

The Key Concepts and Elements of Installation Art

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Installation art has been predominantly perceived as another genre in contemporary art ramification, as earlier attempts by theorists and historians in defining installation art, has put the question into polemical argumentation rather than academic investigation. Early incomprehensive investigation failed to decipher the definitive characteristic of this emerging visual art practice when installation art was defined by its medium alone (De Olivera 2003). The conventional approach to define installation art which is bound by traditional formalism has restricted the genre from being flexible and fluid. This has led some artists to misinterpret installation art as an art of display or installation of objects. Taking media as the most important element in characterizing installation art is also contradictory to the nature of the practice itself, which is to challenge its boundaries. Media does not have the capacity to be the only element in defining installation art.

Further investigations on the nature of installation art has resulted in a series of discourses related to the relationship between the artist and the audience. At the beginning, studies on installation art concerned topics related to human preoccupation with the mediated environment that contained the artwork. Physicality of the body of work was the main focus that amplified most of the theoretical speculations by theorists and historians of the past decade. For example, the art critic, Roberta Smiths, perceived installation art as a body of work which was just another practice governed by conventions, events and the deconstructed arrangement of junk (De Olivera 2003).

While critics and historians were trying to find a precise definition of installation art, artists were making modifications in their practices, diverting installation art to become more fluid and flexible.¹ Artists shifted the paradigm of installation art discourse from an objective critique into an alternate subjectivity which emphasizes on non-object orientation and concern for spatiality (O Doherty 1999).

Artists who moved from objective knowledge to subjective experience presented a vast range of propositions to investigate metaphysical phenomena which could not possibly be conveyed through conventional art practice due to limitation of its boundaries. The idea of evacuating orthodox perception of installation art and giving new understanding to it is supported by numerous artists such as Ilya Kabakov and Francis Alys who were practically engaged with multi-disciplinary visual art practice (De Olivera 2003). Kabakov's proclamation has clearly shown that theories on installation art (which has been constrained by the objectification of physicality) is imprecise and irrelevant. He stressed that 'installation should not be perceived as another new movement in art nor a new fashionable style but as a new genre which is still in the very beginning of its development'² He sees installation art as a genre directed towards viewer preoccupation through the interaction between the artwork and the audience rather than just another sensual experience.

Attempts taken by artists to instill this element of interactivity have been generated through injection of the sense of familiarity of the viewers, directing them to their own everyday experiences. Members of the audience are given the chance to choose their own interpretations without relying on specific conceptions of the artists. They are encouraged to become the author of their own meaning when reading the work. This multi-dimensional concept of interactivity and interface-design is becoming popular among local installation artists. Young media installation artists such as Kamal Sabran and Tengku Azhari have implemented the principle of *author-audience-environment-artwork* interaction in their contemporary art practices.

In one of his latest offerings entitled *You Are Here* (see Photo 1), Kamal experiments with vibration and frequency through human response and interaction. Audience experience sounds and visuals that operate automatically when they are passing by or in front of the installation. The sound source comes from radio frequencies which are collected from the radio receiver installed in the work. The visual source comes from the LED light and the words "You Are Here" appear when the light is on. The sounds and visuals are controlled by a motion sensor detector and they will automatically turn off when there is no motion nearby.

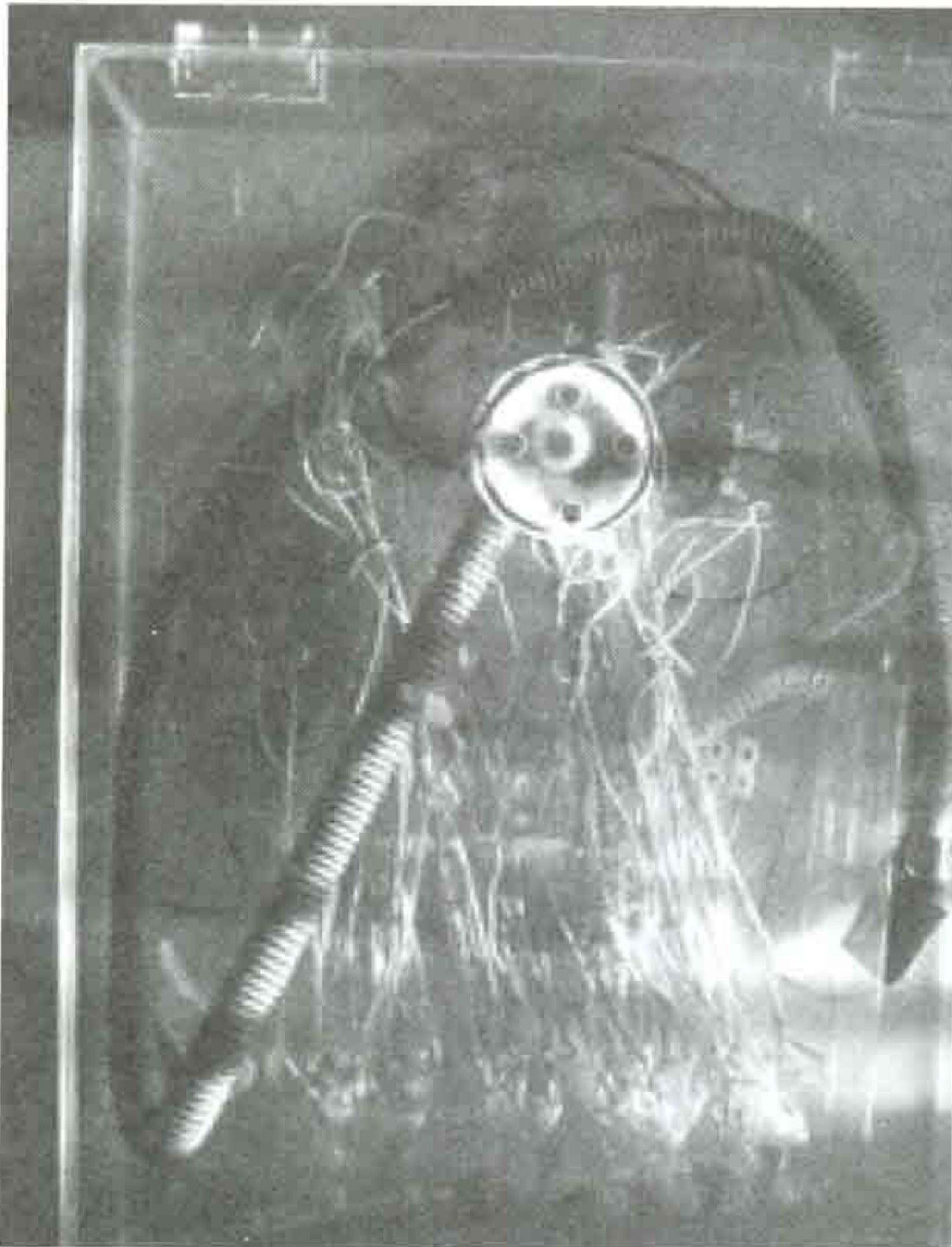


Photo 1 'You Are Here' by Kamal Sabran

Contrary to Kamal's visual sound aesthetics, Tengku Azhari takes a detour from the subject of sound and visual physical interactivity. He is keen on the inner atmosphere and psychological level of inter/intra-connectivity and mutual co-existence between sonic art, soundscape and synaesthesia. In his media installations, he uses sound samples collected from daily social urban spaces; familiar sounds such as noises in the street (such as those produced by vehicles, humans and other creatures living, crawling and adjusting their lives in a congested urban metro-city), and atmospheric sounds of the natural habitat such as wind blowing, birds whistling and so forth. These sounds are then converted into sound samples and translated into moving color patterns (using cymatics sound wave spirals and other related 3D animated forms) projected from an MP (multimedia projector) onto the wall in an enclosed space. These motion patterns move accordingly to the rhythm of the pre-recorded

sound, which can also be viewed from a monitor screen. The sound then becomes a motion sensor that triggers and controls the movement of the cymatics wave of colors and shapes. Impulse cables (electrical chord-like cables) which are connected from the sound wave vibrator are patched on the palm and skin of the participant's hands. This is intended to produce vibrations that can be related to the motion patterns on the screen or monitor. Tacticality of the vibration replicates the same rhythm of the sound. Even when the sound is unheard, the participant is still able to feel the moving pattern of the sound by emotionally connecting the visual and tactile sensation to the beat. Sonic resonance results from the vibrations (see Photo 2).

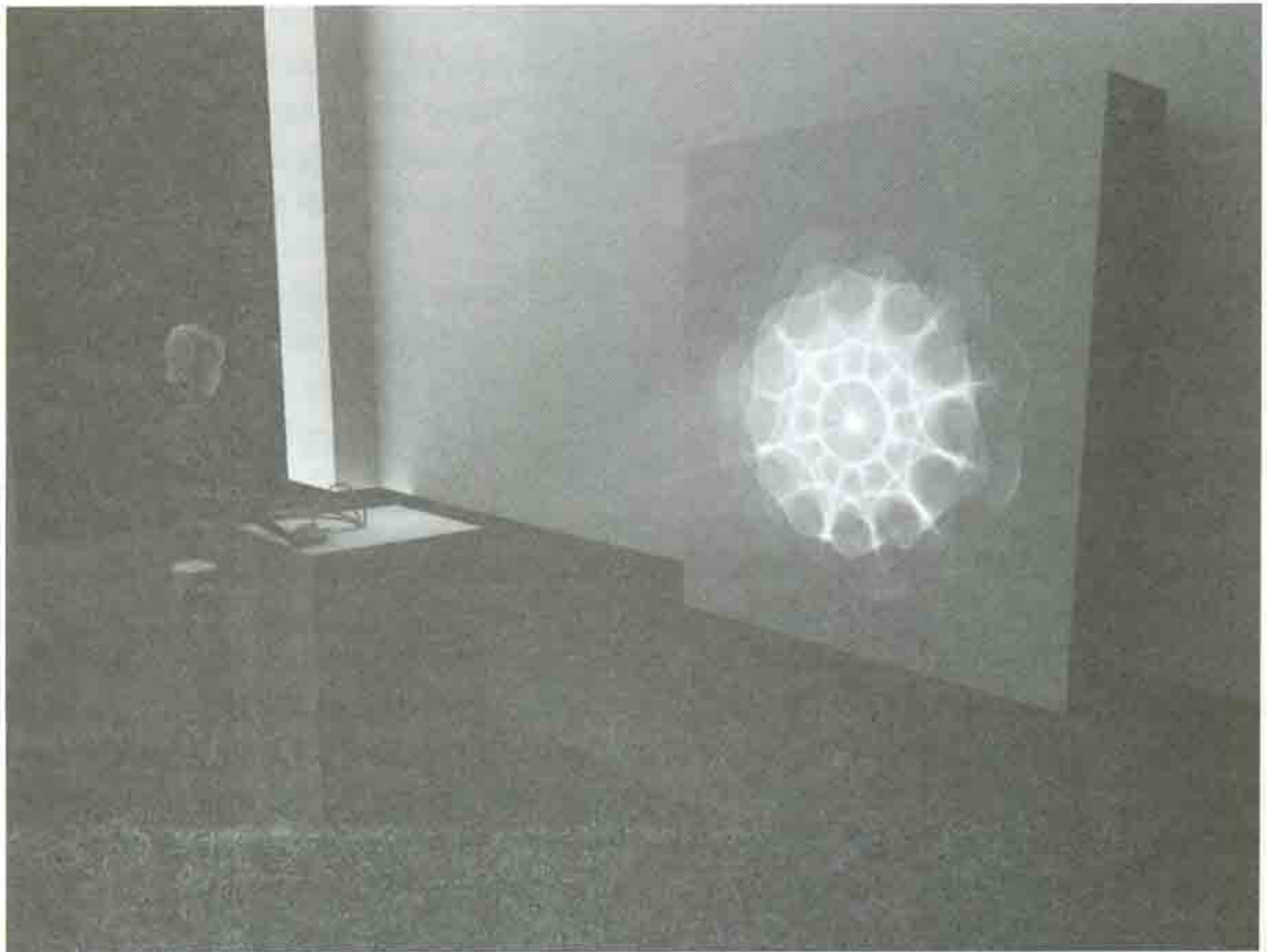


Photo 2 'Noiscape' by Tengku Azhari Tengku Azizan

Despite its element of interactivity, installation art incorporates other elements which have brought about major alterations to its meaning and characteristics. One element which has already existed long before the term installation became a part of the contemporary art domain is environment, a term used by Allan Kaprow in 1962.³ The description of this particular term was in reference to his room-sized multimedia work.⁴

Other terms which were used by critics in the early days of installation art included project art, process art and temporal art.⁵ All the terms imply a sense of ephemerality and impermanence of the material used as well as the process of creating the art. Installation as a term gradually began to be used in tandem with the word 'exhibition', to describe works produced at the exhibition site. According to Allan Kaprow, an installation can also be described as an environment and vice versa as both contain similar characteristics in the making process.

Issues that are often discussed by practitioners regarding the genealogy of installation art include:

- i) inter/intra-relationship between viewer and the work
- ii) connection of the work and space
- iii) link that binds space-viewer relationship

These issues have been highly debated so as to seek the main principal and the true essence of installation art. The intimacy and immediacy of work-space-audience relationship is connected to conceptual studies of theatrical space, which points back to the question of the audience's functionality and participation in the work of installation. Theatricality is depiction of not only the connection of audience and the work, but also affiliation of space/environment/surrounding and media, converging to form one unit of a performance stage. Through research, investigation and theoretical speculations, critics and historians have recently realized that the most important elements in determining installation art are time and space which have already existed long before installation became a part of contemporary art practice.⁶

Time and space represent simultaneity, which is determined by the ephemerality of the media used in an installation work. The type of media which is often used by artists to depict the notion of space and time include electronic devices that inhabit the impermanent domain and tele-technologies.⁷ The range of multimedia technologies used enables artists to transmit sound and vision easily into their work.

Multimedia Installation: A Form of New Media Art

Several years before the end of the twentieth century, we witnessed the invasion of digital technology, as well as the availability of new technologies and approaches in the art-making process, determined by the accessibility of the processing power of personal computers. These personal computers were later exploited by artists who were interested in combining contemporary art practice and high tech evolution. Personal computers as virtual studios⁸ offer new working tools for artists.

A Mexican artist, Stefan Bruggeman once said, "Who needs a studio? All an artist needs today is a computer and phonline".⁹ The digital revolution has increasingly influenced artists especially in their role as innovator/inventor of materials. These artists have changed old substances into new media which were later inserted into new contexts (Jones and Kucker 2001). Hence, the roles and functions of the artists themselves have also changed.

Through the years of digital technology development, new social structures and constructions of the environment have urged artists to be involved in the eccentrically rapid changes taking place in society (Jones and Kucker 2001). Within this period of technological revolution, artists have begun to understand that one needs to change and evolve in order to be part of the pervasive digital culture. The world of contemporary art itself is also experiencing this shift in approach. Multimedia equipment have been used increasingly among visual art practitioners as seen in international events such as the *New York Whitney Biennial*, *Venice Biennial* and *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany.

In the late 1990's, video pieces and video installations have become common in contemporary art installations. Later, installations incorporated various electronic devices and media in the like of

single monitor works and digital works that employ multimedia equipment. The emergence of video technology has a strong impact on the development of multimedia installation. Considered as one of the ancestors of electronic arts, video art was once a mainstream of the electronic art medium. Video art has led to the development of other progressive electronic art practices within the contemporary art scene. Electronic and digital devices (such as the cell phone, DVD, audiovisual CD, MP3, desktop, laptop, palmtop, camcorder, software and the World Wide Web where networking occurs in cyberspace), have provided new sensational experiences through digital aesthetics.¹⁰

Within this progressive period of electronic/digital media development, multimedia installation has become a major component in contemporary art practice. Multimedia has been adopted and employed to inhabit the gallery room and in virtual space. Unlike their predecessors, contemporary artists incorporate advance digital technology in their practices not just as an alternative tool to facilitate their artistic expression or as a trend or style, but as a reflection of their presence in contemporary society where communication technology is highly imperative.

As a multi-layered electronic/digital media incorporated artwork, multimedia installation has promoted the development of other digital technology-based work such as multimedia performance, computer-driven project, net art, biotech art and VR installation.¹¹ The employment of advance computing technology has made these works distinctively radical and effective in comparison to the traditional analog and manual media. Availability of today's inexpensive digital equipment and devices have paved the way for technologically advanced production. Affordable video projectors and home theater systems have allowed artists to take a single video stream and expose it to the large screen on the wall. Digital editing has made it possible for an artist to choose digital video editing software rather than to rely on the time consuming analog editing system.

Advanced computational technology does not leave traditional art making neglected. Multimedia artists are still using traditional approaches. Even though the approaches are not apparent, they build on traditional philosophies. For instance, multimedia equipment has been increasingly used by numerous artists as a medium of expression. The perception of installation space by several artists is still constrained by materials used and formalistic concerns. In a few cases, traditional displays and

conventional arrangements are deliberately used by artists to showcase the authentic and pretty style of presentation. An example of an artist who combines multimedia equipment with non-high tech environment is Renee Gree. He constructs video lounges and libraries for his community-based art project. This work is a resemblance of an information center which allows the viewer to respond as a browser who picks from the available material in the installation site.

These artists have utilized the conventional settings in their multimedia installations. They encourage spectators to relax and enjoy their works without being pressured by over abundant messages and ideological stances. Ironically, these artists are making statements about our deconstructed, unstable and superficial lives resulting from technological and digital simulation. Viewers and participants may realize the fact that our daily lives are being dominated and moulded by machines and the computer system. If we do not find the way to resolve this domination, we may live in an imbalanced social reality.

Although multimedia installation is technology-dependent, conceptual and philosophical concerns are still considered as the main components in constructing the whole body of work. Most multimedia installation artists prefer not to rely or show devotion to one particular media or distinctive style. They use whatever medium, tool or method to form the installation work and represent their ideas. This non-specification approach in their art-making process determines the true character of multimedia artists who are eclectic and diversified in their very own sense of multi-dimensional capabilities and functionalities.

Other than being eclectic in media application, media artists also test and push the boundaries of contemporary art as they embody visual art in non-art related disciplines (De Olivera 2003). This cross-disciplinary approach has given birth to a new breed of contemporary visual artists. The paradigm shift has resulted in the inclusion of science and mathematics in multimedia installation, and contemporary art in general.

Conclusion

The convergence of both digital technology and interrelated scientific disciplines such as biotech and nanotech has changed society's perception of art. Art is no longer perceived as a crafty object constrained by the modernist paradigm to fulfill aesthetic and formalist ends. Media installation holds the responsibility to erase the line between art, science, technology and society. Multimedia and other technology-based arts are the manifestation of a 'figure-ground' relationship. A technological society and its immersion in the environment^{1,2} form the 'ground' while the artwork forms the 'figure'. Affiliation of both elements shows that artists have taken initiatives and efforts in delivering messages about the importance of digital revolution in their day to day lives.

Artists are no longer bound by media rigidity, as they convey their concepts and ideologies. Media installation has opened alternative channels for them to experiment and manipulate media extensively. Electronic and digital media in the virtual and man-made physical space of media installation have placed the viewers as proactive participants. The artist explores new territories and new dimensions in finding new definitions and understanding about the pervasive digital phenomena which is gradually invading our lives. The birth of multimedia installation has helped us to understand the nature of the new space we inhabit.

NOTES

1. Proclamation made by Robert Morris in his essay 'Anti Form', *Artforum*, April 1968.
2. Ilya Kabakov's work concerns the demystification of art where object or form is no longer sacred and hierarchical.
3. *Words*, an exhibition presented in 1962 at Smolin Gallery. In the catalog, Kaprow stated, ... "that any environment, natural or artistic, can be misused and utilized." He added that landscape which we inhabit can be destroyed through human own carelessness, which later gave him the idea to pursue his early installation work.

4. The term 'environment' was popularly used by artists in the mid-1970's to characterize process-based art.
5. Project Art implies community-based art projects in the late 1960's.
6. 1969, a catalog written by Jennifer Licht (2001) for an exhibition called Spaces at MOMA, highlighted space and site-specific emphasis in contemporary art.
7. Apparatus or system for transmitting messages in communication technology.
8. High Tech has arrived as a component of every day life and artists are adopting and deploying it in the gallery and inhabiting it on the internet.
9. Digital technologies such as the personal computer and internet connection are part of the basic tool set of the artist.
10. Digital aesthetics. love, passion, infatuation, feelings and emotion are nurtured using digital apparatus. Computers and digital instruments can be the extensions of the human mind (Tuckle 1997).
11. Ramifications of multimedia installation.
12. The ecosystem is disrupted when technology invades the body and the environment (Derry 1996).

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