



Universiteit Utrecht

Fluidity in Roles: *Becoming* in the Exhibition
On Contemporary Curation Through Performative
Installations

A thesis presented by

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the subject of

Arts and Society

Universiteit Utrecht
Utrecht, The Netherlands

June 11, 2020

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to argue several aspects of contemporary curation through the analysis of three performative installations: *Phobiarama* by Dries Verhoven, *The Automated Sniper* by Julian Hetzel, and Sasha Waltz's retrospective *Installationen, Performances, Objekte* at the ZKM. Given the potential of performative installations as catalysers for reflection on curation, this thesis attempts to answer how to create curatorial discourse from, through and toward the artwork. To do so, Constructive Grounded Theory is used to extensively review literature on performance art, installation art, curation, and aesthetics, and afterwards conform a conceptual foundation for both analysis and reflection on performative installations and curating.

Throughout this thesis, the usefulness of speculation as a way of thinking and potentially producing the curatorial is argued and practised. By conceptually speculating on three performative installations, the exhibition is considered as a spatial and temporal medium which fuses different types of relationality, negotiation, adaptation and participation between subjects and objects, who shift in roles throughout the artistic experience, defying rigidity and fostering a fluid understanding of curating. This fluidity is argued to be agonistic, which leads to the realisation that curation has the capacity to function not as a solution but as both presenter and decoder of contemporary issues.

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Thesis Statement

The articulation of the contemporary in the exhibition space is no small feat. Curation is an ongoing exercise of conceptualisation, materialisation, and presentation. On the edge of usefulness and uselessness, of visibility and invisibility, curation strives to present a tale about the construction of the world. On the other hand, the curator has become one of the most significant personalities within the cultural and institutional economy of contemporary art.¹

Discussions on curating are endless. From the identity of the artist-curator, or the figure of the independent curator, to institutional agency, hierarchies, and power struggles. The ongoing interrogation on the curatorial practice runs parallel to the establishment of independent or semi-independent curating, which switches from an institution-based scope to a self-conscious one in which curators find themselves in constant exercises of “self-reflexivity”, “self-awareness”, and “self-doubt”.² This solipsistic turn in contemporary curation might lead to a way of analysis and reflection that risks worrying too much on individual positionality and forgetting the importance of what is to be curated, where and for whom.

On account of that, the focus of this thesis is on how to create curatorial discourse from, through and toward the artwork; the artwork as the axiom of discussion, the catalyst for reflection, a phenomenon to simultaneously build on and extract theory. The question lies in what can the artwork do for the curatorial and not the other way around, in an gesture of expanded consciousness that, without negating the importance of personal avowal, seeks to step out from an anthropocentric viewpoint of the curator as judge, jury and executioner of the presentation of art.

¹ J.J. Charlesworth, “Curating Doubt”, in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, eds. Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (Bristol: Intellect Books Ltd, 2007), 91.

² *Ibidem*, 93.

Performative Installations

Performative installations are intricate artworks in which artists interweave different levels of presence, temporality, space, and experience. They constitute exciting, complex, and wide-ranging works in which the practices of installation art and performance art merge on different levels and provide a constructed artistic context capable of arising high levels of both self- and inter-subjectivities. Even though both installation and performance have been influencing each other and converging since the 1970s, a glance on exhibitions and festivals around the globe reveals that there is a pronounced tendency amongst artists to merge them in a fully conscious manner and to even name their works *performative installations* – such is the case of the artists that will be discussed in this thesis –.

With the transformation of dance, theatre, and other performative actions into two and three-dimensional “objects” – pictures, sculptures, and installations – it is arguable to talk about an *installation turn* in contemporary art. This shift, “from the street into the museum, from public arena to institutional space, from theatre stage to exhibition space, from time-conditioned performance to permanent exhibition, from action, intentionally performed outside the art context, to document in the museum archive”⁵, reinforces the relevancy of performative installations as objects of study.

As curator Angelika Nollert asserts, performative installations combine within themselves presence and representation, ephemeral and static elements, event and duration, and immateriality and materiality; in them, the dialectics of subject and object are dissolved and given new common identities.⁴ Thus, performative installations are complex works that operate in continuous ontological and representational tensions; their aim, however, is not to overcome such tensions, for performative installations, as it will be explained in the body of this thesis, thrive and find their *raison d’être* in them. For

⁵ Peter Weibel, “Tanz/Performance”, ZKM, accessed May 19, 2020. <https://zkm.de/en/keytopic/tanz-performance>

⁴ Angelika Nollert, *Performative Installation* (Cologne: Snoeck, 2003), 13.

the curator, performative installations present several challenges, especially in the institutional context. These challenges are not only material and spatial, but also conceptual and aesthetic. Although several authors have tackled performative installations, they have generally done so by means of offering a specific perspective or understanding them in a precise field of study, more often than not as a support to reinforce or exemplify another theory. There has not yet been a comprehensive take on performative installations as a phenomenon of study by itself, nor an attempt to analyse them through a curatorial lens. In the midst of this lacuna in academic discourse, this thesis finds its relevancy.

Research Questions

By making the choice of using performative installations as objects of research to write about curation, and starting from the statement that performative installations are likely to substantiate the complexity of contemporary curation of art, the nuclear research question of this thesis arises:

What do performative installations reveal about contemporary art curation and how can their analysis contribute to the development of the latter?

This question requires and incites several others. First, we shall ask what makes a performative installation: are there specific, shared characteristics that are defining of the medium? Once the object of study is identifiable, how can we theorise about curation from and for the artwork? Ultimately, a question on how reflection on a particular artistic medium can help spot and unfurl issues revolving the articulation of the contemporary is to be posed in order to realise the potentiality of the method and turn said issues into solid objects of discussion.

Methodology

In specialised literature, performative installations are generally discussed as case studies to exemplify theories in fields such as theatre; they are also discussed in books on installation art, yet, more often than not, there is no in depth reflection on their performativity. Since comprehensive discussions on performative installations through the curatorial lens are limited, I had to find a method that allowed me to build up specific theory for this thesis. Consequently, Grounded Theory proved to be a handful method to recur to given that, through a step-by-step procedure, the researcher has the possibility to construct theory from scratch.

My prime methodological source is Katy Charmaz's book *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Constructive Grounded Theory, as opposed to objectivist grounded theory, assumes multiple realities, mutual construction of data through interaction, data as relativistic, situational, and partial and that observer's values, priorities and actions affect views.⁵ Besides, it aims for interpretive understanding of historically situated data, it specifies range of variation, and aims to create theory that has credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness.⁶

Following Charmaz's guide to constructive grounded theory, I pursued from step 1 to 5 as it is what most researchers do according to the author, and what is adequate given the scope and extension of the thesis. These steps provide the researcher with stability and direction in the beginning of the research, which can easily be daunting and baffling, and lead to an organically realised theoretical backbone. The steps are the following:⁷

1. Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously – in the case of this thesis, on performance, performativity, installation, and curation –.

⁵ Katy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (London: SAGE, 2014), 32.

⁶ Ibidem, 33.

⁷ Ibidem, 58.

2. Analyse actions and processes rather than themes and structure – i.e., focus on how concepts are used and interlinked rather than how they are framed.
3. Use comparative methods – in the case of this thesis, comparisons were made at the same time that the coding processes were developing.
4. Draw on data in service of developing new conceptual categories – i.e. codes that eventually conform the core concepts of the thesis.
5. Construction and implementation of theory – the core concepts are established and discussed, and afterwards used to analyse the artworks.

Coding is a key element in Constructive Grounded Theory. There are two coding phases: the initial coding is a first attempt to code words that appear simultaneously in the researched literature and can prompt the researcher to see areas in which data is lacking or is overflowing. A more focused coding follows, in which the researcher conceptualises how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory. This will ultimately lead to a tailored conceptual constellation to use in the analysis of the performative installations, and later to a reflection on the curatorial. The three selected projects and artworks discussed in this thesis are not only examples to illustrate the complexity and manifold possibilities of performative installations, but also theoretical objects from which theory can emerge via conceptual speculation. Theoretical testing gives birth to a speculative approach that proves useful when dealing with phenomena that has not been given a referential theoretical corpus yet, which is the case for performative installations.

The performative installations featured in this thesis are the following: first, Dries Verhoeven's *Phobiarama*, a spooky ride into linguistic and visual strategies for racial profiling that raises questions on intermediality, sensorial immersion, and both self- and inter-reflexivity. Second, Julian Hetzel's gamified theatre piece *The Automated Sniper*, an elaborated dramaturgical work with a high level of participation and that disputes the

traditional ways of spectating and partaking in the artistic production. Third and last, Sasha Waltz's retrospective at the ZKM in 2013, *Installationen, Performances, Objekte*, in which her choreographies were transformed into a set of performative installations that infused the museum with alternative ways of exhibiting motion. This selection was the result of extensive research after the first phase of coding was done. They illustrate distinct approaches to the medium and stimulate different inquiries so as to present a wide-ranging and rich discussion that can buttress discourse.

Conceptual Constellation

The two coding processes in Grounded Theory crystallised in a handful of concepts that I deemed relevant to the analysis of performative installations. When analysing data whilst coding, these concepts appeared to be complementary and interconnected with one another. They created a conceptual cartography throughout authors, discourses, and propositions which I articulate in this chapter, forming a “constellation” that flashes throughout the thesis and shapes theoretical figures that I will attempt to reify in the *Speculative Curation(s)* chapter.

Relationality

In order to discuss performative installations in a curatorial lens, a need to propose an alternative relationality becomes apparent. Such relationality is agonistic, following Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonism, which infers an artistic discourse along the lines of discomfort rather than belonging, of tension and conflict rather than harmony and consensus; it strives towards the realisation of counter-hegemonic interventions in both the public and the institutional space that aim to dismantle the illusions of equality and symmetry in participative processes. On the other hand, this relationality is materialistic, following Amelia Jones approach to hybrid artistic practices – performative installations in the case of this thesis –. Jones claims that such artistic practices cannot be understood solely through formalism or structuralism due to its hybrid and performative nature and the fact that there is no final product to be examined, nor through performance theory’s emphasis on the ephemeral action, given that the materiality of the work is the key site of activity and its transformation the key to the experience.⁸ A materialistic approach through this lens transcends the anthropocentric view expressed by Nicolas Bourriaud and that is characteristic of a rather self-referential approach of curation, and move

⁸ Amelia Jones, “Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic “Work,” and New Concepts of Agency” *The Drama Review*, volume 59, number 4, (winter 2015, T228): 21.

towards an aesthetics of interrelation among materialities and processes – installation and performance, respectively – among actors and actants, in which they influence and transform each other and produce endlessly shifting meanings and values.

An agonistic understanding of relationality can already be found in the academic work of Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink. The author suggests that often, in artworks that include performativity in any kind of level, the roles of performers, spectators, and space are not fixed; rather, and resorting to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the roles are in continuous state of *becoming* the other – i.e. an “orientating vector” –: becoming-performer, becoming-spectator, and becoming-space. Accordingly, those three elements enter into composition with one another in an act of high intersubjectivity, constituting flexible, variable constellations.⁹ Nevertheless, in Nibbelink’s analysis, the materiality of the artwork seems to be missing from the equation, or, rather, it is embedded in “space”. It could be argued that the inclusion of materiality in relationality derives from Action Network Theory, in which space and objects are actors or actants in the same way as people, and jointly they affect and modify other each other. Adding materialities in this alternative relationality is necessary for the analysis of performative installations, given that, as it will be detailed, performance, materials and intersubjectivity are entangled in ongoing reciprocity.

Agonism

Chantal Mouffe’s agonism theory is first and foremost political. It sprouts to dismantle the belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason that deliberative democracy, lengthily developed by Jürgen Habermas, strives to defend. The deliberative approach to democracy claims that for norms and institutional arrangements to be valid, they should have been agreed by all affected by their consequences according to a

⁹ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, “Bordering and Shattering the Stage. Mobile Audiences as Compositional Forces”, in *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!*, ed. Doris Kolesch et alri (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 67.

process of deliberation, in which participation should be equal and symmetrical, with equal rights to questions topics and to initiate arguments, so as to produce legitimate outcomes.¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe raises several concerns and critiques to this model. First, the idea of rational and neutral dialogue amongst participants does not consider agreement on language and leads to an ideal speech situation in which communication is free of constraints.¹¹ There is naïveté and deception in such an idea: as Slavoj Žižek points out, discourse is structurally reliant on authority, since only through the intervention of a master signifier, a consistent field of meaning can emerge. On top of that, the very conditions that possibilities deliberation are, at the same time, the conditions of impossibility of ideal speech situation.¹²

Consequently, Mouffe offers an alternative to deliberative democracy based on agonism. Since conflict is in the core of any political process, it should not be eradicated but unveiled and presented at all times. Conflict, however, should move away from an antagonistic understanding – i.e. the struggle between enemies – and be considered agonistic – i.e. struggle between adversaries –.¹³ This move entails an important semantic shift: enemies fight within a frame of clear distinction between “us” and “them”, and their ultimate goal is to win over the other and establish an irrefutable point of view or action. Adversaries, on the other hand, compete to occupy positions of power whilst respecting each other and allowing coexistence. For Mouffe, the specificity of democracy is not overcoming the we/they opposition, but, given the impossibility of such a thing, the different way in which it is established.¹⁴ Ultimately, democratic politics should allow collective forms of identification and legitimise a transparent arena of exchange, especially considering that the democratic character stems from the facts that no limited social actor can attribute to themselves the representation of totality¹⁵, and that every

¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? (1999)”, in *The idea of the public sphere: a reader*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud et alri (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 284.

¹¹ Ibidem, 288.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: thinking the world politically* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 7.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 9.

¹⁵ Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? (1999)”, 289.

consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony.¹⁶ Consensus cannot be reached without exclusion, yet that is not a bad thing per se. Disguising exclusion under a veil of rationality or morality is.

It is the very tensions in the struggle for hegemony that is of interest for this thesis. I will attempt to argue that performative installations are agonistic in both their nature and execution, and that such agonism should be considered in both aesthetical and curatorial levels. Performative installations can successfully unveil antagonism and agonism in both the public space and the arts institution by means of creating a sophisticated intersubjective experience that begins with an already agonistic relationship between performativity and materiality.

Participation

Participation is a key element in performative installations, whether it is framed as a conscious contribution from non-performers – visitors, spectators, participators – or as a result of the expansion of the artwork in the exhibition space. The first thing to acknowledge when trying to analyse participation in performative installations is that there are a variety of models that can be applied, and so it is impossible – and futile – to establish a universal approach.

In regard to performance, Pamela Bianchi claims that participation is an exercise of artistic creation in which “the spectator conquers the scene in the illusion of having acquired an emancipated condition, almost becoming a work of art”.¹⁷ The participator often becomes object of transformation, which results either in a device, and obstacle or the very subject of the artistic proposal.¹⁸ On the other hand, participation does not necessarily render the artist obsolete or powerless: the amount of autonomy ceded to

¹⁶ Ibidem, 290.

¹⁷ Pamela Bianchi, “The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces. Fluid Spectatorship into Hybrid Places”, *Anglistica AION 20*, no. 2 (2016): 91.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 88.

participators remains the artist's choice.¹⁹ Participation, thus, can be regarded as a means to activate intersubjectivity in the artwork, and, in the case of performative installations, it is not a strategy, but a necessary condition. The function of the participator is usually assembled in the work and structured as a set of societal relations, and, moreover, it has a discursive and institutional dimension.²⁰ Therefore, participation, as a means of reflection, interaction and significance, is always political.

Kaija Kaitavuori offers a comprehensive categorisation of four types of participation in contemporary art. Performative installations are complex works that emerge from engaging spectators in varied ways; however, it might be proven that her “user” category is the most recurrent in the medium. Under the umbrella of the “user” category, we find artworks and projects that engage viewers physically and socially in the process of experiencing art. Such works provide a platform for people to use and activate, and they rely on the viewer's presence and activity. The artist may or may not be present. Works that stimulate “user” participation are characterised by open-endedness and unpredictability as they exert the least amount of control over participants. Besides, these works activate the participants' relationship to the physical and social environment.²¹

Barbara Ferriani takes one further step and states that such relationship between participators and work, specifically in installation art, challenges the aesthetics of frontality – i.e. cinema screen and monitor – and that the audience participates in the work by becoming fused with it.²² This clearly echoes the aforementioned relationality that occurs in performative installations. Such a fusion between performativity and materiality in performative installations resonates with the concept of “subject-in-process”, which Karin Schneider applies to her analysis of Joan Jonas' work, in which the

¹⁹ Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 12.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 11.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 37-39.

²² Barbara Ferriani, *Ephemeral monuments: history and conservation of installation art* (Los Angeles, California: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013), 167.

audience actively contributes to the production of the work's meaning.²³ It also resonates with what Liesbeth Groot Niebbelink has coined as "mobile spectators": agents involved in processes in which they enter into composition with performers²⁴, and as proposed, with materialities as well. Conclusively, it all seems to point out that in performative installations, participation is fluid, and by the same token, so are the roles of artist, artwork and participator; in *The Automated Sniper* by Julian Hetzel, this statement will be further illustrated and discussed.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity is expressed by many authors as an indispensable element in the curatorial, the political and in the experiential. It is part of performative installations as they always involve two or more separate conscious minds communicating on a certain level. The question lies in which kind of intersubjectivity is found, and what role it plays in understanding performative installations as aesthetical productions to be curated. Participation in performative installations, even though it assumes varied forms, is always intersubjective, yet it also involves a level of self-reflexivity. In order for intersubjectivity to take place, passive contemplation of an artwork ought to be contradicted.²⁵ It could be said, therefore, that intersubjective participation happens on both an individual level, which entails a self-reflexive process, and on a collective level, in which intersubjectivity arises. For this to happen, Barbara Coutinho suggests that the exhibition space must be articulated in cognitive, emotional, and sensory ways, all in all contributing to a holistic sensibility.²⁶

²³ Joan Jonas and Karin Schneider, "Joan Jonas", *BOMB* no. 112 (summer 2010), 58.

²⁴ Niebbelink, "Bordering and Shattering the Stage...", 60.

²⁵ Barbara Coutinho, "Curatorial Work. Towards a New Relationship Between People, Places and Things", in *Contemporary Curating and Museum Education*, ed. Carmen Morsch et alri (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 66.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 67.

Intersubjectivity is also necessary for relationality to be successful. Nicolas Bourriaud claims that the substrate of a relational artwork is formed by intersubjectivity, as it strives to collectively elaborate meaning.²⁷ This reinforces the argument that intersubjectivity is intrinsic in performative installations given that they always operate in relation to something and someone. Nevertheless, Bourriaud's approach to intersubjectivity cannot be successfully applied to performative installations as it is based on the fact that it should aspire to create an ideal of togetherness that escapes the conflicts of everyday life and establishes itself in what the author borrows from Marx: a social interstice, a space of democratic and participative relations.²⁸ Chantal Mouffe alerts that intersubjectivity does not always convey positive, democratic, equally participative and free of constraints.²⁹ On the contrary, and following her agonism theory, intersubjectivity entails necessary tensions and it is at all times the temporary result of a provisional hegemony.³⁰

Conversely, paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott stated that in an intersubjective space, meanings are always renegotiated, due to the use of play as a tool to create a shared cultural reality.³¹ Intersubjectivity, thus, allows performative installations to be spaces *of* and *in* mediation that persevere not in the obtaining of a realized final product, but in the making of a meaningful process.

Play

It could be argued that performative installations have the potential to open up the site of play. In an artistic context, play is capable of aesthetic production, as play allows a

²⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 16.

²⁸ Idem.

²⁹ Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? (1999)", 288.

³⁰ Ibidem, 289.

³¹ Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 39.

cognitive leap that can radically change one's relation to reality.⁵² According to Donald Winnicott, play seeks to find an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated.⁵³ Play is and creates a shared cultural reality, a space between individual and environment where cultural experience is located. On the other hand, the ceaseless inventiveness of play makes an experimental space for exploration. The artwork, and in this case, the performative installation, can host such a space as it is the representation of mediation.⁵⁴

In the opinion of Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most fundamental aspirations of art is to diminish the distance between the work and its publics and to transform the distance of the spectator into the involvement of the fellow player.⁵⁵ To Gadamer, the work of art is not a self-conscious object, but finds its true being in becoming an experience that changes the person who experiences it.⁵⁶

Ultimately, play, as an inherent aesthetical element of performative installations, leads to consider them as open works. This entails that they are often discovered by the audience in an unfinished state, considering that time, the fourth dimension of a performative installation, makes it difficult to conceive them as stable entities with finite borders. In the analysis of Sasha Waltz's exhibition at the ZKM, the transference of these qualities in performative installations to the museum will be discussed.

Performativity and Materiality are not featured as core concepts in this constellation because they are already embedded in the work in specific ways that are to be extracted rather than proposed. I have not chosen a particular way of understanding them; rather,

⁵² Ibidem, 57.

⁵³ Ibidem, 59.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 58-60.

⁵⁵ Renée van der Vall, *At the edges of vision: a phenomenological aesthetics of contemporary spectatorship* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 87.

⁵⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 108.

they will first emerge in the description of the artworks and subsequently be entangled within the discussion of the other concepts. Thus, having presented the nuclear concepts that conform the theoretical constellation of this thesis, let us proceed to the analysis of the three performative installations.

Phobiarama, by Dries Verhoeven

Fear is an intricate emotion, yet it is relatively easy to induce; it works in anticipation of danger and triggers a gesture of withdrawal. In *Phobiarama*, Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven enquires into our contemporary culture of fear, exploring the tactics of terrorists, politicians, newsmakers, and other marketers by restaging them in the format of a haunted house. The installation, co-commissioned by Onassis Cultural Centre Athens and Holland Festival in 2017, is a feverish ride towards the political strategy of fear inducement, which, through an emphasis on the political construct of *we/them*, fuels the levels of anxiety and worry whilst constructing a false sense of threat that feeds right-wing and fascist agendas. The haunted house becomes a true to life tableau in which the fun-fair witch's role is performed by politically targeted peoples used as scapegoats.



Picture by Willem Popelier

The spectators are grouped in pairs and guided into the dimly lit haunted house. Once they are seated in small cars on rails, the ride begins, penetrating into the darkened, nondescript installation, progressively befogging any sense of time, duration, and direction. Screens begin to flicker, eerie flashes of light dart throughout the white walls, and familiar voices – politicians, news presenters – start uttering speeches and

comments on terrorism, refugees, and the safeguard of the nation. These stimuli go hand in hand with the physical presence of the performers, sturdy men of politically-targeted ethnicities that loom in the dark, walking around and encircling the funfair cars, at first dressed up in circus costumes – grizzly bear, clown... – and later revealing their true appearance, shirtless. Both digital influenced perceptions and the embodied presence of the performers conform a disturbance of senses that results in a blurring of realities⁵⁷, which is a recurrent strategy used in installation art that Claire Bishop, in her differentiation of modes of experience in installations, categorises as *mimetic engulfment*: the subject is decentred by means of disorientation and displacement in a physical context that lacks solid shape or size.⁵⁸ Such blur allows the installation to conform its own particular reality, which is performed by performers, spectators and materialities.



Picture by Willem Popelier

Most performative installations are intermedial in the sense that media not only exist next to each other, but through their interplay result in a reconfiguration of spatial

⁵⁷ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, ed. Sarah Bay-Cheng et alri (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010): 218.

⁵⁸ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), 14-17.

and temporal relationships. On the one hand, the use of intermediality in *Phobiarama* reframes the fear-inducing political agendas through media outlets in the spatial recreation of a fun-fair, transforming public space into entertainment space in which the spectators are treated as anxiety-consumers⁵⁹; on the other hand, it produces a resensibilisation of the senses by targeting the haptic sense of the spectators, who are immersed in a situation over which they have little to no control. The artistic experience is successful inasmuch as the artistic is a locus for a bodily encounter in a specific space and time through the heightening of perception. Besides, the performative element in the installation activates the polysemic quality of space: not so much the architectural qualities of it, but rather the uses which arise from it.⁴⁰ In *Phobiarama*, the funfair ride works as a pretext to discuss political targeting and fear tactics. The installation is not just a space in which the art happens: it is precisely the space, its configuration and performance, which conveys the artistic message and determines its perception.

Phobiarama, as a performative installation, ignites a sense of self-reflexivity on the side of the spectator and, at the same time, creates affective relationships with the performance's subject matter. The audio messages that blast throughout the installation are likely to sound familiar to the spectators, as they are articulated by famous politicians and, concurrently, they have been circulating in all kinds of far-reaching media – “Last January was the warmest January”, “The threat we see from Jihadist terrorism, aimed at Europe, aimed at the Netherlands, is real and current...”, “We are dealing with extremists who have but one goal: to destabilise our Western civilisation...” –. What is said is not made up talk, but real excerpts by those in position of power and influence; once consciously forgotten or believed to be admissible, now they are rethought in an act of disconcerting repetition and confronted with the imposing presence of those precisely deemed responsible for them. Ultimately, these elements may lead the spectator to an

⁵⁹ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, “Mirrors of Public Space: An Interview with Dries Verhoeven”, *Intermedial performance and politics in the public sphere*, ed. Katia Arfara et alri (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 56.

⁴⁰ Bianchi, “The Theatricality...”, 84.

act of questioning hate speech and its articulation in the media via influential agents in the political and social realm, be it the prime minister or a public TV panelist, within the fear-inducing environment of the installation.

Sensory submersion in performative installations allows for the audience to have an immersive experience. As the artistic space, which has also become a public space, unfolds as an arena of action, as Barbara Grounau claims, they face shocking situations that subvert all sense of security and comfort, and confront them with the unexpected. Grounau suggests that it is in this destabilisation that the truly explosive artistic potential can be found.⁴¹ When the work's frame, the rules, and the roles of the performers are not overtly presented – what are they in *Phobiarama*? Clowns, bears, thugs, terrorists, guides? – it gives rise to new ways of questioning the role of the audience themselves.⁴² Paraphrasing Gadamer, the work of art is not an object which stands up for itself against a subject. Instead, the artwork has its true being in that it becomes an experience which changes the individual who experiences it.⁴⁵



Picture by Willem Popelier

⁴¹ Barbara Grounau, “Unexpected Encounter. On installation art as immersive space”, in *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!*, ed. Doris Kolesch et altri (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019): 28-29.

⁴² Idem.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 108.

Intermateriality, both digital and physical, contributes to the creation of what Karen Barad has called “relational ontology”, in which materialities affect one another in a continual way.⁴⁴ They do so by means of intra-action – in contrast to interaction– : “through specific agential intra-actions, the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and particular concepts become meaningful”.⁴⁵ This relational ontology is present in all performative installations, in which both actor and actant engage in continual reciprocation. A relational ontology cannot be fully understood solely through formalism or structuralism, given its performative nature and the inexistence of a final product to be examined, nor through performance theory’s emphasis on ephemeral action, as the materiality of the work is its key site of activity and its transformation is paramount to the experience.⁴⁶ There is a need, hence, to put forward a comprehensive take on an alternative understanding on relationality, one that considers performativity, materiality and intersubjectivity, in a specific set of time and place, as elements that work in continual influence. Performative installations, by using those three elements as their foundation, become sites of relational practice.

In line with said relational ontology, Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink’s concept of *mobile spectators* is useful to think about the interweaving⁴⁷ that takes place in performative installations: Nibbelink, in the context of nomadic theatre, claims that spectators are mobile in the sense that they are agents involved in processes in which they enter into composition with performers.⁴⁸ Performative installations are considered part of the nomadic theatre spectrum, for they present similar scenarios in which performers, spectators and spaces are engaged in a continuous reconfiguration of spatial relations,

⁴⁴ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, *Gender and Science: New Issues* (spring 2003): 812.

⁴⁵ Karen Barad in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 214.

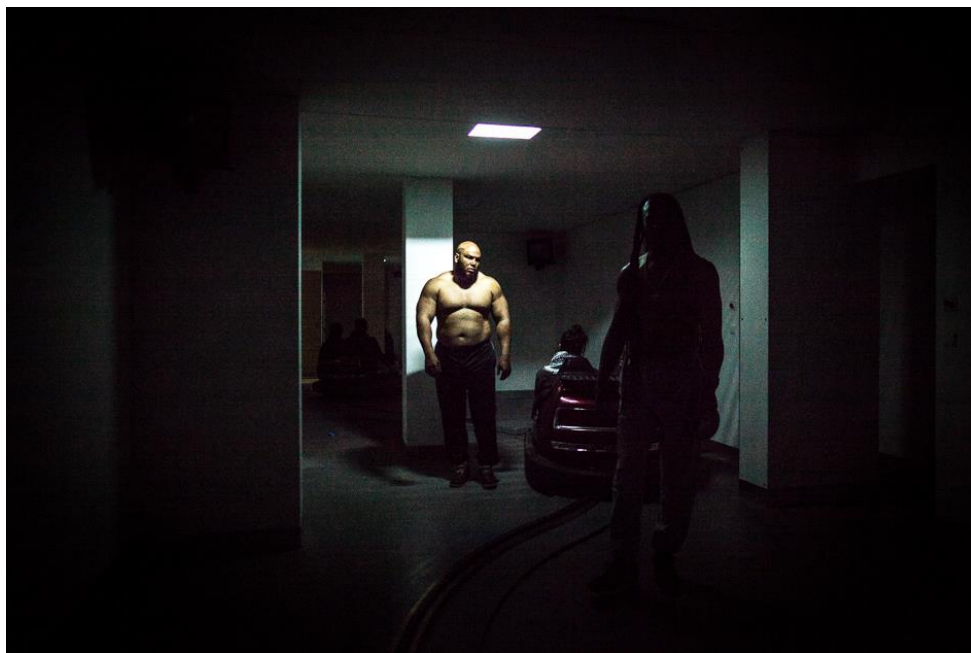
⁴⁶ Jones, “Material Traces...”, 21.

⁴⁷ The use of “interweaving” instead of “hybridity” comes from Erika Fischer-Lichte: hybridity entails the combination of elements that do not belong together in nature; interweaving, on the contrary, involves an interrelation that considers the distinctness of its plural strands. More in Fischer-Lichte, 2009.

⁴⁸ Nibbelink, “Bordering and Shattering...”, 60.

and thus form “flexible, variable constellations” that are articulated in one way or another, varying in each performance.⁴⁹ Becoming-performer, becoming-space, becoming-spectator: these reciprocal acts of becoming are but the manifestation of a relationality that ultimately leads to a powerful artistic experience that disputes dualistic ways of understanding the artistic encounter – passive vs active, artist vs spectator – and challenges the curatorial exercise, especially in an institutional context.

Dries Verhoeven’s *Phobiarama* is a magnificent example of an agonistic relational artwork. Contrary to the artistic strategies in participative or community art, which generally aim at the production of legitimate and harmonious outcomes, *Phobiarama* is a hotbed for agonistic relationality as it sustains on a set of tensions and discomfort to achieve its aims. Frictions are expressed from the intimidating and polarising presence of brawny shirtless men of colour that confront the spectators with the paradigm of political targeting, reinforcing the construction of “we” versus “them” alongside with the diatribes that blast from speakers throughout the installation, to the treatment of terrorism as a form of entertainment that seeks to paper over vile political brainwashing. Forms of racial and religious exclusion, disguised in politics and media under the veil of rationality or morality, are brought to the fore in an agonistic gesture



Picture by Willem Popelier

⁴⁹ Idem.

that reveals that in any political consensus – i.e. equating refugees with terrorists – exclusion is a fundamental element.⁵⁰

Verhoeven also articulates the performative installation agonistically by injecting new meanings and signifiers in the public space. Inserted in a nondescript part of the city, what is usually a transitory space with little to no social meaning now turns out to be a place for direct confrontation and polarisation by means of artistic intervention. As Mouffe articulates, “a given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces, and this means that the hegemonic struggle also consists in an attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces”.⁵¹ Verhoeven has done that in other projects, all of them always operating as performative installations: *Wanna Play?* (2017), *Ceci n’est pas...* (2013), *Happiness* (2019) ... These works originate disruption and pressure in the public space by recurring to visual strategies that, even though they seem shocking or ignominious, they emulate already existing ones perpetuated by different kind of medias. The desired harmony in public space is challenged by an overt exercise of unveiling the uncanny (*Happiness*), the taboo (*Ceci n’est pas...*), the perverted (*Wanna Play?*), and so on.

It could be said that for Dries Verhoeven performative installations conform the perfect medium for acute social and political critique on the treatment of minorities or socially excluded groups. By providing them with a “house” – i.e. the installation – to dwell – i.e. the performance – and by evincing them in the public space, Verhoeven turns public spaces into arenas of agonistic representation.

⁵⁰ Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? (1999)”, 290.

⁵¹ Mouffe, *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*, 91-92.

The Automated Sniper, by Julian Hetzel

“Drone bomb me. Blow me from the mountains, and into the sea. Blow me from the side of the mountain. Blow my head off, explode my crystal guts. Lay my purple on the grass”. This is chorus of *Drone Bomb Me*, a song by ANOHNI, written from the perspective of an Afghan little girl whose family has been killed by a drone bomb strike. Drone strikes have become a recurrent targeted attack: commanded remotely, an unmanned (combat) aerial vehicle (UCAV) fires a missile or drops a bomb onto a target. According to a 2018 report in *The Daily Beast*, Barack Obama launched 186 drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan during his first two years in office. Donald Trump, in just his first two years, launched 238⁵². Even though drone strikes are perpetuated by other countries or groups, the US military has carried out most of them in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen.⁵⁵

Julian Hetzel’s performative installation *Automated Sniper. Make Art Great Again!* explores the gamification of violence and the blurred lines between the virtual and the real through the ethics of virtual warfare, which are exemplified by drone strikes. As the artist himself argues, if we look at the history of warfare, it is clear that the distance of combat has been gradually widened, from knives to swords, from bows to guns, to the extent that a soldier in Washington DC is capable of stealthily operate an UCAV and drop a bomb in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with 12.000 km between the two places. Striking back is not an option, and the attacker is faceless.

Automated Sniper premiered on March 8th, 2017, at Something Raw Festival, Frascati Theater Amsterdam. The performative installation is divided in two parts. First, in a theatrical setting, a stage that seeks to exemplify Brian O’Doherty’s well-known concept of the “white cube” to refer to modern art museums. The two performers engage

⁵² <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/5/8/18619206/under-donald-trump-drone-strikes-far-exceed-obama-s-numbers>. For more information on American drone strikes and their opacity: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/30/opinion/drones-civilian-casualties-trump-obama.html>

⁵⁵ For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drone_strike

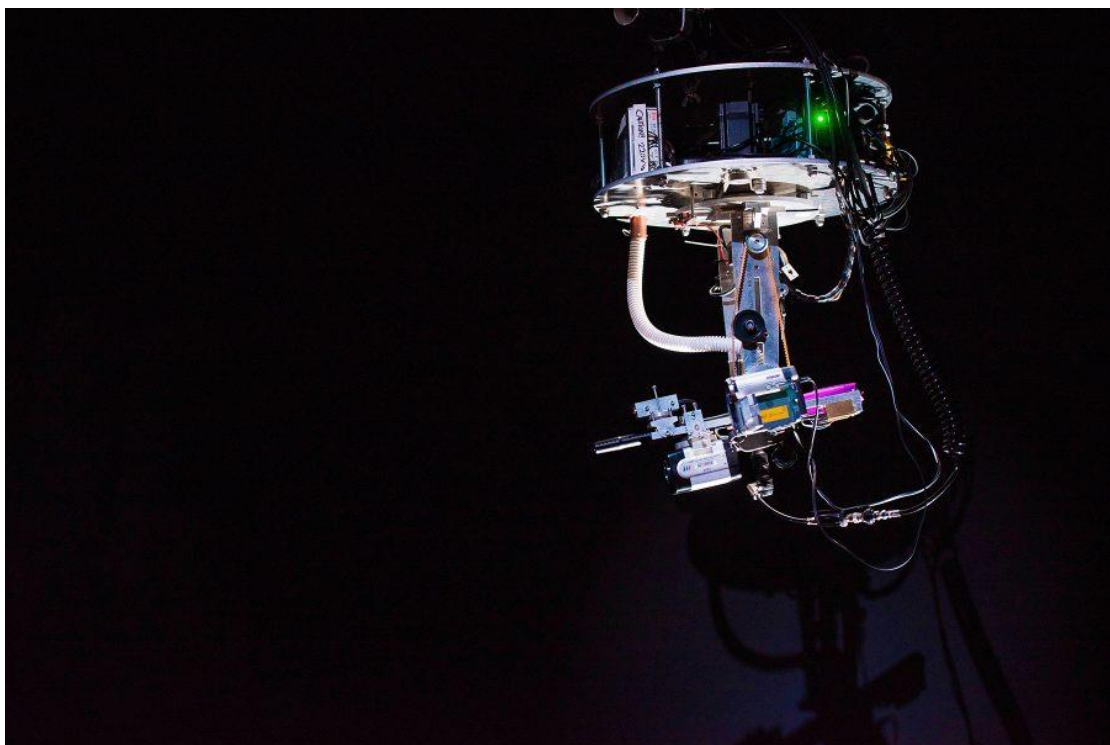
in a zany competition to see who can create the most outlandish, pretentious and elevated work of art by stacking up and randomly placing quotidian elements on stage – a coat stand, a chair, a bucket... – whilst uttering monologues on art and its political power. After that, a voice emerges from an invisible speaker, and with a gentle tone explains how play and competition are essential activities for humans. The piece then gets violent when the shooting device, representing a drone, enters into scene, commanded by one spectator after another in a backstage room, as if it was a videogame. They shoot paintballs at will to the performers, who cover themselves with the very art that they have previously created, while images of drone strikes are projected onto the walls. When the spectator returns from the commanding room, they are greeted with jubilant applause.



Picture by Modern Body Festival

The Automated Sniper is an elaborate work that successfully manages to achieve a high level of relationality between performance, materiality and intersubjectivity. Additionally, it exemplifies what, according to philosopher and art historian Juliane Rebentisch, is the accomplishment of installation art: “reflecting, in the medium of art, the generally constitutive dependence of aesthetic objects on the performative

perspective of the one who aesthetically experiences it”.⁵⁴ The spectators of installation art perceive themselves in this relationship, and arguably by means of a relational ontology, here achieved by directly inviting the spectator to actively participate in the work. As a consequence, aesthetic experience itself, the one of relationality, of play, of intersubjectivity, comes to the fore and allows reflexivity to emerge; in Hetzel’s artwork, such reflexivity is oriented toward the realisation of the frivolity of contemporary warfare ethics and their likeness to videogame culture, characterised by the problematic agencies in both the real and the virtual.



Picture by Bas-de-Brouwer

The Automated Sniper fits in Claire Bishop’s installation experience category of *activated spectatorship*: the spectator is a political subject that acts and makes choices.⁵⁵ Through this activation on the side of the spectators, it is arguable that the boundaries between the artist’s operational realm and the spectator’s acquiescent position become fuzzy as a diminishment of distance between work and publics takes place, and, subsequently, said distance is replaced by an conscious involvement of the spectator-

⁵⁴ Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 74.

⁵⁵ Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 63.

now-become-player in the artwork⁵⁶, materialised here in a sniper videogame that ultimately gamifies the artistic.

Play is a recurrent artistic strategy in performative installations. Play is a transversal and highly mutable concept across disciplines and fields of study, and, in performative installations, it contributes greatly to the acute reflexivity that has been discussed before. Given its nature of an open-ended process of engagement, interruption and possibility, play allows for an encroachment in art that subverts the idea of the artwork as self-defining object and subject. According to philosopher Isobel Armstrong, it is only in play that an essential cognitive leap is possible, which radically changes one's relation to reality.⁵⁷ Armstrong also claims, on the basis of the theories of paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, that “play seeks to find an intra-subjective space in which meanings are renegotiated”.⁵⁸ Such intersubjective space is achieved in *The Automated Sniper* since all of its elements are interdependent for its success: from the performers' monologues to the voiceover, from the spectators to the drone-like artefact.



Picture by Thomas Lenden

⁵⁶ Van der Vall, *At the edges of vision...*, 87.

⁵⁷ Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic*, 37.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 39.

It could be claimed that the audience becomes a performer in *The Automated Sniper* given that it has the capacity to physically alter the piece by shooting at it. However, scholar Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink is wary of such statements as she claims that framing spectators as performers or actors does not help to analyse the possible functions of difference between them.⁵⁹ For this reason, she argues that the spectator remains as such but shifts in roles throughout the duration of the piece: in Hetzel's, by *becoming-performer* in the second part of the piece. Constantly shifting, the spectator becomes responsible for the production of the work's meaning by actively participating in its construction.

Following Kaija Kaitavuori's theory on participation in contemporary art, one could argue that in performative installations participation functions akin to Michel Foucault's author function: it is constructed in the work and structured as a set of societal relations, and, additionally, it has a discursive dimension.⁶⁰ Participation becomes an exercise of artistic creation that follows the abandonment of passive condition, which is turned into an illusion of an emancipated condition of the spectator, who becomes infused in the work of art.⁶¹ The spectator/participator is an essential element in *The Automated Sniper* because they are part of its sensemaking mechanisms.

In *The Participator in Contemporary Art*, Kaitavuori offers a detailed and comprehensive classification of types of participator in contemporary art. Regarding performative installations, and significantly exemplified in *The Automated Sniper*, the category *user* appears to be the most befitting: it is found in artworks or projects that engage spectators physically and socially in the artistic experience; said artworks rely on the spectators' presence and activity, and the artist may or may not be present.⁶² The *user* category is the most open and exerts the least control over participants, for open-

⁵⁹ Nibbelink, "Bordering and Shattering the Stage...", 62.

⁶⁰ Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art*, 11.

⁶¹ Bianchi, "The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces...", 91; Nicolas De Oliveira et al., *Installation Art in the new millennium: the empire of the senses* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 14.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 37.

endedness and unpredictability are part of the artwork's ethos.⁶⁵ Performative installations seem to generally require an intellectual and engaged spectator who, in Jacques Rancière's proposition, contributes to undermine the opposition between looking and acting.⁶⁴ Participation in art creates the conditions for a forum of reflection and interaction that is, first and last, political.



Picture by Thomas Lenden

“It is the nature of the practice of installation to challenge its own boundaries”.⁶⁵ In *The Automated Sniper*, a dramaturgical setting is blended with performance art that is strongly linked to the materiality of the installation and the unpredictable input from the spectator-player. Performative installations, overall, exemplify what Jean Baudrillard states as “the confusion of the medium”⁶⁶, which could be argued to be a natural response to the state of the contemporary art, and, accordingly, the world. When, in a final act, performer Bas van Rijnsoever sprays MAKE ART GREAT AGAIN on the wall, is it not a cynical yet spot-on conclusion of the state of the (art) world?

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 39.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, 13.

⁶⁵ De Oliveira, *Installation Art in the new millennium...*, 167.

⁶⁶ Idem.

Installationen, Performances, Objekte, Sasha Waltz at the ZKM

Sasha Waltz's retrospective exhibition at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (Centre for Art and Media) in Karlsruhe in 2013 was framed in what its co-curator and director of the institution Peter Weibel calls the "installation turn": a tendency in time-based arts (dance, music, poetry, performance) to materialise in two- and three-dimensional spatial arts, namely, installation, sculpture, and the object.⁶⁷ It is no coincidence, hence, that Weibel proposed a comprehensive exhibition to Waltz, who had the challenge to transform her choreographies into installations to present in the museum, something she had been ruminating for a while. Waltz's works were presented as independent works of art that reached out to the exhibition space: some installations needed the presence or activation of performers (*Objekt aus Impromptus*, 2004); others could be viewed or experienced by visitors themselves as they were screen-based (*Dido*, 2005) or formed by particular objects from the original pieces in an evocative exercise (*Wind, Objekte aus Media*, 2013). This exhibition poses a great chance to not only talk about individual performative installations, but to also frame them in an institutional context and analyse how they were exhibited.

Dance in museums is usually thought as a one-time performance to accompany an opening, an exhibition, a workshop, etc. More often than not, dance is museum adjacent, it is instrumentalised within what Philip Bither calls "related programming"⁶⁸. The nature of dance makes it challenging to present it in the context of an exhibition, where time stretches out and requires a level of continuity or repetition. However, any live art can have a significant effect on the institution, given that, according to Ana Janevski,

⁶⁷ <https://zkm.de/en/keytopic/tanz-performance>

⁶⁸ Programming carried out by educational department staff who lack training within live art disciplines and unconsciously instrumentalise these forms. For more information, Philip Bither in *Curating Live Arts: Global Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, ed. Dena Davida et altri, (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2018): 317.

“Live art has an impact on the institution: it alters the space-time coordinates of the exhibition apparatus, shifting the relationship with the public. It brings with another idea of authorship, challenging the established economy, and it exposes the museum’s human infrastructure and relationships, prompting a new role within curatorial departments”.⁶⁹

We have seen that a performative installation emerges when live art is installed. Installation transforms how art is received, it spatialises and temporalizes what is within it, insofar as it cannot be perceived in a conventional manner.⁷⁰ *Szene aus Körper* was presented in a big space with black flooring and dim lighting, and it incorporated spatial elements from the original piece: a towering, written and drawn wall, a sharp sculpture that descends from the ceiling as if about to drill the surface. This work questions cultural templates for movement, forms of pleasure and cosmetic improvements through an exploration of the body as malleable materiality. The visitors have roamed the space, but they are quickly beleaguered by a troop of performers who create boundaries of spectating with their bodies; they alter the space’s geometry by their corporality. The visitors are forced to move and change their position in the space; we see how the spectators participation, as well as the very act of observation, is choreographed and theatricalized.⁷¹ At the same time, the visitors/spectators are able to recognize their own corporeality, to map their location, becoming part of the imaginary “oneness”⁷² between the performers, the work of art, the space, and themselves, which ultimately constitutes an achievement of advanced intersubjectivity.

Angelika Nollert states that installation always evokes a spatial experience and dissolves the borders between the work and the field of observation around it, unlike

⁶⁹ Ana Janevski in *Empty stages, crowded flats: performativity as curatorial strategy*, eds. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warza (Berlin: Alexander, 2017): 107.

⁷⁰ Kerstin Schankweiler, “Structures of Spectatorship”, in *Staging Spectators in Immersive Performances: Commit Yourself!*, eds. Doris Kolesch et alri (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019): 74.

⁷¹ Bianchi, “The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces...”, 88.

⁷² *Sasha Waltz: objekte, installationen, performances*, ed Christiane Riedel et alri, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2014), 148.

sculpture.⁷⁵ Even though we could agree with Nollert if we were to think of sculpture as a petrified artwork that is inserted in a spatial experience rather than creating one, Sasha Waltz challenges this traditional understanding of sculpture by thinking of a new scenography in a sculptural mindset, in which object and dance play with and transfer connotations to one another. *Continu, Performative Installation* – a piece specific for the museum – instantiates Waltz’s artistic research into thinking volume in dance in sculptural lines: on the one hand, the artist’s drawings of bodies in motion on paper frame one side of the space; parallelly, performers are suspended from the ceiling. In a slow-paced pulse with gravity, the performers assume sculptural qualities. This interrelationality between sculpture and body objectifies the latter: the materiality in performative installations is hence broadened and includes the body as material, which despite being choreographed, it is subject to unpredictability.



Continu, Performative Installation (2013). ZKM

⁷⁵ Angelika Nollert, *Performative Installation*, (Cologne: Snoeck, 2003), 11.

“I am someone who attaches particular importance to the materiality of the object”, claims Waltz⁷⁴ – indeed, Waltz’s adaptation of her work to the museum spaces seems to be in line with Karen Barad’s theories on materiality:

“Phenomena are differential patterns of mattering produced through complex agential-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production, where apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices – specific material (re)configurations of the world which come to matter.”⁷⁵

We see this reflected in *Stammbaum, Objekt aus insideout* (2004). A wooden panel with thirteen small doors, each one depicting a portrait of a relative of the artist, conform a *Stammbaum*, German for family tree. The performers insert their arms in them, expanding the two-dimensional object into three-dimensionality. Meanwhile, another performer approaches the panel in slow and heavy steps, for her thighs are filled with dense, soggy rice. The performer, back against the panel, is grabbed and ultimately held by the dancers’ hands, which also remove the rice, symbolically relieving the burden of being away from one’s homeland. Such is the agential-discursive practice of the body, which simultaneously draws physical boundaries in the exhibition space, the space of spectating, by means of performing the object, turned three-dimensional. The aesthetic experience is no longer limited to artefacts, but it is also a bodily encounter in a specific space and time.⁷⁶

In this exhibition, the stage space became exhibition space. In this transformative process, one did not cancel the other; the polysemic quality of the exhibition space was revealed and heightened, not only through a conversion from theatre to museum, but

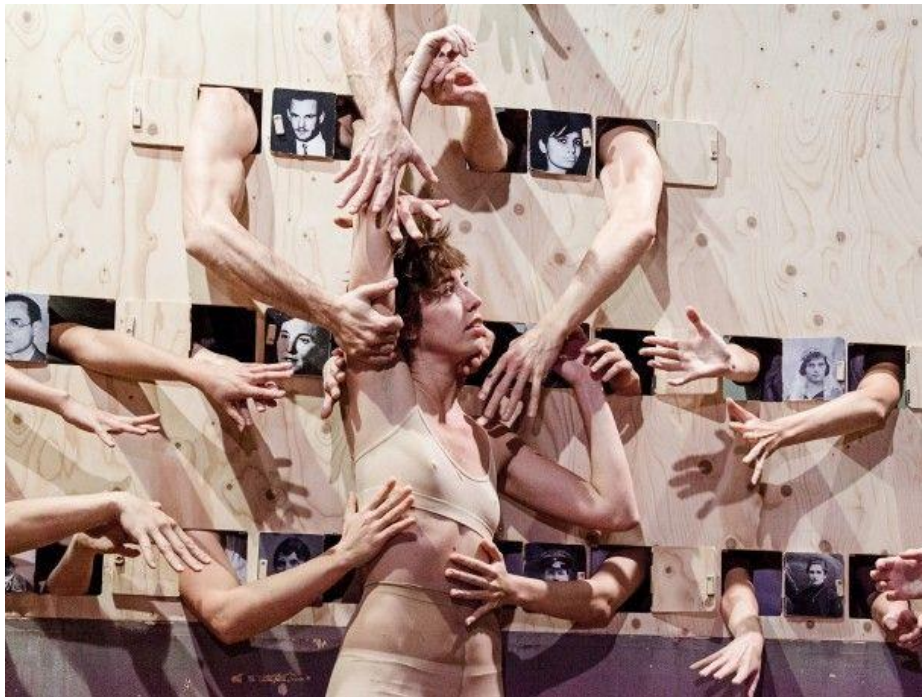
⁷⁴ “Sasha Waltz in interview with the BNN”, ZKM, accessed May 3.

<https://zkm.de/en/magazine/2013/10/sasha-waltz-in-interview-with-the-bnn-badische-neueste-nachrichten>

⁷⁵ Karen Barad in *Materiality*, ed. Petra Lange-Berndt (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015): 214.

⁷⁶ Bianchi, “The Theatricality of Exhibition Spaces...”, 84.

also through a spectatorship awareness that disrupts the passivity of the visitor and challenges them to position themselves spatially, as well as intellectually.



Stambaum, Objekt aus insideout (2004), ZKM.

The spectator in theatre becomes a visitor in the museum and vice versa. They emancipate themselves by sharing the same stage of artworks and bodies in motion.⁷⁷ The exhibition space, concurrently, becomes a crossbred place where performance steps out of specific places in a museum – e.g. auditorium – and into the “fine arts places”, acquiring an extended temporal dimension.⁷⁸ The performative installation, a work in a constant state of flux, oscillating between object-like and performative qualities⁷⁹, constitutes a phenomenological experience in which instantaneity, duration, and active and passive participation results in a new spatial and temporal consciousness of spectators/visitors.⁸⁰

By isolating a scene from the context of the original piece, and afterwards *installing* it, new interpretations for the work arise, and the scene itself becomes an

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 86.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 85.

⁷⁹ *Sasha Waltz...*, 148.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, 87.

object, a tangible artwork capable of being exhibited.⁸¹ Even though the isolation of the scenes may lead to a plethora of narratives difficult to grasp comprehensively, their exhibition makes them perceivable as fully realised works. Installation materialises the complexity and substance of choreography by fixing it. A performative installation, however, is not about either dissolving the work through the event or vice versa, but about the event as a constitutive force of the installation, about the symbiosis of the event and the work⁸², which in Waltz's case, intensifies the relationships between body and space, between the dynamic and the sculptural.

Interestingly, the performative installation can also function as artwork producer. In *Object aus Impromptus* (2004), a big canvas stretched over a floor panel where performers collectively created an image in paint pigment and water through their dance movements in response to Franz Schubert's music. The canvas ultimately transformed stage into image, performance into exhibition, theatre into museum.



Object aus Impromptus (2004), ZKM.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 141.

⁸² Nollert, *Performative installation*, 14.

Speculative Curation(s)

We have seen how performative installations propose an alternative kind of relationality that shies away from the anthropocentric, human-centred basis – expressed by Nicolas Bourriaud – to embrace the materiality of the artwork and its placement, the performative elements exercised by performers, participators and materials too, and the overall intersubjectivity that results. Such relationality between objects, people, space, and time inevitably permeates in an exhibition context, and it is inscribed in a ceaseless shaping process. This constant connection between all elements in the artwork(s) allows the exhibition to become an analogy for ever-changing societal processes. As Beatrice von Bismarck suggests, “the exhibition becomes a spatiotemporal social fabric that negotiates the goods and values that are at stake within the artistic field and makes this negotiation visible and comprehensible”.⁸⁵

In performative installations, the dichotomy of subject and object is challenged and often dissolved. Actors and actants, performer and spectator, are likely to become either indistinguishable or each other. This potentially subverts a marketable understanding of exhibitions; authorships and roles are blurred, and so is the final artistic or curatorial product, if such a thing is ever realised fully. In light of this, Beatrice von Bismarck sharply claims that the relevance and significance of the exhibition for the contemporary cultural field is justified, given that “it exemplifies the fundamental cultural change from a culture of representation to a culture of transmission”.⁸⁴ It could be argued the leap is not only to a culture of transmission, but also to a culture of experience: in itself venue, object, and mediating participant, the exhibition emerges as a simulacrum of contemporary life, and its value resides in the quality of the experiences it provides. The arts institution, in adaptation to contemporary entertainment strategies,

⁸⁵ Beatrice von Bismarck (ed.), *Cultures of the Curatorial*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 291.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 298.

gradually moves its aim from showing self-explanatory objects to providing a valuable, educational, and engaging cultural experience.

The exhibition has the ability to function as an arena where negotiations of meanings take place. We have seen how in performative installations every identity is relational; by the same token, the space in which it is exhibited becomes a hotbed of relational identities on a bigger level: between institution, exhibition space, the curatorial practice, visitors, performers, and artworks. Such intricate relationality inevitably arises a set of tensions in power and roles – artist’s, curator’s, visitors’ – that ideally should not be hidden in the curatorial exercise, but rather rendered visible: it is what Chantal Mouffe urges democracy, and subsequently public institutions, to be, a place of agonism where conflict is not eliminated but recognised and legitimised. This would entail, for instance, that if we were to curate *Phobiarama* in a museum, the element of fear in it would not be watered down in any way for the comfort of museum visitors, as that would conceal a key experiential element in the work, which precisely seeks to create necessary tensions for the understanding of it. On the other hand, what *Phobiarama* ultimately does is shed light on the fear-inducing tactics in politics and media by means of an artistic experience; through a curatorial exercise, it could be interwoven in the spatiotemporal social fabric that an exhibition has the potential to be.

It could be said that a museum, just like a performative installation, is a constructed situation; in itself, it is a continuous construction of meanings.⁸⁵ In Sasha Waltz’s exhibition at the ZKM, the installations took over the museum and challenged it to a position of artistic uncertainty and experimentation, where the exhibited works presented similar yet different outcomes constantly. This might be observed as a curatorial headache, as any strive towards a fixed, controllable, and fully defined presentation is in vain. Nevertheless, what if curating was understood as the organisation of conflict – or in Mouffe’s frame, of agonism – as the mediation of open-ended

⁸⁵ David Carr, “A Museum is an Open Work”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7:2 (2001): 174.

experiences that, therefore, cannot be organised completely? As Helmut Draxler points out, the curatorial is an artistic, social, and political problem, not a solution for any crisis.⁸⁶ The crisis is precisely the problem of curating and of any form of mediation. It is not that institutions, identities, and forms of production are objectively in crisis, it is rather that the crisis provides the interpretive model for institutions, identities, and forms of production.⁸⁷ Performative installations materialise this crisis by challenging the artistic experience and the curatorial task. Exhibitions can potentially be a space of mediation within such a field of conflict, where not only the imaginary and symbolical aspects of curating remain visible, but in which also the crisis as form can be opened up to debate in artistic, theoretical, and political dimensions.⁸⁸ If the institution seeks to be a place for societal reflection through the artistic, should it not mirror the complexities of its contemporary society, that is, an exuberant cornucopia of necessary tensions?

Installations are context-sensitive with regard not only to the interior or exterior space in which they are exhibited, but also to the social frameworks that influence reception of art in general.⁸⁹ By exhibiting a performative installation in a museum, its quality of an open-ended work is transferred to the museum itself. That is to say that the museum is discovered by its visitors in an unfinished state, and that what is exhibited projects ongoing artistic-social relationships within a space-time frame provided by the artist, the curator, and the institution.⁹⁰ The perception of an exhibited performative installation is also the perception of the institution in which it has been placed. Hence, we find here another level of relationality: the artwork and the institution, the former transfers its artistic, social, and political qualities to the museum experience, the latter influences the work spatially and temporally.

⁸⁶ Helmut Draxler in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 58.

⁸⁷ Idem.

⁸⁸ Ibidem, 59.

⁸⁹ Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, 221.

⁹⁰ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 82

Curating a performative installation in a museum, whether it is commissioned or not, is a process of adaptation. Therefore, it is not about creating a specific space in the museum from scratch, but rather to adapt the artwork to a desirable space. For example, in Sasha Waltz's retrospective, *Cloud* was installed in the hall of the museum since the living sculpture required a big space to expand in volume. *Phobiarama*, likewise, could be adapted and installed in a museum's hall given its magnitude. The hall, a transitory space for visitors, can be turned into an exhibition space, defying the assigned spatial roles, as well as activating spatial polysemy in the institution. Inevitably, this would create a set of tensions that would confront the association of the hall as just an uninvolved starting point and contribute to an understanding of the institution as a place for intellectual and emotional encounters in its totality, therefore abandoning the idea that art has specific places to be exhibited and cannot stretch out into other ones.

As for time, an installation can be performed in the timeframe of the exhibition or the museum's opening hours, or in specific time slots with breaks in between. Referring back to *Cloud* by Sasha Waltz, the work was performed only twice: in the opening and the closure, yet other performative works, such as *Szene aus Körper* and *Stammbaum*, *Objekt aus insideout*, were performed regularly during the exhibition's timeframe. What about works such as *The Automated Sniper*? Julian Hetzel's piece, longer than Waltz's, would require cleaning the stage and resetting objects. Perhaps it could only be performed once or twice a day, and it would need to be set in a soundproof and closed area. Again, performative installations' spatial and temporal challenges ought to be resolved in a process of adaptation; given that they are incredibly diverse in shape and execution, it is impossible to offer a definitive guideline.

As seen in the body of the thesis, performative installations pose terminological issues. Visitors, spectators, audience, participators... There is no consensus amongst authors on what to call, and therefore how to address, those who experience a performative installation. Visitor refers to people who visit the museum, that is, wandering around it for the purpose of experiencing what is in it. A spectator is one who

watches, usually as a member of an audience. Participator, on the other hand, is someone who participates in the execution of an artwork or set of artworks on different levels of involvement. There is, nevertheless, no need to reach a consensus, nor to lean on one term or the other. We have discussed how scholar Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink proposes that the people involved in an artistic situation interchange roles in an act of *becoming*: the spectator becomes-performer, the performer becomes-spectator, the visitor becomes-participator, the participator becomes-player, and even the artwork becomes-space and vice versa. This concept of becoming + an “orientating vector” – borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari – could be particularly useful in performative installations, where, as it has been argued, an intricate relationality between actors and actants is found. As Nibbelink holds, such an act of becoming- does not entail a literal transformation; it is about entering into composition with qualities, desires, or capacities, about activating elements that align with one another holistically.⁹¹ This understanding of addressing actors and actants in an artistic situation simultaneously alleviates any need to categorise and enriches the curatorial. By integrating Nibbelink’s proposal, the curator has the chance to speculate and test ways to experience the artistic and provide the grounds for a level of organicism in the institution that ultimately renders it malleable and relatable.

It should also be considered that the artist might take part in the performative installation, and even co-curate it – i.e. Sasha Waltz’s exhibition –. This inevitably leads to a close collaboration between artist and curator; even though the artist takes part in curatorial tasks and supervision, the curator does not necessarily acquire artist qualities. Instead, the curator emerges as a mediator between artist and institution or program, they work as facilitator in practical terms, and as presenter in conceptual ones: in the act of presentation, the exhibition, and by default the institution, become committed to a narrative about the construction of the world.⁹² This would suggest that both the artist and the curator, in symbiosis with the artwork, install their constellation of views and

⁹¹ Nibbelink, “Bordering and Shattering the Stage”, 68.

⁹² Carr, “A Museum is an Open Work”, 183.

concepts in the museum spaces and times, and, at the same time, they perform them, for performativity resides somewhere in the tensions among language, embodiment and action.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Tawny Andersen, "An Object that Belongs to No One", *Performance Research*, 21:5, 2016: 12.

Conclusions

With this thesis, I have attempted to open up a discussion on contemporary art curation by first learn from specialised literature, then undergo two coding processes to establish a set of concepts to work from, and finally confronting said concepts with three performative installations to later speculate about curation. Given my interest in curation, I saw potential in the analysis on performative installations as an artistic medium given, on the one hand, their intricacies and challenging characteristics, and on the other, their resemblance to both the act of curating and the exhibition: they are installed works in a specific place and time, and they are performed by different subjects and objects.

In the beginning of this thesis discussion, I proposed an alternative relationality to examine the curation of performative installations. It can be concluded that they indeed work in relation to their own and the exhibition space's **materialities**, to their **performers**, and to the **intersubjectivity** they establish between these two elements. This kind of relationality has not only revealed the inner mechanisms of the medium, as it has been seen in the analysis of *The Automated Sniper*, but also fluidity in roles between artist, curator, spectators/visitors, and space. Consequently, curating performative installations does not only deal with the work in its physical and conceptual levels, but also with its entanglement with the exhibition space and the institution; Sasha Waltz's exhibition at the ZKM illustrates such statement.

Performative installations lead to the realisation that exhibitions are a spatial and temporal medium that combines different ways of relationality, negotiation, adaptation and collaboration between subjects and objects, who shift in roles throughout the artistic experience, defying rigidity and fostering a fluid understanding of curating. This fluidity is not harmonic, but rather tense and confrontational; it is agonistic. Dries Verhoeven's *Phobiarama* epitomises agonism through the artistic. However, it is in this very struggle that the curator finds their aims: curation is not the solution to a problem, but a way of

unveiling it and opening up a place of mediation to mirror and enquire society. Following the agonistic approach, the difficulty in assigning clear roles does not need to be solved but unveiled. Deploying agonism in the exhibition space by means of installing and performing materialities and abstractions could be considered the ultimate aim of the curator as it has been seen to be a successful means to convey artistic message whilst igniting self- and inter-subjectivity in its experience.

Even though Grounded Theory is not a common method in the Humanities, it has been advantageous not only as a reading method, but also in establishing a constellation of concepts to guide me through the analysis of performative installations. During my analysis, other concepts emerged that, even though they were not part of my constellations of concepts, they have proven to be valuable when discussing curation. Space, time, and roles are intricate concepts that could be further analysed in future discussions and projects sprouting from this thesis. Extensive conversations with curators would also further develop them and interconnect them on a deeper level.

The learnings from this thesis have also influenced its conclusions. By dealing with phenomena that refuses conclusive approaches, it is a rather contradictory and hard task to present a set of determining thoughts. Nonetheless, this thesis has revealed the usefulness of speculation as a way of thinking and potentially producing the curatorial. It is precisely in indeterminacy and hypothesis where insightful discourse has emerged. Hence, let this thesis be an invitation to think from, with and towards the artwork, embracing speculation as a method to reflect about and generate the artistic through a multiplicity of standpoints.

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