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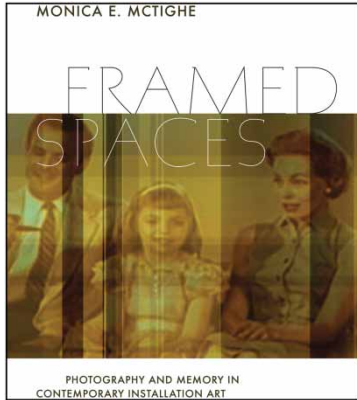
Framed Spaces: Photography and Memory in Contemporary Installation Art

by Monica E. McTighe

Hanover, New Hampshire, Dartmouth College Press, 2012

264 pp., 29 illus., \$35.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-61168-206-9

Reviewed by Kevin Concannon



Installation art has been explored in several excellent books in recent years. Monica McTighe's *Framed Spaces: Photography and Memory in Contemporary Installation Art* considers the topic in relationship to photographic theory and practice, arguing that the inherent connection between installation and photography has prompted a rise in photography and film-based installation projects.

Beginning with the problem of installation's typically temporary nature, McTighe reflects on issues of how these works have been—and might be—preserved and considered for art history. Observing that the history of installation art “is filtered through the memories of the people who saw them first hand” and often “solidified or distorted by the documentation that is published alongside the work,” she concludes that “photographs mediate memory: history is a representation often constructed from these bits of evidence” (p. 2).

In the first of the book's four chapters, she focuses on installation art in the 1970s. Narrowing her subject to installation art that challenged traditional gallery spaces, she examines three landmark exhibitions: *Rooms* at PS1 (1976); Gordon Matta-Clark's (1943–1978) *Splitting* (1973–1974); and a group exhibition at Artists Space in New York (1978) that included the work of Adrian Piper (b. 1948), Christopher D'Arcangelo (1955–1979), Louise Lawler (b. 1947), and Cindy Sherman (b. 1954). Because for the most part only the photographs and texts (and not the works themselves) survive, McTighe notes, she studies these installations through their catalogs in order to “understand how this type of representation conditions the historical understanding of these exhibitions” (p. 24). After discussing the emergence of alternative spaces and the common notion that, since much of the work in this chapter seeks to engage a bodily response from the viewer, catalogs are insufficient to communicate the experience of the work, she offers an extended consideration of each show.

For *Rooms*, at least, she concludes that some installations lend themselves to photographic documentation while others do not. She also points out that the layout of the catalog itself is “an attempt to solve the problem of representing the experience of a body moving through the space of the exhibition,” using the “turning of the pages to suggest movement from one room to the next” (p. 39). This, she posits, is a nod to later art historians seeking to understand the show. Indeed she asserts that the photographs and the catalog have “secured *Room's* place in the art institution and in art

history . . . giving it symbolic value, and rendering it an object of art historical classification and study” (p. 40).

Here McTigue is tackling the problem of art historical representation/preservation of works that were arguably intended to evade it. The performance artist Marina Abramovic (b. 1946) attempted much the same in 2005 with her re-performances of seminal works by other artists. In that case, Abramovic proposed preserving performances in the form of scores that, like musical compositions, could be performed by anyone at any time.¹ In Abramovic’s case, she seemed unaware (at the time) that a precedent already existed in works by Fluxus artists for which scores had been provided since the 1960s. McTigue, on the other hand, addresses the precedent of Gordon Matta-Clark, the artist best known for his “building cuts” that relatively few people saw first-hand. Matta-Clark, she notes, incorporated photography as an integral part of his oeuvre. “Matta-Clark’s dynamic of site and photograph clarifies one aspect of his site-specific installation art: photographs of installations, as do installations themselves, acknowledge the dimensions of space and time—and time at many different scales. . . . The photographs acknowledge the duration of the process of making the work, as well as its destruction” (p. 49). Making the distinction between the photographs of the *Rooms* exhibition and Matta-Clark’s *Splitting*, McTigue identifies their contexts as exhibition catalog and artist’s book, respectively, deftly navigating a territory in which documentation and artwork sometimes merge.

The elevation of the conceptual over the material that characterizes much art of the period is further explored in the last case study of the chapter, the group exhibition at Artists Space titled _____, *Louise Lawler, Adrian Piper and Cindy Sherman Have Agreed to Participate in an Exhibition Organized by Janelle Reiring at Artists Space, September 23 through October 28, 1978*. In a thorough description of the exhibition, calling on archival photographs, the catalog, retrospective commentaries by the artists, and more, she leads the reader from the critique of the modernist “white cube” exemplified by *Rooms* to the critique of the institutions of art themselves exemplified by the show at Artists Space, giving shape to a moment in art history that signals the shift from modern to postmodern.

In an extended rumination on the work of artist Renée Green (b. 1959), chapter two takes the reader from the critique of the white cube and the institutions of art to the critique of the photographic archive itself—as art. Green’s *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996–1997) looks back at the 1970s, revolving around two events at Kent State University in 1970: the creation of Robert Smithson’s (1938–1973) *Partially Buried Woodshed* and the shootings of student protestors that May. As McTigue explains: “This is a work of installation art that takes as part of its subject matter the documentation of a previous work of site specific art and the historical context of which it is a part. *Partially Buried in Three Parts* asks questions about documentation and its relationship to memory and history” (p. 73), making the case that Green’s installation invites the viewer to consider how documentary and material evidence is marshaled critically in different contexts for different ends. It is obvious, she argues, that the viewer is removed by many layers of material from the original event represented.

McTigue’s extended discussion of Green’s installation becomes a stand-in, to some extent, for her earlier consideration of the relationship of documentation (especially

photographic documentation) to the installation art it seeks to represent. Along the way, she expertly surveys an impressive range of relevant critical theory (not only of installation art, but photography and film as well) and takes a number of fascinating side trips through contemporary art histories. One of her key observations in this chapter is that while, in the conceptual art of the 1960s (out of which this work emerges) the rational was privileged over the emotional, documents are framed in ways that lead interpretation, and it is crucial to “question how we evaluate documents of history and their relationship to memory” (p. 114). Green’s work, she insists, invites the viewer to question how meanings are produced from these materials. “In that process,” she writes, “the photograph as document is revealed to be an ideological object whose frame guides our reading of it” (p. 115).

Chapter three picks up on this idea with a discussion of Ann Hamilton’s (b. 1956) installations and photographs, considering that artist’s approach to documentation of her installations. Hamilton, in McTighe’s analysis, grapples with “the tension between installation art that requires the viewer’s bodily experience of the work and photographs of the work” (p. 118). Here she circles back to the question of how an installation can be represented with photographic documentation. Yet while her discussion of the *Rooms* exhibition at PS1 seems to come largely from the perspective of art curators and (future) art historians, her reflections on Hamilton’s practice focus on the artist’s own concerns and approaches. Hamilton’s installation work, according to McTighe, concentrates on bodily experience. She sets up her discussion of Hamilton’s work with a short survey of installations that she organizes into three categories: installations that focus on immersive materiality, engaging touch, smell, and even taste; works that engage the observer in reflection on the process of perception; and work focusing on the materiality of objects and their relationship to the human senses to evoke memories and human experience (p. 128). It is this last category with which she frames Hamilton’s work: “sensuous materials ... employed to evoke memory, human experiences, or stories” (p. 130). Hamilton has stated that in documenting her installations, it is important that the writer or photographer both understands her intentions but also makes the work his or her own (p. 143). McTighe also contextualizes the difference of photographic approaches from the *Rooms* show to Hamilton’s installations within the context of the contemporary institutions of art, specifically the market. “As installation art has been taken up into better-funded art institutions, the style and quality of photographs have changed considerably in the last thirty-five years” (p. 153). She characterizes the *Rooms* pictures as grainy, low-production black-and-white images suitable for a newspaper and the Hamilton images as having the quality of a photographer’s book and the layout of architectural magazines. In addition to an extended discussion of Hamilton’s installation documentation, she explores an unusual project, *face to face*, in which Hamilton makes photographic portraits using a homemade pinhole camera. A punctured film canister with a single frame of film inserted into her mouth is exposed when the artist faces her subject and opens her mouth (which effectively acts as a shutter). This, of course, brings the discussion back to the subject of embodied perception so crucial to much installation art.

McTighe's final chapter delves into the material forms of outmoded analog media, considering how these media lend an air of nostalgia to the projects that incorporate them, becoming to various degrees, a large part of the subject matter as well. Tying her discussion back to the vinyl LPs, Super 8 films, and 35 mm slide shows incorporated into Renée Green's installations, she looks at work by three artists: Tacita Dean (b. 1965), Tony Cokes (b. 1956), and Matthew Buckingham (b. 1963). Dean's film documents one of the last Kodak factories to produce 16 mm film, using some of the very film produced there to shoot it. *Kodak* (2006) qualifies as installation art by virtue of the fact that the artist refuses to show it in conventional cinema formats. She deliberately places the projector itself so that viewers hear the film traveling through its sprockets. Curiously, the author claims "even the practice of watching an analog film will soon be relegated to the arena of fine art" (p. 171). Buckingham's film installation is a narrated composite of four vintage home movies he discovered discarded on a New York street. Cokes's *Headphones* (2004) is a video installation.

In her conclusion, she contends that "the book traces the constellation of relationships that are revealed when one considers photography and memory in the context of installation art" (p. 202). And indeed it does. Along the way, she reviews a wealth of critical and theoretical literature on installation, photography, and film. While I remain unconvinced that ". . . the closeness of installation art to the field of photography . . . [led] to a flood of photography- and film-based installations," as the back cover copy promises, McTighe deftly weaves together history and theory into a compelling discussion of photography, film, and installation.

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- 1 Abramovic's project, *Seven Easy Pieces*, was presented in a much-heralded exhibition (with accompanying catalog) at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005. It followed a spate of lesser-known exhibitions on the subject. Among them were *A Little Bit of History Repeated* (2001) Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; *A Short History of Performance I* (April 2002) Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; *A Short History of Performance II* (November 2003) Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; *Art, Lies and Videotape: Exposing Performance* (November 2003–January 2004) Tate Liverpool; *A Short History of Performance III* (October 2005) Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; and *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (2005) Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.