new French realism or the pop art experiences of the '60s, the art of installations is seen as a complex set of techniques, motifs, and social interactions, capable of bringing a diverse set of issues to the fore in any context, be it a gallery, a private or a site-specific space. The significance of Dada or Neo-Dada experiences makes itself felt in light of the current context of art. What used to be only experienced or instinctive is currently being theorized, acknowledged, and applied in wide areas of contemporary art. Artist's work with interaction, performance, limits or the lack thereof, using installations as a laboratory of visual structures and of ways to involve the public. The installation has been defined as a refusal to accept limits and borders, and the practitioners of this medium of expression are interested in relating to other artists or to specialists from different fields.

Installations art – memory and nostalgia

The present helps light create a meeting point between the past and the future. Lighting also entails refreshing information in the present moment

of the artist and then of the audience. By illuminating the space and objects, the artist creates a space for refreshing information, a memory of his or her emotions. At the same time, memory and lighting are cognitive processes that require to be anchored in life in all its aspects.

We can easily find these aspects in the works of Christian Boltanski, but also in those of Felix Gonzalez-Torres or Jorje Macchi.

Memory, death and childhood are the topics behind Boltanski's works, which are made from objects, photographs, and lights. In the *Compositions* series, dating from the early '80s, death is less present, and the lighting of the photos that are part of the project is discreet. This was a time when the artist focused more and more on the spatial organization of his exhibitions. It was also the time he started experimenting with theatrical lighting, projections, or light bulb wreaths (Boltanski, 1997, 75). For example, *Occidental Composition*, displayed in 1981, became the model for the next series of *Monuments*. In this series, whose title is ironic, the monumental features (large dimensions, valuable and carefully chosen materials, references to notable events and personalities) were completely absent. The series consists of reused photographs from other previous projects that have now been recycled. For example, *Monuments - The Children of Dijon* (1985) uses images from the project *Portraits of the Students of the Lentillères College of Secondary Education* (1973), which were framed and adorned with wreaths of Christmas lights (Boltanski, 1997, 83). *Lessons of Darkness* also originated from *Compositions*, but with an alienation effect which is linked to theatre and carnival. In 1984, Boltanski exhibited a mechanism made up of silhouettes reassembled from the *Compositions* series, and of projections of lights creating shadows of various shapes on the walls.

Light as a signal of living consciousness is also used in a more recent project, *The Dead Swiss* (1991). *Reliquaire* is a work by Boltanski that also speaks of consciousness, memory, and death, and which certainly does exude a sense of mystery, sobriety, anxiety, and respect. The photographs making up the work, showing persons unknown to us, are distorted and enlarged portraits that tell of a likewise unknown past that gives free rein to imagination (Barro, 2006). It is a project which is symbolic through its elements. The photographs immortalize the people by translating them into a continuous present.

Also, by using light—small light bulbs placed at the center of the photos at a short distance from their surface—the image turns into a reflector that draws attention to the portraits. This creates an intriguing visual play between the power of the light and its source. The cable and the support disrupt the image, while the light simultaneously enhances the photograph. As in other works, Boltanski gives us a vague and fragmented image. Its reconstruction is almost impossible, much like how memory is composed of fragments and sometimes finds it impossible to recreate the original image

of a person or event. The light present here only helps us to recreate some vague details of an unknown past.

In 1995, Christian Boltanski collaborated with Felix Gonzalez-Torres on a work, *Untitled*, which marks these two post-conceptualist artists' meeting in Santiago de Compostela. Both artists worked with objects, light, and situations, exploring concepts of death, loss, memory, and memories. Light plays a very important role in their work because it becomes a symbol of life. Light keeps memory alive; it also turns memories into images while fostering an exchange between objects and viewers.

Gonzalez-Torres created this work - made up of two light bulbs suspended on a wall with an electric cable - as a response to a piece from 1991 that reflected on his partner's passing. Each light bulb is perceived as an entity and the ensemble automatically conveys a relationship, an intimate dialogue between the bulbs, representing love and the pain of losing a loved one. As any fabricated object, a light bulb has a finite lifespan and thus becomes a symbol of existence as a whole. Placing the two bulbs together amplifies the light and energy the two lovers radiate. Ultimately, this piece becomes an elegy on life having to go on, now, even without the love of the loved one (Segade, 2007, 158-161).

Light and the relationship between the two light bulbs creates a sense of privacy when they are close to each other. They are two dots living unseparated lives and whose energy is sufficient to provide warmth and light, to keep life and memories alive.

Judith Butler, in her work *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (Butler, 2004), argued that losing a loved one means acknowledging the loss of a part of ourselves. What is lost is the relationship itself, not the disappearance or leaving behind, but something which is conceived as a key element of the differentiation and connection between the two. What mourning shows is how the relationships with others uphold our existence and often test and make us reconsider our relationship with ourselves (Butler, 2004, 37).

Christian Boltanski uses a language similar to the one he used in the exhibition *Advento* (1996, Church of Santo Domingo de Bonaval, Santiago de Compostela, Spain). He created a box of light with a photo inside that is only slightly visible. This photo is part of a series used by the artist for the work *The Dead Swiss*. By bringing together the photographs of deceased individuals from the necrosis of a Swiss newspaper, Boltanski created collections he exhibited together with sources of light (small light bulbs). These small everyday tragedies highlight death and its consequences. Through mourning, the artist builds monuments that speak about private life and preserve the memory of anonymous persons, while in fact reflecting death and forgetfulness as universal phenomena.

Both elements of the work engage in a mirrored dialogue, with a deep shade of nostalgia, articulating a mechanism of mourning. Through

mourning, the two artists remind us that our existence is, to a certain extent, part of the enigmatic race the others run (Butler, 2004, 68). The nostalgia of losing a loved person, incomplete memories, and the fragility of memory are counterbalanced by light, which keeps our relationship to the others and, more than that, to ourselves, alive.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres pursues these ideas in works such as *Untitled* (Miami), *Untitled* (North), *Untitled* (Toronto), *Untitled* (A Couple), created after the first work with light bulbs in 1991, *Untitled* (*5 March*), made in memory of his lost partner. In these works, he used wreaths of light bulbs (low energy 15-20 V) placed along the walls in various spaces. The artist intentionally made visible the electric cable which connects the light bulbs and provides power to the wreath, to reveal the formal installation structure of the created assembly. An important aspect here is the nearly perfect integration with the environment, highlighting the dual roles of these wreaths – decorative and conceptual.

The titles of the works reference various places, persons, or ideas that have influenced the artist's life in some way and which are evoked by way of these concatenations of luminous dots. At the same time, by utilizing these types of installations that allow for infinite variations and placements, the artist aims to intensify the collaboration with the public (the interactivity), to relinquish control over the work, but also raises questions about his own cultural influence on the audience (Spector, 2007, 184).

Monica Alonso is an artist who creates ambient installations with the aim of presenting realities specific to the human psyche. In the work *Cinco Terapias combinales 5TC* (1998) she explores the concept of collective memory as virtual architecture. The image of memory means here an environment made up of parts of buildings reminiscent of intimate spaces. This installation comprises five sculptural pieces, placed in a blue-painted room, illuminated by an all-encompassing, soft source. These five pieces can be relocated and contain objects of therapeutic value that enable an opening to memory or oneiric spaces, much like Lygia Clark's *The Relational Objects* (López, 2007, 150-153). With this spatial structure, Monica Alonso attempts to recreate a space capable of evoking the internal memory of each of us. At the same time, memory offers the possibility of creating and recreating an intimate space indefinitely. The *therapy* of this installation consists in utopia encountering daily life. Memory plays an important role in triggering personal sensations and representations.

The artist uses colors and space to render rooms, houses, and private spaces with curative properties on memory. This architectural space is perceived here as a protective space akin to the maternal uterus, our room at home, or our bed. The nostalgia for the childhood lost with the destruction of these spaces is also present. We must search in our memory and conscience for personal connections that can cure the anxiety that society and daily life induce. Everyday life manifests itself in universal,

neutral spaces with no intimacy. Therefore, therapy involves relating these everyday spaces, memory, and personal imagination. The subjective space is made visible by the colors and personal objects it contains. The artist thus highlights the necessity of a comprehensive therapy for the memory and emotions of the individuals inhabiting contemporary spaces (López, 2007, 151).

Light creates a confined space, a space that accentuates five sculptures. The general atmosphere of this setting is defined by the blue walls and the light that unites the space and creates visual cohesion. It is a semi-obscure environment which encourages a dreamy and reminiscing state in the viewer. The illuminated space highlights the concept of the artwork by enveloping the viewer in a semi-conscious sensory atmosphere. It exemplifies how light can create an environment that impacts the viewer's experience.

Monica Alonso makes possible the manifestation of memory and dream, building environments and objects with light, individualizing the space of the work, just as Thomas Hirschhorn does in creating a self-sustaining environment through light and objects used in installations such as *Exchange Value Room* (1999). Similarly, German artist Hans Hemmert's installation "*Unterwegs (En Camino, 1996)*" achieves a complete immersion in an environment different from everyday reality by using materials and sensations provided by light.

Video projection creates another type of ambient space. Maria Rudio, a Spanish artist who explores history and its influence on the lives of ordinary people, deals with memory. She is also interested in the mechanisms of memory building and the relationship between memory and history.

During a journey to Germany, the artist performed the video work, *La Memoria Interior*. Drawing on her family's experience as emigrants, she investigated the phenomenon of migration and emigration, which has been common across different eras and geographical regions in history. Her family personally endured the consequences of this experience, and unlike the official historical accounts, they have their own memories. By engaging in dialogue with her family, the artist constructed an articulated and aestheticized memory. In this context, memory serves as a connection and dialogue between what is alive and what is left in public or personal history. The artist insists on the need to incorporate direct personal and collective experiences into the development of a diverse and inclusive memory policy (Oliveira, Pereira, 2006, 76-77).

Memory deals with history and the idea of losing a piece of oneself within the vast amount of information preserved over time. This process is supposed to turn individual experiences into something that represents an entire generation. The projection of this video, which can be done in an obscure space, creates an environment of light and movement, allowing us to interpret the artist's message. The space shifts from two-dimensional to

three-dimensional, merging the reality of the video with the physical space we are in. The same goes for other works by Maria Ruido, such as *Cronología* (1997) or *Tiempo Real* (2003), which also explore issues of history, memory, and modern society.

Installations made up of light sources are a common practice among contemporary artists. An example of such an installation is Jorge Macchi's "*Time Machine*" (2005). This installation features five monitors embedded in slots on a table and visible through their glass areas. The screens continuously run a few seconds from the closing scenes of five 1940s North American films, each showing "The End." Due to the way they are placed along the table, it is impossible to view all five images simultaneously. Additionally, the sound is perceived differently. As each video contains its own sound that is repeated at the same time as the image, all the sounds of the movies can be listened to concurrently, but they are not synchronized with the images. "*Time Machine*" is an installation that enables us to travel through time. It replicates time in the present, rendering it eternal, but actually, the contents portray the present moment as dying every second.

The installation uses fiction and illusion to create a connection between personal and collective memory, through the cinematography of the 1940s in the United States. Cinematography becomes a gateway into each other's inner worlds, acting similarly to the personal mechanisms that uphold memory. The idea of a camera, of internal memory is reinforced by the emphasis on the viewer's experience in perceiving the space constructed by the artist. The slots force the viewer to experience the installation in a fragmented manner. Perceiving the screens separated by the exhibition space simultaneously is impossible. The screens become eyes that open and all look at us at the same time, yet we cannot see them simultaneously.

The construction of subjective memory is compared to the fragmented, multiple, and impossible to structure mechanism provided by the media. Creating narrative is impossible, just as contemporary society is unable to provide a coherent and unified image. We are constantly bombarded by various lights that attract us, but cannot be viewed simultaneously, nor can they create a coherent memory for us.

In *Frontiers of Utopia* (1995), Jill Scot creates a similar atmosphere. This is the final part of an interactive series that explores the "history and nature of idealism, technology, and design" (Scott, 1995). The first two parts, *Machinedreams* (1991) and *Paradise Tossed* (1993) explored the relationship between desire, design, and memory haphazardly and in a manner reminiscent of dreams. In *Frontiers of Utopia*, however, the audience can build a collage of sound and images from 1900, 1930, 1960, and 1990 by moving through real and virtual space. Thus, they become time travelers, being able to learn about history in a new way. The environment created by the artist is based on a dark room, with the monitors the images are

displayed on as the only points of reference. These locally lit areas attract visitors' curiosity.

The examples above show that installation spaces can have different structures. Within these structures, light turns into signals that either draw attention to some sources or create a general atmosphere, depending on the concepts the works are based on.

Conclusions

The transition from the traditional artistic object to the "aesthetic device" marks a definitive shift in contemporary art, where the focus has moved from materiality to the purity of the effect produced. As analyzed throughout this paper, installation art—specifically through the medium of light—functions as a "gaseous" environment that eliminates the boundaries between the artwork and the viewer. This immersive quality allows for a unique synergy where the audience no longer just observes but actively completes the creative act, providing the final "art coefficient". Furthermore, the use of light in the works of artists like Boltanski and Gonzalez-Torres serves as a powerful mnemonic tool. It acts as a bridge between the present and an unknown past, keeping memories alive while simultaneously highlighting the fragility and fragmentation of human existence. Whether creating a space for mourning or a "virtual architecture" for therapeutic reflection, light installations transform the exhibition space into a profound sensory atmosphere where personal and collective history converge. Ultimately, these installations prove that in the realm of contemporary art, the generated experience and its emotional impact remain the most enduring elements, long after the physical components have faded.

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