

*Empowerment and Manipulation: The Seductive Betrayal of Art*  
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[published in the Venice Biennale Romanian Pavilion catalogue: Mirela Duculescu and Alina Serban, *The Seductiveness of the Interval*, (Stockholm, Romanian Cultural Institute, 2009), 127 - 132]

What if the goal of contemporary art is (and has been) “learning to inhabit the world in a better way”?<sup>1</sup> Although inevitably this is a utopian question, Nicolas Bourriaud asks it less out of a desire to posit a utopian agenda for art than out of a recognition that one of the defining characteristics of recent art is a rejection (by artists themselves) of the hegemonic or totalizing vision of the artist, and with it, a reassessment of both the expectations made by the art work on the viewer and a reconceptualization of the relationship between the viewer and the art work. Certainly, the notion of interaction between the viewer and art is not new; and neither is the recognition of how conditions of viewing can either enhance or suppress this interaction. But the expectation that the work of art can only be completed by the viewer, and that the viewer’s inability to do so is a sign of apathy does force a significant reevaluation of the purpose of the installation of a group of art works. Indeed, it forces those of us concerned with the creation of such spaces to reconceptualize the gallery as a theater of commodities, more like a marketing exhibition than a museum. Because the *Seductiveness of the Interval* specifically centralizes questions such as these, and in particular, the question of the relationship between the real, as embodied by the spectator, and the imaginary, as embodied by the art work, in this essay I want to rehearse some of the main themes in the increased desire to treat both the artwork and the installation as theatrical spaces and the concomitant demands this desire places on the spectator.

The interest of artists in theatricality has a long history, and without retracing it, it will suffice to note that even Byzantine churches were not oblivious to the goal of creating a complete environment in which the religious spectacle at times merged with the political, creating a performance of liturgical politics without the use of words or even actors but entirely through the images on the walls and their symbiotic relationship to the actual rituals of the church. Think of *San Vitale* of Ravenna, and the inclusion of the Emperor and Empress in its splendid mosaics. Of course, the role of the spectator was rather limited in such an environment, merely expected to attend the service and be transported through art to the realm of the spiritual. “Merely” is obviously an understatement but on all levels except for the spiritual this was a spectator who was visualized as someone who looks. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bernini, the baroque master of religious and theatrical illusion, still conceptualized the viewer as someone whose

primary activity was looking. He did, however, complicate the mental activity of the viewer by staging his art as a theater with its own audience prior to the entrance of the real audience. Here we have only to think of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* with its box-seats for the Coronaro family, present in sculpted form as they watched the rapture and ascension of St. Teresa.

But for all the emotional extravagance of baroque art, theatricality remained an implicit phenomenon until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artists from Watteau to Manet were clearly influenced by the theater – Watteau in his theatrical fantasies, painting the elite as they play-acted for themselves, and Manet in his commitment to new models of vision derived from a conceptualization of seeing as something which involves more than the eye and calls for a continual reassessment on the part of the viewer. But to whatever degree artists may have departed from the earliest models of vision as something static and framed by the art work, they were always limited by the constraints of a gallery system which positioned or packed multiple art works on the walls of the salon or museum. Although challenges to this system of display came from artists who refused to show their work in the salon, they did not challenge the actual approach to exhibition practices, only the place, and then primarily for ideological reasons stemming from the artists' opposition to the existing salon system.<sup>2</sup> The earliest real challenges to the notion of the exhibition as a place where the viewer encounters art works as objects on the wall, there to be seen and/or ignored, came in the 1910s and 20s with the challenges posed by Russian Constructivism, Berlin Dada, and eventually Surrealism in all its forms. In Russia, the connection between theatricality and exhibitions is particularly interesting in that it worked in two directions: just as theater was revising its notion of the role of the spectator, the designers of exhibition spaces were beginning to treat the relationship between the art works, space, and viewers as a more interactive arrangement. In both cases, the expectation was for a viewer who would be more actively engaged with the performance, whether a performance conducted by actors and stage artifacts or a performance of paintings on display, and in both cases, the precise nature of the performance had its origins in both the cinematic montage and the liminal world of the carnival. Meanwhile, this experience, in turn, reflected back into the theater and a new understanding of how the theater might be an exhibition of these relationships, as opposed to a site of entertainment, becoming perhaps one of the earliest attempts to use art as a means of "inhabiting the world in a new way." These experiments, particularly in Russia, were aborted by political realities, but their lessons were enduring.

To take one example: if, by the mid-1920s, writers and artists such as Sergei Tretiakov, the

poet and playwright, who, like Bertolt Brecht, was drawn to the idea of the “problem play,” and Vsevelod Meierkhold, the theater director known for his use of constructivist stage sets and biomechanical acting, were already abandoning the art work as something descriptive of a time and place and action, preferring instead to create situations with unpredictable outcomes, in so doing they were embracing a model of art in which the artist and audience together were implicated in an intervention in real life. Meierkhold’s interest in carnival theater is well-known, as is his interest in abandoning the traditional stage in which audience and actors are implicitly separated by an invisible wall. Hardly alone in his desire to create a more active experience for the viewer, he took it to a level which few others had reached in the 20s and in so doing, he raised questions about the degree to which the activated spectator is either empowered or controlled in a more subtle way. Likewise, at the same time, the Bauhaus and constructivist artist El Lissitsky was asking similar questions about the nature of the exhibition. Maria Gough’s analysis of Lissitsky’s designs for exhibitions in Dresden, in 1926, and Hannover, in 1927-8, suggests that whereas Brecht and Tretyakov interrupted the narrative progression of their plays in order to activate the spectator, Lissitsky “interrupted” or disoriented the spectator in order to activate the artwork. He achieved this by creating a room in which the background for each art work changed with the movement of the viewer, thereby sacrificing the stability and autonomy of the work of art in order to give both the art works and spectators a role in producing the experience of viewing art.<sup>3</sup> Given the similarity of their goals, it seems almost pre-ordained that Meierkhold and Lissitsky would come together to work on a production of Tretyakov’s newest “problem” play, *I Want a Child*, in 1928. Just as the paintings in the Hannover *Abstrakt Kabinet* would have engaged in a struggle with the wall and the viewer to assert their autonomy, in the production of Tretyakov’s play (if it had ever taken place<sup>4</sup>), the audience would have been caught in an even more disorienting challenge. The planned production would have used a combined elliptical theater/stage which elided seating for the audience and acting spaces, and Meierkhold planned to use scripted non-actors, called “orators” by him, to sit in the audience and act as though they were unscripted spectators spontaneously responding to the debates generated by the play. And if, from the perspective of the audience, these orators were other audience members like themselves, then the audience/performer divide would have been breached and the spectator might likewise contribute to the debate. Even unproduced, these plans have led various historians to position Meierkhold and Lissitsky on a direct line with the totalitarian uses of art by Stalin, so characteristic of the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> My own dissenting point of view is that the combination of radical stage, an experimental play, and a production which manipulated viewers’ perceptions of the identity of the audience and actors and in which the actors ultimately appeared to be little

more than puppets was ultimately not a play at all, but an exhibition of the new spectator. If true, would it be too farfetched to imagine this as another instance of the creation of a socialist network of desiring, with the commodity in this case not an object to be bought, but a lifestyle to emulate? Although it may be impossible to prove in this essay, I raise the question in order to raise another issue: the resemblance between theater, exhibitions and window displays in commercial stores.

Window displays, whether using mannequins, live models, or solely displaying objects, must actively engage the spectator because the display must culminate in the spectator's decision to enter the store and buy something. This performance has a role for the viewer as well as a role for the viewed object. Unlike the constructivist spectator, who became a performer by metonymical association with the actors and whose unscripted conceptual performance was instigated by the production, the performance in the window display is not complete until the spectator enters the store. Somewhat like the orators in the planned production of Tretiakov's play, this is a performance with a scripted role for the viewer. But unlike the Russian audience, this viewer can create a different ending, an ending which challenges or defies the script.

In the evolution of display windows, the earliest windows followed a model of the panorama or gallery – little more than a “moving picture” of objects, with movement coming primarily from the locomotive activity of the spectator. Ignoring the functionalism of the displayed products, the guiding principle of these displays was a principle of visual composition. Clothing displays probably carried this to an almost anti-human extreme as they subordinated the clothing to interactions between space, shapes and colors, and by extension, subordinated the human being – as spectator and consumer – to the object.<sup>6</sup>

Frederick Kiesler compared the display window to a “static theater” which “dramatized the merchandise” but although he predicted future display windows which would be comparable to motion pictures, he does not seem to have commented on the change in the role of the spectator. At first, live models became central to the performance of the objects, and later, when mannequins modeled on real life took their place, the object ceased to rule over the individual. The performer in the window became dynamically engaged with the object, much as the constructivist actor dynamically interacted with the stage machinery in constructivist productions of the early 1920s. And as models began to demonstrate the viability of what they modeled and the ethos of the companies which designed their products, the viewer became more dynamically engaged with the display. But unlike a play or even a gallery, these scenes

communicated a single narrative: a narrative of desire, and the spectators' desire became the desire to imitate or possess the lifestyle of the model. The consumer, of course, can choose not to be a consumer, but within the theater of the store window, the only refusal he or she can make is to walk away. This right of refusal is complicated by the mannequin. Although the mannequin, seemingly a surrogate for the consumer, appears to be lifelike and familiar, it is not: it is an uncanny imposter, repulsive and fraudulent. Through the pretense of reality, the mannequin foregrounds the identity of the viewer and the difference between reality and the imaginary. It is in this respect that the spectator's role is not fully scripted and that the model of the consumer/spectator cannot be said to be a complete reimposition of a scripted or passive spectator role, a situation which returns us to the parallel theatricality of the gallery and installation.

Installation, today, refers to two things: art made to be installation art, and the installation in the museum or gallery. Although the use of one word to describe two different situations might be confusing, in this case it is actually helpful because the present installation is targeting the viewer in much the same way that installation art does.<sup>7</sup> In the latter case, the audience for an installation is expected to participate in a way which contravenes the expectations of museum behavior. Traditionally, the rule of galleries, much like the store window, is that you observe. With installation art, this creates a "trap" for the spectator as she struggles to determine what she has the right to do and what rules she is willing to break. Further complicating this dilemma, in some installations, people are included to "act" as spectators, although they are part of the installation. In some cases, these hired bodies may be present in video form. But the living viewers are as isolated as the people in the projection on the wall – you stand and look at these people who may or may not be looking at you. Ultimately this confusion of boundaries is little different from the confusion which the audience would have encountered in Meierkhold's production of *I Want a Child*. Perhaps it is even more enigmatic, given that the once sacrosanct space of the gallery with its firm divisions between art and the viewer has now been disrupted. When the gallery installation foregrounds this disruption, viewer and gallery alike must question both their bracketing of reality and the imaginary, and the belief that the spectator has been empowered. The lure of empowerment contains the risk of manipulation – is this the seductive betrayal of art?

1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, transl. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (France: Les Presses du réel, 2002).
2. On the ideological exhibition as a forerunner of the surrealist exhibition, see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), chapter 1.
3. See her insightful article, "Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitzky's Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*," in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 76 - 125.
4. It was not produced although the writer and director did receive permission to do so. Reasons for the non-production can only be hypothesized at this time. See my unpublished manuscript, "The Constructivist Intervention in Politics: Theater and the Empowered Spectator."
5. This would seem to be the position taken by Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman. In her *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), Kiaer refers to a statement by Naiman asserting that "if Boris Groys is correct and there is a direct line connecting the Russian avant-garde with Stalin's governance, that line surely runs through Meyerhold and *I Want a Child*," p. 260. For Naiman's position, see his book *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 109-115.
6. My discussion of display windows is based on Sara K. Schneider, *Vital Mummies/Performance Design for the Show-Window Mannequin* (New Haven: 1995). Quotations from Kiesler are from p. 16 and 17. Extrapolations to the engaged spectator are my own, and more fully developed in an earlier work of mine, "The Constructivist 'Engaged Spectator': A Politics of Reception," *Design Issues*, 15 (1), 1999, 31-48.
7. A good introduction to some of these issues can be found in Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry, *Installation Art in the New Millennium. The Empire of the Senses*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003).