

Persian translation of this paper entitled:
تحلیل چیدمان‌های شیرین عابدینیراد در گفت‌وگو فضا از محیط تا زمینه
is also published in this issue of journal.

Original Research Article

Analysis of Shirin Abedinirad's Installations in the Discourse of Space: From Environment to Context

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Received: 01/03/2025 ;

accepted: 29/04/2025;

availableonline:22/05/2025

Abstract

Problem Statement: Recent developments in installation art have transformed the concept of space from a mere display backdrop into a dynamic and interactive element. Within this context, Shirin Abedinirad's works, through the use of mirrors and reflections, propose an innovative approach to redefining space. However, the way these elements influence spatial perception and audience participation has remained underexplored. This study aims to address this research gap by investigating the role of mirrors and reflections in Shirin Abedinirad's installations and analyzing their impact on the transformation of spatial concepts, audience interaction, and the construction of meaning.

Research Objective: The objective of this research is to examine the role of mirrors and reflections in Shirin Abedinirad's installations and to analyze their effects on redefining spatial concepts, audience engagement, and the formation of meaning. This investigation is grounded in the artistic theories of Kaprow, Licht, Celant, and Johnston, while also considering institutional critiques and the social context of art.

Research Method: This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing upon literature, direct observation, and analysis of selected works by Abedinirad. The theoretical framework draws on the artistic theories of Kaprow, Licht, Celant, and Johnston to explore the interplay between space, light, and mirrors. Additionally, institutional critiques and the social context of art are incorporated into the analysis.

Conclusion: The findings reveal that the use of mirrors in these installations not only reconfigures the physical and perceptual boundaries of space but also transforms the audience from passive observers into active participants in the process of interpreting the artwork. Drawing on Kaprow's theories of audience participation and Licht's perspectives on spatial dynamism, it is concluded that Abedinirad's works convert space from a static backdrop into a fluid, multi-layered environment. This characteristic fosters an interactive experience while simultaneously providing a platform for critiquing social and institutional structures.

Keywords: *Installation art, Discourse of space, Mirror, Audience, Shirin Abedinirad.*

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Introduction

Installation art has played a pivotal role in transforming our understanding of space in recent decades (Bishop, 2005, 47). As artists shifted from confining art to static, classical forms to embracing space as an active and transformative element, installations became a medium for interaction between the artwork, audience, and environment. In this process, artworks are no longer independent entities but dynamic elements engaging with their surroundings and the audience's presence. Shirin Abedinirad, through her use of mirrors and their reflective properties in installations, reconfigures exhibition spaces into interactive, mutable environments. By employing mirrors, she alters the physical boundaries of space, redefining it as a multidimensional, dynamic entity. Abedinirad's works actively involve the audience in interpreting the artwork, transforming them from passive observers into collaborators. Thus, analyzing her work can illuminate new dimensions of the relationship between art, audience, and space. Despite recent advancements in installation art and the growing significance of spatial concepts, the role of mirrors and reflections in shaping spatial perception and audience participation remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Abedinirad's installations, emphasizing their contribution to redefining space and audience interaction in contemporary installation art. Grounded in the artistic theories of Kaprow, Licht, Celant, and Johnstone, alongside institutional critiques and the social context of art, this research employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method to explore the interplay of space, light and mirrors in her works. The central research question is: How do mirrors in Abedinirad's installations redefine spatial concepts and activate audience participation in the meaning-making process?

Problem Statement

In contemporary art, space is no longer a passive backdrop but a dynamic, mutable element that

acquires new meaning through interaction with the artwork, audience, and environment. This shift is particularly evident in installation art, which has flourished in recent decades. Installations allow artists to portray space not as static but as a living entity interacting with the audience. Shirin Abedinirad, an Iranian contemporary artist, radically redefines spatial concepts through her mirror-based installations. She uses mirrors not merely as decorative or lighting tools but as instruments to engage audiences in redefining space. Continuous reflections alter both physical and perceptual spatial boundaries, elevating the audience's role from passive spectators to active contributors in shaping the artwork's meaning. The core question is: How do mirrors and reflections in Abedinirad's installations reshape the audience's spatial perception and foster their active participation in interpreting the artwork?

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how Shirin Abedinirad employs mirrors in her installations to redefine spatial concepts and enhance audience interaction. Specifically, it seeks to uncover the methods through which reflective properties of mirrors facilitate active audience engagement. The research examines the transformation of spatial meaning in her works and investigates the interplay between audience, space, and artwork.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on Abedinirad's mirror-centric installations. Data collection includes library research, direct observation, and analysis of selected works. Key concepts such as space, reflection, audience participation, and interaction are analyzed through visual critiques, artist interviews, and existing scholarly critiques. The theoretical framework integrates Kaprow's (1958), Licht's (1969), Celant's (1975), and

Johnstone's (1985) theories on spatial dynamics and audience engagement. Institutional critiques and the social context of art are also incorporated to comprehensively assess the impact of mirrors on spatial perception and audience interaction

Literature Review

While numerous studies address spatial roles in installation art—particularly architectural installations—no prior research specifically analyzes Abedinirad's works through the lens of spatial discourse. However, two notable studies are: Xie (2020): In *Research on the Application of Mirror Materials in Contemporary Public Art* (presented at the 6th International Conference on Arts, Design, and Contemporary Education), Xie examines the functional and artistic value of mirrors in public art. The study highlights how mirrors enhance urban cultural identity and foster connections between humans, nature, and society. Ippolito et al. (2024): In *Contemporary Art in Reality vs. Images: Analyzing Shirin Abedinirad's Works* (published in *Contemporary Heritage Dictionary*), the authors explore the interplay between representation and contemporary art. They analyze Abedinirad's use of mirrors and organic materials to create immersive experiences that transcend mere aesthetic imitation, addressing social, political, and personal themes. Existing literature predominantly focuses on the aesthetic and technical aspects of mirrors in installation art, such as visual illusions and audience experience. This study diverges by offering a conceptual and discursive analysis of how Abedinirad's mirrors redefine space, context, and audience perception.

Installation as a Space-Centric Art Form

The discourse of installation art is deeply intertwined with spatial metaphors, concepts related to space, and references to the category of "space." Since Allan Kaprow described room-sized multimedia works as "environments" in the 1960s, installation art has gravitated toward creating works

as spaces or environments (Kaprow, 1958, 49). In his essay *Notes on the Creation of a Total Art*, linked to his 1958 exhibition at the Hansa Gallery, Kaprow introduced foundational ideas for defining installations. He asserted that the audience does not merely observe the work but enters it, immerses themselves in its environment, and actively or passively participates as part of the artwork (ibid., 50). Kaprow outlined three fundamental ideas that later became theoretical cornerstones of installation art: First, he defined the viewer's entry into and enclosure within the work's space as the starting point for interaction. Second, he emphasized the reciprocal impact between the artwork and the audience, where the viewer is not a passive receiver but an active contributor to meaning-making, decentralizing the artist's control over interpretation. Third, Kaprow addressed the boundary between art and life, arguing that while art may draw inspiration from everyday experiences, it does not directly imitate them. This distinction preserves the boundary between art and life, emphasizing that installations, though rooted in real environments, possess unique characteristics distinct from daily existence (ibid., 55).

A decade later, in 1969, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York hosted the first dedicated installation exhibition, *Spaces*, curated by Jennifer Licht. In the catalog, Licht proposed a new conception of art, arguing that innovative art forms transcend traditional definitions and material constraints (Licht, 1969, 51). She highlighted two novel features: physical and theatrical interaction, expanding on Kaprow's ideas, and the redefinition of space as an active element. Licht wrote: "In the past, space was merely a characteristic of art, depicted through illusionistic conventions in painting or volumetric displacement in sculpture. The invisible dimension separating viewer and object is now an active element—not just for display but for shaping and specification by the artist, capable of integrating the viewer and art within a broader spatial and scalar

context” (*ibid.*, 55). This shift aligned with 1960s theories of perception and space, such as Russell Cross’s phenomenological concept of “situated landscapes,” which posited that an object’s experience depends on environmental conditions and interactive viewpoints (Cross, 1970, 54).

Seven years after MoMA’s groundbreaking Spaces exhibition, Germano Celant organized Environment/Art (1976), the first historical survey of installation art, during the Venice Biennale. In his 1975 essay Art Spaces, Celant situated installation art within a historical and theoretical framework (Celant, 1975, 57). Like Licht, he emphasized spatial integration and audience engagement but added a critical social dimension, arguing that installation art overcomes the isolation inherent in traditional sculpture and painting, fostering connections with social contexts and everyday life (*ibid.*, 60). This contextual approach gained traction in the 1980s–1990s, as seen in Lesley Johnstone’s Installation: Inventing Context (1985), which defined installations as spatially organized works grounded in site-specificity and institutional critique, and Michael Archer’s Art Since 1960 (1994), framing installations as avant-garde critiques bridging art and everyday life.

Benjamin Buchloh’s theory of “spatialized readymades” redefined sculpture’s formal doctrines through spatial demarcation (Buchloh, 1990, 61). Johnstone argued: “The political, economic, and social conditions of the work, the exhibition space, and the artist’s position both specific and general are fundamental to an installation’s structure and meaning” (Johnstone, 1985, 63). Contextual analyses often draw on Brian O’Doherty’s critique of the “White Cube” gallery model (O’Doherty, 1976, 64). By challenging institutional frameworks, installations transform exhibition spaces into integral components of artistic content. This critical stance aligns with Marxist and postmodern critiques of capitalism and commodification. Betty Reise linked early installations to political



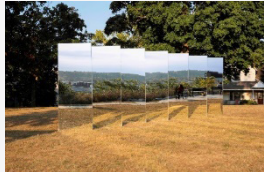

radicalism, arguing their placement outside formal venues critiqued institutional and economic structures (Reise, 1979, 65). Mark Rosenthal compared immersive installations to postwar amusement parks, highlighting their sensory engagement (Rosenthal, 2003, 39), while Nicolas de Oliveira tied installations to broader visual culture, particularly cinema’s influence on multisensory expectations (Oliveira et al., 2003, 23) (Table 1).

Installation art, by centering space, environment, and audience participation, continually redefines the relationship between art and everyday life. Through spatial activation and institutional critique, it challenges economic and cultural systems while deepening our understanding of art’s role in contemporary society.

Shirin Abedinirad and Her Mirror Installations

Shirin Abedinirad, an Iranian artist, explores concepts such as identity, connection with nature, and the boundless essence of existence in her works. She employs various media, including video, performance, land art, and installation, to express her ideas. Among her notable works are Tower of Babel, Evocation (Thought-Provoking), and Magic Carpet. Abedinirad began her artistic career with painting before studying graphic design and fashion. Her interest in blending fashion with conceptual art led her to performance art. A turning point occurred in 2013 after a desert experience, which inspired her shift toward land art and installations centered on natural elements. Using minimalist installations composed of raw materials like water, mirrors, and light, she creates liminal spaces that act as gateways for reconnecting humans with the Earth. The interplay of light and reflection in her works mirrors humanity’s intrinsic bond with nature. Since 2010, her works have been exhibited at festivals and biennials across Europe, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, and North America. Her conceptual inquiries focus on self-awareness and its relationship with nature.

Table 1. Classification of Shirin Abedinirad’s Mirror Installations. Source: Authors.

Category	Features	Key Concepts & Audience Impact	Example
Reflective Installations	Use of mirrors for reciprocal reflections of space and individuals.	Creates self-awareness and direct interaction. Reflects identity, time, and place, aligning with Archer’s view of art-life fusion.	 <p><i>Reflections Series</i> (February 2025, Phillips, Los Angeles, USA). Source: [https://www.shirinabedinirad.com]</p>
Cubic Installations	Mirror cubes enveloping viewers.	Dissolves boundaries between artist, artwork, and viewer, aligning with O’Doherty’s “White Cube” critique.	 <p><i>Portal of Reflection</i> (2024, Nanhai Art Field, Foshan, China). Source: [https://www.shirinabedinirad.com]</p>
Scattered Installations	Dispersed mirror fragments prompting movement.	Emphasizes motion and perceptual shifts, aligning with Rosenthal’s immersive sensory experiences.	 <p><i>Reflective Journey No. 2</i> (September 2024, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA). Source: [https://www.shirinabedinirad.com]</p>
Environmental Installations	Mirrors integrated with natural/social environments, combined with light/color.	Critiques socio-institutional structures, aligning with Reise’s radical critiques and Oliveira’s visual culture analysis.	 <p><i>Evocation</i> (April 2013, Central Desert, Iran). Source: [https://lastsecond.ir/blog/8933-shirin-abedinirad-mirror-installations.]</p>

Through poetic language, her works awaken a sense of shared divinity between humans and the cosmos, inviting viewers to contemplate empathy and planetary healing.

Distinctive features of Abedinirad’s work include the use of natural elements to create meditative spaces, an emphasis on the human-nature connection, the design of transitional spaces, and the fusion of conceptual art with minimalist and poetic aesthetics. As a leading

contemporary artist, she prioritizes not only visual aspects but also profound philosophical and ecological themes. Her mirror installations foster intricate interactions between viewers and space, exploring abstract concepts like identity, reflection, and human-spatial relationships. These works, as Johnstone notes, gain meaning within social and institutional contexts: mirrors redefine space while reflecting viewers, implicating them in critiques of socio-cultural structures

(Johnstone, 1985, 62). For example, in *Evocation* (April 2013, Central Desert, Iran), Abedinirad used mirrors and light to create a space prompting reflection on one’s ties to nature and society—aligning with O’Doherty’s view of exhibition spaces as artistic content (O’Doherty, 1976: 64). From Archer’s perspective, Abedinirad’s installations extend avant-garde efforts to merge art with daily life (Archer, 1994). Her mirrors, akin to Duchamp’s readymades, blur boundaries between art objects and lived experience. In *Reflections* (Phillips Los Angeles, February 2025), multi-layered mirror reflections position viewers to reconsider their identity and social role—resonating with Buchloh’s “spatialized readymades” (Buchloh, 1990, 61). Reise interprets her works as radical critiques of institutional structures (Reise, 1979, 65). *Portal of Reflection* (Nanhai Art Field 2024, Foshan, China) immerses viewers in mirrored cubes, challenging boundaries between art, environment, and exhibition systems—paralleling O’Doherty’s “White Cube” critique. Rosenthal highlights their sensory impact, akin to amusement parks (Rosenthal, 2003: 39), while Oliveira links them to visual culture’s multimedia influences (Oliveira et al., 2003: 23).

In the context of contemporary installation art, Shirin Abedinirad’s works exemplify a multidimensional interplay of space, reflection, audience participation, and interaction. By employing mirrors and generating multiple reflections, her works create a dynamic process of redefining the exhibition space, wherein the boundaries between environment, artwork, and viewer are perpetually shifting. A precise analysis

of the spatial characteristics, mirror-induced reflections, the degree of audience engagement in the visual experience, and the interplay among these elements fosters a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the works. Table 2 delineates the diverse dimensions of these concepts in Shirin Abedinirad’s installation art:

Shirin Abedinirad’s Space-Centric Installations: From Institutional Critique to Social Context

Shirin Abedinirad’s works can be analyzed within the framework of installation as a spatial art form, where space operates not merely as a backdrop for display but as an active agent in shaping meaning. As Kaprow emphasized, a fundamental characteristic of installation art is the direct participation of the audience and their immersion into the work (Kaprow, 1958, 50). In Abedinirad’s mirror installations, such as *The Sky is Mine* (2016) and *Evocation* (2013), this interaction intensifies through shifting reflections, dynamic lighting, and reciprocal exchanges between the viewer and their surroundings. Here, the artwork transcends static objecthood, becoming a platform for fluid, dynamic experiences. Licht similarly argued that installation art invites audiences not only to observe but to integrate into the spatial fabric of the work (Licht, 1969, 52).

In Abedinirad’s works, mirrors surpass their role as mere reflectors of the environment, evolving into tools for creating layers of visual and multidimensional experiences. This visual dynamism evokes profound sensory perception and engages the audience as active agents in interpreting

Table 2. Interpretation of Artistic Dimensions in Abedinirad’s Installations. Source: Authors.

Artistic Component	Interpretation
Space	Transforms from static backdrop to dynamic, participatory medium. Emphasizes transience and dematerialization.
Reflection	Multilayered interface between viewer, artwork, and environment. Reflects both external and internal worlds.
Audience Participation	Shifts viewers from passive observers to active meaning-makers.
Interaction	Generates continuous spatial and perceptual metamorphosis, enhancing sensory and cognitive experiences.

the work, even in their physical absence. For instance, in *The Sky is Mine* (2016, Semnan, Iran), part of her land art installations, the artist challenges the boundary between direct observation and mediated experience through mirror reflections. Even audiences encountering the work through photographs confront its visual structure and reflective interplay, offering a novel interpretation of visual and semantic experience.

Within this framework, the audience's experience is no longer passive. Through movement, shifting perspectives, and responses to reflections, viewers contribute to meaning-making. This aligns with Kaprow's theory on the audience's role in installations, where the artist relinquishes full control over meaning, and the viewer becomes a collaborative agent in shaping the work. Licht further emphasized that space is not a secondary feature but an active component of the artwork (Licht, 1969, 55). In installations like *Tower of Babel* (2016) and *Mirror Ziggurat* (2016), Abedinirad employs space and light not only to define form but also to influence the viewer's perception of self and environment. This process entails a dematerialization of the artwork, as its final form constantly shifts depending on the audience's presence and position. Many of these works are also accessible through other media, such as photography.

The spatial perception in Abedinirad's works resonates with Cross's theory of "situated landscapes," a phenomenological perspective asserting that an artwork's experience depends on the viewer's spatial and bodily position. In her installations, mirror reflections amplify this feature: each viewer's unique position generates a distinct experience, creating a dynamic, ever-changing relationship between artwork, space, and audience. This process underscores installation art's contemporary hallmark, where space is not merely a container for art but an integral part of the artistic experience.

Abedinirad's installations can also be interpreted

through institutional critique and social context theories. Here, installation art emerges as both a physical form and a critical platform for redefining relationships between artwork, environment, and audience. As Celant noted in his essay *Art Spaces*, environmental or installation art emphasizes establishing physical relationships within interior spaces and creating shared contexts for visual experiences. By fully integrating space into the work, the artist dissolves rigid boundaries between artwork and surroundings (Celant, 1975, 57–60). Abedinirad's use of mirrors transforms gallery spaces into living, interactive environments where viewers are not just spectators but active participants in meaning-making.

Johnstone (1985, 62–63) stresses that the political, economic, and social conditions of the work, exhibition space, and artist's position are pivotal to an installation's meaning. Abedinirad's works critique traditional institutional frameworks of museums and galleries, aligning with Archer's (1994) view of installation art as an extension of avant-garde efforts to bridge art and daily life. Archer draws parallels between installations and Duchamp's readymades, while Buchloh (1990, 61) introduces the concept of "spatialized readymades," highlighting how installations dynamically demarcate space through objects.

Celant also emphasizes the "social function" of installation art—its ability to transcend the isolation of traditional art objects and forge connections with social life (Celant, 1975, 60). This is evident in Abedinirad's immersive, multilayered mirror spaces, such as *The Sky on Earth* (2014, Italy), which blur the line between artwork and lived experience. O'Doherty's critique of the "White Cube" gallery model further contextualizes the role of mirrors in redefining exhibition spaces and their economic and institutional frameworks. Cross's "situated landscapes" theory underscores the viewer's spatial and bodily engagement, transforming Abedinirad's installations into multisensory and social experiences.

In summary, Shirin Abedinirad’s installations challenge the boundaries between artwork and environment by fully integrating space into their structure. They critique the institutional and economic frameworks of museums while highlighting the viewer’s role in meaning-making. Grounded in the theoretical framework of spatial discourse, her mirror installations can be examined both as “environments” and “contexts” (Table 3).

The mirror-based installations of Shirin Abedinirad, based on the discussed theory, exemplify contemporary art that challenges the viewer’s experience through the use of mirrors as a multi-layered element. These works not only recreate physical space like a dynamic medium but also disrupt the boundaries between art and everyday life, providing a platform for critiquing institutional and cultural structures. In this regard, it can be said that Abedinirad’s installations, as suggested by theorists such as Kaprow, Licht, Celant, Johnston, and Archer, aim to establish a dynamic and critical interaction between the artwork, the viewer, and the environment—thereby continuously redefining the relationship between art and contemporary life.

Conclusion

Recent developments in installation art have transformed the concept of space from a mere display backdrop into a dynamic, transformative element that interacts with the audience. Within this context, Shirin Abedinirad’s mirror installations stand as exemplary works that redefine space in contemporary installation discourse. Analysis of these works reveals that the use of mirrors and reflections not only reconfigures the physical and perceptual boundaries of space but also creates a platform for active audience participation in the process of interpreting the artwork. In this approach, space is no longer a passive container for the artwork but a dynamic, constructive material through which meaning emerges in interaction. Abedinirad’s mirror installations foster an immersive and engaging experience for the audience. The viewer is not merely present in the space but becomes a central element of the work through their reflection in the mirrors. This aligns with Kaprow’s concept of “participation,” where the artwork is no longer an independent object but gains meaning through the viewer’s presence and perceptual engagement. This active participation elevates Abedinirad’s installations

Table 3. The Evolution of Spatial Concepts in Shirin Abedinirad’s Mirror Installations. Source:Authors

Space as an Immersive Environment
As Kaprow theorized, space in Abedinirad’s installations becomes an active participant in the viewer’s experience. Mirrors act as mediators, immersing viewers in reflective environments where they co-create meaning.
Space as Plastic Material
Licht’s notion of space as a malleable, dynamic element is embodied in Abedinirad’s use of mirrors. They dissolve and reimagine spatial boundaries, transforming static environments into fluid, interactive realms.
Socio-Institutional Context
Celant and Johnstone frame installation art as a critique of institutional structures. Abedinirad’s mirrors reflect and destabilize the capitalist art system, blurring lines between art objects and everyday life.
Viewer-Art Relationship
Kaprow and Archer position the viewer as an active agent. In Abedinirad’s works, mirrors reflect both the environment and the viewer, collapsing the boundary between observer and observed.
Dematerialization and Ephemerality
Many installations, temporary or site-specific, embrace dematerialization. Abedinirad’s works dissolve fixed spatial-temporal boundaries, creating transient, ever-shifting experiences.

beyond visual spectacle, transforming them into environments where the relationship between art, audience, and space is profoundly redefined. Building on Licht's theory of space in installation art, Abedinirad's works treat the exhibition space not as a static backdrop but as a plastic, mutable material. The reflective properties of mirrors render space fluid, continuously redefining its boundaries. This multilayered reflectivity creates an ongoing dialogue between the artwork and its surroundings, reshaping the viewer's spatial perception. The dynamism and transformation of space in her works stem from the strategic use of mirrors and multifaceted reflections. By generating variable reflections of the viewer, environment, and light, mirrors transform space into a fluid, multidimensional medium dependent on the viewer's position and movement. For example, in *The Sky is Mine* (2016), mirror reflections shift with the viewer's angle of observation, producing unique, ephemeral images of the environment and the viewer themselves. This process resonates with Cross's "situated landscapes" theory, as spatial perception in these works hinges on the viewer's bodily position and movement, with each shift redefining the space and the artwork's meaning. By dissolving boundaries between artwork, viewer, and environment, mirrors transform space from a fixed framework into an active, ever-evolving element. This dynamism is further amplified through the viewer's sensory and visual interaction, as mirror reflections not only represent the surroundings but also provoke self-awareness of the viewer's presence within the space. In this way, Abedinirad's installations forge a dialectical relationship between object and environment, pushing installation discourse toward a renewed understanding of space and its role in art. From a socio-institutional perspective, the use of mirrors and layered reflections critiques social structures, institutional frameworks, and the viewer's role in cultural systems. As Celant and Johnstone argue, installations can serve

as platforms for critiquing the economic and institutional systems of art. In Abedinirad's works, reflections function not only as a means of creating multidimensional spatial experiences but also as metaphors for rethinking the boundaries between art, environment, and audience. This is particularly evident in the redefined role of the viewer, who transitions from a passive observer to an integral part of the reflective space, compelled to confront their own image and surroundings. The transient and dematerialized nature of Abedinirad's installations further underscores their conceptual depth. Many of her works are temporary and site-specific, rendering the spatial experience ephemeral and context-dependent. This transience highlights space as a dynamic, ever-shifting element that evolves through interaction with the viewer, environment, and temporal-spatial conditions. In conclusion, Abedinirad's installations transform space from a static, fixed category into a dynamic, mutable phenomenon. The interplay of environment, context, and reflection in her works positions space as an active agent in meaning-making and audience participation. This study demonstrates that Abedinirad's innovative use of mirrors offers a novel experience of space, advancing installation discourse toward a more complex and dynamic understanding of the environment and context. Her works not only reflect conceptual shifts in contemporary installation art but also represent an innovative approach to reimagining space and the viewer's role within it.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Mokhtari Dehkordi, R., & Asadi Farsani, M. (2025). Analysis of Shirin Abedinirad's Installations in the Discourse of Space: From Environment to Context. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 22(144), 53-62.

DOI: 10.22034/bagh.2025.509523.5774

URL: https://www.bagh-sj.com/article_219909.html?lang=en

