

## Original Research Article

## Presence of the Body in Installation Space: The Theatrical Encounter and Sensory Experience in Shirazeh Houshiary's Installation "Breath"

Majid Asadi Farsani<sup>1\*</sup>, Raziieh Mokhtari Dehkordi<sup>1</sup>

1. Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Shahrekord  
University, Shahrekord, Iran

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The present study investigates installation art as a distinct genre and its impact on the viewer's experience. The primary focus is on the interaction between the human body and space during the encounter with an artwork.

**Research objectives:** The core objective is to explore how installation art, by establishing specific spatial conditions, actively incorporates the physical presence of the audience into the perceptual reception of the work.

**Research method:** Employing a qualitative, case-study methodology, this research examines the installation *Breath* by Shirazeh Houshiary. The artwork is analyzed through its visual, auditory, and spatial characteristics to elucidate its experiential dimensions.

**Conclusion:** By creating a dark and confined space, *Breath* engages the viewer in an immersive environment that directs their visual and auditory senses toward a profound state of introspection. In this experience, the spectator's body becomes an integral component of the artwork, thereby challenging the "autonomy of the art object" in favor of the viewer's "personal experience." The findings reveal that *Breath* not only affirms the concept of "theatricality" as a pivotal element in contemporary art but also instigates a fundamental paradigm shift in understanding the nexus of art, space, and the human body. Ultimately, this installation exemplifies an immersive and transformative experience that redefines the audience's interaction with both space and time.

**Keywords:** *Installation art; Human body; Sensory experience; Shirazeh Houshiary; Breath installation.*

### Introduction

Installation art, as a dynamic and influential artistic genre, has attracted considerable attention in recent decades. By dissolving the conventional boundaries between artwork and exhibition space, installation art provides the viewer with an immersive and multisensory experience. At the heart of this experience, the human body functions as an active agent and as an integral component of the work.

The apprehension of space and its experience are always mediated by the presence and movement of the body. The human body not only operates as a physical element within space but also shapes our sensory, cognitive, and perceptual engagement with the environment. In contemporary art—particularly in installation—the interaction between body and space has become a central concern. Installations, by combining visual, sonic, kinetic, and material elements, generate rich, multilayered experiences

\*Corresponding Author: 09134839589, Majid.asadi@sku.ac.ir.

that exceed a merely visual encounter and summon the viewer to deeper sensory and intellectual engagement. This study examines the impact of installation on the viewer's experience with a focus on Shirazeh Houshiary's installation "Breath." Through the deployment of varied installation techniques—light, sound, and movement—this work provides a framework for rethinking the interaction between body and space. The principal research question is how the installation "Breath" shapes the viewer's embodied experience and how its spatial features, structure, and sensory components inform viewer perception and response. The aim of this study is to analyze how multimedia installations influence the viewer's experience through a case-study methodology. To this end, first the theoretical foundations related to the body in space and viewer experience are reviewed; next, the aesthetic and sensory characteristics of Houshiary's "Breath" are analyzed. By presenting findings regarding the interaction of body, space, and installation, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how installation artworks affect audiences and to inform the design of more effective spatial experiences.

### Reserch Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a case-study approach with content analysis, to examine the effect of Shirazeh Houshiary's installation "Breath" on the viewer's experience. In the first step, theoretical foundations related to the concepts of installation, bodily presence in space, and viewer experience are reviewed to establish the analytical framework. Within this framework, Michael Fried's concept of "theatricality" is delineated as a primary axis of analysis. Next, the sensory and aesthetic features of the installation "Breath" were examined through documentary methods and with reference to interviews conducted with the artist. This stage aids in understanding how the work's sensory and conceptual elements shape the viewer's sensory and cognitive experience. Finally, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive-analytic methods to comprehensively assess the

relations between installation elements and viewer experience.

### Literature Review

Although various studies have addressed installation, research that directly examines Shirazeh Houshiary's works or the specific modalities of bodily presence within installation space has been limited. Konapfel, Fingerhut, and Plosky, in their article "The Role of the Body in the Experience of Installation Art: A Case Study of Embodied, Emotional and Transformative Experiences of Visitors to Thomas Saraceno's 'In Orbit'" 2023, employed self-report questionnaires and quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate the bodily experiences of 230 visitors to Thomas Saraceno's "In Orbit." Their results indicated that bodily awareness—particularly in domains of proprioception (such as awareness of balance, movement, and weight) and disruptive experiences (such as feelings of discomfort, being observed, or trembling)—played a decisive role in the evaluation of art and in transformative experiences. Network analysis of the data identified four primary clusters of bodily experience: "interiority," "presence," "disruption," and "proprioceptive sense." These findings suggest that bodily experiences are not only integral to the experience of installation art but can also engender deep affective states and even transformative effects in visitors. Another key source in this field is RoseLee Goldberg's book "Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present," first published in 1979. Goldberg examines the role of the body in performance and installation, demonstrating how the body has been employed as a medium for articulating artistic concepts and for engaging the public. The book pays particular attention to the intersection of theatre and visual art in the works of artists such as Marina Abramović and Yoko Ono. The analyses presented in Goldberg's work provide an important historical foundation for examining Houshiary's installations and the role of the body within them. Compared with prior research, the present article specifically interrogates bodily presence in Shirazeh Houshiary's installation "Breath" and its

intersection with theatricality and sensory experience. Whereas earlier studies have tended to concentrate on the body's role in installation art and its interaction with the audience more generally, this research analyzes the manner in which bodily presence within installation space functions as an element of the artistic process itself. This approach constitutes the principal distinction between the present study and earlier work and yields a deeper understanding of the body's role in contemporary art and its relation to sensory and theatrical experience.

### Theoretical Foundations

#### • Installation as an artistic genre: a study of historical and ideological transformations

Installation as an artistic genre produces a unique experience of space for the viewer. Whereas painting and sculpture position the viewer apart from the work, installation places the viewer within the artwork's space and surrounds them. This condition renders the viewer a bodily participant in the scene of the work. As Jennifer Licht, an American curator, put it, "the presence of the human being and the perception of spatial context have become material..." (Licht, 1969, 13). The idea that spatial perception is an integral component of installation experience is similarly emphasized by RoseLee Goldberg, the performance historian. Goldberg argues that the gallery space is no longer a neutral container for objects but has become "a place for the experience of experience." (Goldberg, 1975, 134).

One of the central propositions of this article is that installation as a genre has consolidated both through new artistic practices and through profound shifts in the ideological and theoretical debates about art. Accordingly, our working definition of installation encompasses an artistic practice and a linguistic-semantic structure — a discourse. Statements by Licht and Goldberg suggest that most commentators who have attempted to define installation have felt compelled to define it not only as an object, an independent material entity, but also in relation to the viewer and the surrounding environment. Work and viewer, subject and object, become interdependent dimensions associated with the situation that begins

when the viewer's presence is within and around the work. Thus, installation articulates itself in a manner fundamentally different from what proponents of modernism had posited. Douglas Crimp, the American art historian, succinctly captured this difference with respect to the forerunner of installation, Minimalism: "Any relationship that now had to be apprehended was conditional upon the temporal movement of the viewer through a space shared with the object. Thus, the work belonged to its site; if its site changed, the reciprocal relation of object, context, and viewer also changed. Such a shift in the perceptual experience of art effectively made the viewer the subject of the work, whereas under modernist idealism this privileged position had ultimately been transferred to the artist, the sole producer of the relations that shape the artwork." (Crimp, 1993, 154).

This study addresses precisely that articulation of installation as a genre and as an index of historical and ideological divergence. The conceptualization of installation offered here combines discourse and textual analysis with a study of the history of the concept of installation itself. After a brief explanation of how this article intends to apply discourse analysis, the historical emergence of an installation discourse will be described. Thereafter, the attributes commonly ascribed to installation will be identified, and the role of the installation discourse in confronting modernism — which by around 1960 had become an entrenched tradition such that younger, experimental artists felt they must assault the concept of art by any available means — will be clarified.

#### • Discourse analysis of installation art

In this study, the term "discourse" is employed as an analytical concept and as a tool for examining how installation art is construed. The discursive domain, like other discursive analyses, is delimited by the interpreter. Nevertheless, an attempt is made to make this delimitation reasonable and defensible for others. Real discourses lack fixed boundaries and are defined by dynamic patterns that determine and limit meaning. Because their boundaries are contingent and mutable, it is difficult to demarcate them precisely

(Jørgensen & Phillips, 143—44). In this analysis, elements of critical discourse analysis derived from Marxism are adopted, albeit without embracing the Marxist ambition that discourse analysis can effect social transformation. Such ambition appears unattainable through the analysis of visual art alone, since the position of the arts relative to the principal social, political, and economic processes is highly marginal. The aims of this research align more closely with discourse analysts such as Allan Sekula and Jeffrey Behn, who examined and discussed patterns in the meanings attributed to a particular medium — photography — within a specific historical context (Sekula, 1993, 107).

The notion of a “discourse order” is drawn from Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1971, 44-45). A discourse order denotes the aggregate of types of discourse used within a social domain or institution — for example, the institution of art or theatre. Thus, the term refers to the set of discourses active within a field. A discourse order “is a system in the sense that it both shapes and is shaped by particular instances of language use. It is therefore both structure and practice” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, 72). The use of discourses is governed by the discourse order because it constitutes the discourses and genres available for use. Consequently, it imposes constraints on what can be said and seen, since access to and the shaping of visual phenomena are always mediated through discourses. At the same time, language users have the potential to affect the discourse order by using and combining discourses and genres in novel ways or by employing discourses and genres that belong to a different discourse order. According to Fairclough, interdiscursive combination is an effective mechanism for discursive change (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2002, 49).

In critical discourse analysis, discourse comprises not only linguistic expressions but also visual ones — including those manifested in three dimensions. Artworks possess not only sensory and material properties but also semiotic and discursive ones. Individual installations can be regarded as determinate discursive articulations. Installations exist as physical

and sensory phenomena but attain meaning only through discourse. Each installation communicates its content via its relations to an implicit system of covert discursive signs. The art institution functions as a social domain with its own discourse order composed of discourses that articulate the visual arts and aesthetics across practical, theoretical, institutional, and political dimensions: the art discourse order. Discourses of direct significance to installation art include: the discourse of sculpture (concerning the nature, development, and problems of sculpture), the discourse of aesthetic reception (which defines the role and perception of the viewer and also the politics of the spectator’s body), the discourse of institutional critique (which includes critique of art’s commodification and the “white cube” modernist exhibition aesthetics, though it is not limited to these), the avant-garde discourse (promoting new artistic expressions in relation to older forms and to tradition — that is, the politics of the “new” — and discussing the relationship between early twentieth-century historical avant-garde and what has been called the neo-avant-garde after 1960), the modernist discourse (concerning the development and concept of modernism in art), and, finally, the branch of visual-arts discourse within postmodernism (which, among other things, frames the relation between modernism and postmodernism as largely antagonistic and as a historical rupture). Each of these discourses interprets concepts such as artist, viewer, work, form, content, context, subject, and object in its own particular way. Using a term from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theory of discourse, these concepts can be labeled “nodal points” — privileged signifiers around which other signifiers in a discourse cohere and derive relational meaning. In any chain of signification, a nodal point functions like an anchor that holds a constellation of signs together. Accordingly, nodal points also possess the potential to initiate a radical reconstitution of an existing discourse by emerging anew and displacing or restructuring the discourse order. Nodal points are essentially empty signifiers that, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, operate as floating signifiers: “Floating signifiers are those that different discourses attempt to invest with their own

particular meaning. Nodal points are floating signifiers, but while the term ‘nodal point’ refers to a point of crystallization within a particular discourse, ‘floating signifier’ belongs to the ongoing struggle among discourses to fix the meaning of important signifiers. Thus, ‘the body’ is a nodal point within medical discourse and a floating signifier in the contest between medical discourse and alternative-healing discourse” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, 28-29). Similarly, the term “work” is a nodal point in the discourse of sculpture but a floating signifier in the relation between sculpture and avant-garde discourses and, as we shall see, also in the relation between sculpture and installations. As the American artist Martha Rosler has observed, initially the term installation itself was one of those floating signifiers for which people struggled to define meaning (Rosler, 2001, 59). Thus, one can contend that during the 1960s and 1970s a new discourse emerged out of the sculpture discourse: the installation discourse. This new discourse consolidated as an independent genre not only through novel artistic practices but also through fundamental shifts in the ideological debates of art theory. This development signaled a profound transformation in how art was perceived and experienced. While the sculpture discourse focused on the art object and its form, the installation discourse emphasized the viewer’s spatial experience and their interaction with the artwork. In this way, installation became a field for new sensory and perceptual experiences and elevated the viewer’s role from mere observer to an active participant in the artwork.

#### • Critique of theatricality: michael fried and the installation discourse

The most instructive source for apprehending the ideological function of the installation discourse is not specifically about installation but is instead connected to Minimalist sculpture. One of the indispensable theoretical prerequisites for understanding installation art is Michael Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood,” published in June 1967 in the journal *Artforum* (Fried, 1967, 12-23). Fried’s penetrating and highly critical analysis of the viewer’s “theatrical” involvement in Minimalist sculpture, and his consequent challenge to

the autonomy of the artwork, provided key theoretical elements for the commonly held concept of installation. These elements include theatricality, temporality, the incorporation of environment, and new aesthetic ideas of reception concerning how audiences interact with artworks. Over the years, Fried’s concept of theatricality has become inseparable from the installation discourse (ibid., 15). Sources that cite Fried, such as those by Julie Reiss and Michael Archer, commonly do two things: first, they attend only to Fried’s use of the term “theatricality” to describe the performative, temporal, and interactive aspects of Minimalist sculpture; and second, they recast Fried’s argument in a way that legitimizes the performative aspects of Minimalism and installation rather than criticizing them<sup>1</sup> (Reiss, 1991, 45; Archer, 2000, 78). Reiss’s and Archer’s readings of Fried are not themselves incorrect, but they are limited. They show little interest in Fried’s proposed antagonism between Minimalism and the modernism he contrasts it with, an antagonism that Fried articulated in “Art and Objecthood” through the polemics with Minimalists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd on one side and with painters of color-field and sculptor Anthony Caro on the other. Hence, Archer and Reiss inadvertently elide the ideological function of Fried’s concept of theatricality (Fried, 1967, 18).

For Fried, theatricality denotes a particular relation between the viewer (subject) and the artwork (object). This relation requires the viewer’s presence and a bounded duration for the relationship’s development. Consequently, Fried criticized Minimalism for its theatricality because these features foreground the actual conditions of the viewer’s encounter with the work. The experience of a Minimalist work, Fried argued, is an experience of “an object in a situation,” something that, almost by definition, involves the viewer (ibid., 20). In “Art and Objecthood,” theatricality is defined as a subject/object relation in which the artwork is regarded as heteronomous — dependent on space and time — rather than as an autonomous object. Fried’s critique of Minimalist sculpture for its theatricality emphasizes its dependence on the viewer’s presence. Like theater, Minimalist sculpture requires

the presence of an audience and, like a performance, unfolds over time in a particular place. Moreover, these qualities divert the viewer's attention from the sculpture as a self-contained object to the shared space between object and viewer (*ibid.*, 22). As Fried later noted in a 1987 panel discussion, "Art and Objecthood" was constructed on a bipolar logic rather than on a dialectical or deconstructive one. His argument rests on a hierarchical opposition between the "good" artistic efforts of Anthony Caro and the color-field painters on one side, and the "simple" endeavors of the Minimalists on the other. This opposition is problematic because of the absence of absolute distinctions among the principal art currents that Fried identified as American Minimalism and modernism. Nonetheless, Fried's aim in drawing such a contrast was to map the battle lines among aesthetic values contested during the 1960s (*ibid.*, 55-87). Fried described Minimalism as an ideological project that signaled a broader shift in artistic sensibility. In his view, Minimalism was not merely a new style but a historical challenge to modernist sensibility in painting and sculpture. He criticized Minimalism for its objecthood and theatricality, viewing these as markers of decline in art (*ibid.*, 25). In elaborating his critique, Fried noted how Minimalist works, often scaled roughly to the size of the human body and significantly extended into space, compel the viewer to explore the spatial aspects of the work over time. These features structure the viewer's experience around a determinate duration that can, in principle, be indefinitely extended. Fried described this temporal aspect as exemplary of "theatricality," in stark contrast to the modernist work's autonomy (*ibid.*, 30). In Fried's formulation, theatricality functions as an index of a broader artistic and cultural transformation. He treated theatricality as nearly synonymous with postmodernism and interpreted it as a radical historical and ideological rupture in the division between temporal and spatial arts (Foster, 1996, 102).

#### • Introduction to Shirazeh Houshiary

Shirazeh Houshiary, born 1334 in Shiraz, is an artist whose work pursues a profound exploration of the manifestation of phenomena and spiritual concepts

through material means. By achieving a kind of geometric abstraction and producing biomorphic panels rooted in imagination and mystical thought, she has created installations, sculptures, and paintings that, despite their apparent formal simplicity, possess significant conceptual and spiritual density. Houshiary has resided in the United Kingdom since the early 1970s and completed her studies at Chelsea School of Art and subsequently at Cardiff School of Art. She graduated from Cardiff in 1979 and that same year staged her first solo exhibitions at reputable venues including Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, the Lisson Gallery in London, and Leman-Mappin Gallery in New York. Shortly after completing her studies, Houshiary quickly became recognized as one of the foremost contemporary sculptors, and her works have been exhibited in numerous solo and group shows worldwide. Her works have appeared in major institutions such as Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Royal Scottish Academy, Musée Rath Geneva, the Ashmolean Museum Oxford, Centre d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble, Tate Gallery London, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In addition, her works have participated in significant international biennials and triennials, including multiple Venice Biennales, the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale, the Kyiv Biennale, and the Münster Sculpture Triennial. In 1994, Houshiary was shortlisted as a finalist for the Turner Prize at Tate Gallery, London, and in 1997, she was conferred the title of "Professor" by the Institute of London. These recognitions attest to her prominent standing in contemporary art. Formally and conceptually, Houshiary's practice fuses geometric abstraction with mystical concerns (Camfield, 2011, 45). She began her career making biomorphic sculptures using materials such as clay and straw, and over time moved toward metals and more geometric forms. Her work in this trajectory became physically simplified and stylistically distilled. Geometry plays a central role in her later work (Craddock, 2013, 78), as exemplified by works such as "Blossom" (2005, Midtown, Tokyo), "Untying the Knot" (2007, Lisson Gallery, London), and "Asset" (2009, Lisson Gallery, London), which employ small aluminium or steel bricks arranged

in ascending spirals. These works, while recalling Brâncuși's endless columns, draw particular inspiration from the spiral minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq, known as the "Malwiya" (meaning "spiral"). Moreover, Houshiary's frequent presence at international biennials such as Venice and Kyiv has consolidated her position within contemporary art. In recent years, she has undertaken major projects, including the volumetric installation "Seif" and participation in the design of the altar for St Martin's Church in London, marking her as a leading figure in conceptual and abstract art. Her works—characterized by recurring, interwoven forms—do not merely possess a distinctive visual beauty but may also be read as metaphors for the complexities of the cosmos and inner interrelations (Camfield, 2011, 52). As a contemporary artist inclined toward spirituality in art, Houshiary consistently employs themes shared across multiple cultures to reveal the unseen and intangible aspects of being (Craddock, 2013, 81).

• **Installation "Breath" and theatricality: an analysis of embodied experience and sensory interaction in contemporary art**

The multimedia installation "Breath" occupies a central place in Shirazeh Houshiary's oeuvre. First realized in 2003 and reconceived as a site-specific installation for the Venice Biennale in 2013, it consists of a video

installation configured as a simple cubic architecture functioning metaphorically as an architectural condensation of the Kaaba. Visitors may enter this darkened space and watch four synchronous videos projected onto the cube's interior walls, each presenting transcendental imagery of an infinite cosmos of stars and galaxies. Houshiary created these videos with attention to the relationships among architecture, volume, sound, image, and human being (Lisson Gallery, 2013) (Fig. 1). The audio track in these videos comprises the rhythm of breathing, the call to prayer (adhan), Buddhist and Jewish chants, and resonant church music accompanied by double-bass timbres. According to the artist, patterns and correspondences among breaths play a central role, and she likens her techniques and tools to elemental forces such as air, earth, fire, and water. The installation aligns with the surrounding architecture, and the presence of arches and stairs evokes religious architecture. Houshiary's paintings complement the videos by linking distant, transcendent imaginations with proximate, material images. She ascends in an abstraction of infinity, employing spare forms and modules with repetitive rhythm, subtle greys, and a largely monochrome field (Ideelart). The texture of her paintings evokes fingerprints that, without exception, contain a center—an allusion to Eastern traditions of painting and illumination.



Fig. 1. External structure of the video installation "Breath," Shirazeh Houshiary, 2003, La Biennale di Venezia. Source: <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/shirazeh-houshiary-breath>; <https://www.shirazehhoushiary.com/site-specific-projects/>.

Houshiary's "Breath" investigates the concept of the breath and lived experience. "Breath" is not merely inhalation and exhalation but rather the manifestation of being—the essential core of human existence that transcends cultural and identity determinations and is therefore universal and fundamental (MoMA, n.d.). By employing evocative intonations from Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic devotional practices alongside imagery of the breath and exhalation of various vocalists, the work forges a harmony between the visual and the sonic. The installation—comprising a felt-lined black chamber and four internal screens—creates a contemplative, spiritual space for the spectator in which diverse devotional chants intermingle and become a unified spiritual resonance, as if cultural and identity plurality dissolves before the unity of human breath. By selecting La Torre as the exhibition site, Houshiary underscores the significance of place and history in shaping the artwork (Houshiary, 2022). This tower, acting as a threshold to the Arsenale and as a symbolic gateway, provided an apt context for presenting "Breath" and for engaging with its ontological and spiritual concerns. Moreover, exhibiting Houshiary's recent paintings alongside "Breath" transformed the installation into a genuinely multimedia work and offered viewers a better grasp of the artist's developmental trajectory and conceptual scope (Fig. 2). Houshiary's painting process, developed over four decades, begins with pouring pigment onto canvases and then layering inscriptions over the accumulations and forms created by this wet ground (Fig. 3). Two words—the physical manifestation of breath—are repeatedly layered and interwoven. Houshiary explains the work as follows: "From the moment we entered this building, we understood that this place was entirely suitable for the video installation 'Breath.' The building is truly amazing, but at the same time challenging, because the building is very powerful and cannot be dominated by an artwork. Therefore, any work you install here must be strong and somehow sit alongside the architecture. Particularly on the ground floor, where 'Breath' is installed, everything is about scale and presence. I think what we have done is very satisfying

because, to my mind, the work has presence, and the question of scale and how it engages with the vastness of this space is crucial. Suddenly, you are confronted by this huge black box made of felt, and then you enter this box, and you have a very intimate and deep experience. It really cannot be described with words, and if I could, I probably would not. When I installed this work here, I was not sure whether it would work or not. I was always a little doubtful because when you place an existing work into a space, you are never certain, especially when the building is so strong. So I was not one hundred percent sure, but at the moment we installed it, I realized there was a relationship between the work



Fig. 2. Video installation "Breath," Shirazeh Houshiary. Source: <https://www.shirazehhoushiary.com/site-specific-projects/>.



Fig. 3. Video display of the installation "Breath," Shirazeh Houshiary: "I set out to image my breath, to find the essence of my experience beyond name, nationality and cultures. Source: <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/shirazeh-houshiary-breath>.

and the space. I love the brickwork here, and also the work is installed so that you see the water behind it. The colour of the work almost dissolves into the water and, in a way, empathizes with the building and the water behind it. Both paintings, one titled 'Kebudi' and the other 'Numa,' were made on the floor with colours created for this space. I always say that my vision is a bird's-eye vision, not a human vision. I do not favour the human eye; I like to see things from above because you gain a better understanding of the map and how things work. To me, perception is all about how you see the world. This work is made of two words that are almost erased by repetition. So this work is not about meaning but about the force or pulse that it produces in the space between the viewer and the painting. 'Between' is an earlier piece I made in 2011. It has a strong dialogue with 'Breath' because if 'Breath' is intimate and highly immersive, 'Between' creates a relation between the individual and a larger image of the world. That work is about the relationship between the small and the large, between that which is momentary and that which is infinite. So the dialogue is different but in some way connected to 'Breath,' and I think the connection works very well" (Archer, 2000).

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, Houshiary's installation "Breath" can be approached as a discursive articulation that possesses not only sensory and material qualities but also semiotic and discursive ones. The installation functions as a determinate discursive formation that attains meaning only through its relations to an implicit system of discursive signs. Within this framework, "Breath" forms part of the art discourse order, encompassing several subordinate discourses such as aesthetic reception, institutional critique, the avant-garde, and modernism. By employing various visual and sonic elements, the work crafts a contemplative space that invites active spectator participation. Consequently, the spectator's body operates as an inseparable element of the artistic experience. Concepts embedded in the installation—such as "breath" or air—may be interpreted as nodal points around which other signs cohere to produce meaning. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, these nodal

points are floating signifiers that different discourses strive to invest with particular meanings. Thus, "Breath" not only provides a sensory encounter but also facilitates a radical reconfiguration of existing discourse orders, thereby dissolving boundaries among artistic practices. Furthermore, by creating an immersive and multisensory environment, Houshiary's "Breath" aligns closely with Michael Fried's notion of theatricality as articulated in his critique of Minimalist sculpture (Fried, 1967). Fried defines theatricality as the relation between viewer (subject) and artwork (object) that requires the viewer's presence and the passage of time for this relation to unfold (ibid., 20). By inviting viewers into a dark, confined space, "Breath" directly engages their physical presence and sensory experience. In "Breath," the viewer's body functions as a key component within the space. The installation's spatial proportions and the use of immersive sound envelop the spectator in a sensorial environment. This sensory engagement redirects attention from the artwork as an autonomous object toward the viewer's interactive experience with space and time (ibid., 22). In this manner, "Breath" transcends the status of a mere object and becomes a situation or event that necessitates active viewer participation and presence. Moreover, by challenging the autonomy of the artwork, "Breath" approaches Fried's concept of theatricality. As Fried argued in his critique of Minimalism, theatrical works depend on the presence of the spectator and reveal themselves over time within a particular place. "Breath," by altering the viewer's experience across time and in relation to their affective and sensory states, relinquishes autonomy and becomes a mutable experience contingent on situational conditions. Hence, the artwork ceases to be a self-sufficient object and instead operates as a catalyst for private, interior experience. Nevertheless, there is a salient distinction between Fried's critique of theatricality and the experience produced by "Breath." Fried regarded theatricality as symptomatic of decline in modern art because it diverts attention away from the artwork itself toward extrinsic conditions of its reception (ibid., 25). By contrast, Houshiary knowingly embraces theatricality as a means to generate a deeper

and more meaningful encounter for the spectator. Through the creation of a contemplative environment that blends image and sound, she invites viewers on an inward journey aimed at probing ontological and spiritual questions.

Accordingly, the video-based installation “Breath” employs theatricality not as an aesthetic fault but as an instrument for producing an intimate, multisensory, and transformative experience. By engaging the body in space, challenging the autonomy of the artwork, and foregrounding the role of time and context in artistic reception, the work advances a renewed understanding of the relation between art and spectator (Foster, 1996, 102). This comprehension moves beyond Fried’s denunciation of theatricality toward an immersive, potentially transformative form of contemporary art practice. Under the theoretical framework presented above, “Breath” may also be interpreted as a contextualized spatial field. The work, by transcending mere sensory environment creation, actively engages with the historical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it is situated (Johnstone, 1985, 63). The use of heterogeneous religious sonorities, the Kaaba metaphor, and the presentation in La Torre together demonstrate the artist’s attention to the multiple contextual layers that shape and confer meaning upon the work. Fig. 4. presents an analytical framework of the factors influencing the viewer’s experience in Shirazi’s installation “Breath”. The framework indicates that the spectator’s perceptual experience results from the multifaceted interaction among dimensions such as the multisensory character of the space, spatial synergy, spiritual concepts, sonic elements, and visual elements. Each of these components simultaneously contributes to shaping the final reception, creating an integrated whole by linking architecture, cultural rhythms, semantic layers, and sensory stimuli. The figure is designed to reveal the relationships among these components and demonstrates that the viewer’s experience in contemporary installations emerges from a multilayered combination of physical, perceptual, and conceptual factors. In addition, “Breath” performs a kind of institutional critique by challenging the

conventional role of museums and galleries as spaces separated from quotidian life (O’Doherty, 1976, 64). By inviting the viewer into a personal, interior encounter, the installation produces a space for reflection and critical thought concerning ontological and spiritual themes. Thus, “Breath” functions not merely as an artwork but as a social and cultural space that enables discourse and exchange. The installation can be regarded as a metaphoric field that dissolves boundaries between media and opens possibilities for personal and interior readings by the viewer, such that the work’s meaning is found not within itself but in its relation to the spectator (Reiss, 1979, 65). In light of these analyses, the installation “Breath” can be understood not merely as an immersive aesthetic experience of consciousness but as a deliberate artistic intervention within the contemporary cultural and social fabric. By engaging the body in space, challenging the autonomy of the art object, and emphasizing the roles of time and context in artistic experience, the work arrives at a renewed understanding of the relationship between art and audience. “Breath”, beyond being a mere object, becomes a space for reflection, critical thought, and exchange, and through this transformation, it redefines the role of art in contemporary society. This installation not only dissolves the boundaries between artistic disciplines but also enables intimate, personal interpretations by the viewer, so that the work’s meaning is produced not in itself but in relation to its audience. Thus, “Breath” is an invitation to breathe within a space where constraint and

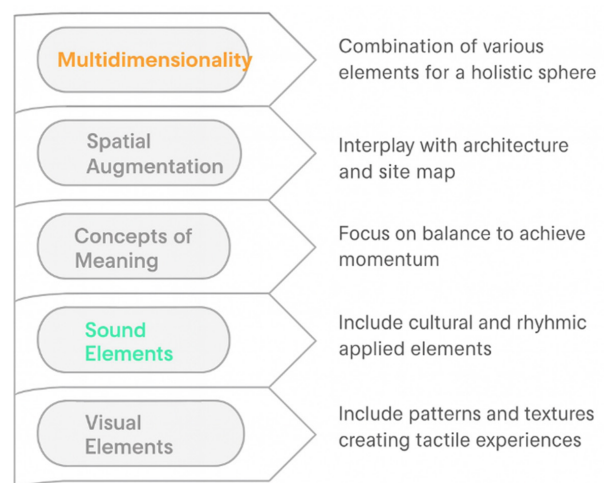


Fig. 4. Visual Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Viewer’s Experience in the Installation “Breath” by Houshiary. Source: Authors.

liberation, silence and sound, spirituality and materiality are interwoven, producing a singular experience of being (Table 1).

### Conclusion

Installation as an artistic genre has effected a fundamental transformation in the ways art is perceived and experienced. This genre has consolidated itself not only through innovative artistic practices but also through profound shifts in ideological and theoretical debates about art. Unlike traditional media such as painting and sculpture, which position the viewer outside the work, installation immerses the viewer within the spatial field of the work and renders them an active participant. This shift elevates the viewer’s role from that of a mere spectator to a constitutive element of the artistic experience and reconfigures the gallery from a site for object display into a locus for sensory and perceptual encounter. Accordingly, installation functions as a sign of historical and ideological change within contemporary art. The four-channel video installation “Breath” by Shirazeh Houshiary, as a site-specific, multimedia work, constitutes a prominent example of contemporary practice that summons viewers into an immersive, multisensory engagement with ontological and spiritual themes. By combining visual, sonic, and architectural elements, the work generates a contemplative spatial field in which the

viewer’s body operates as an inseparable component of the artwork. Houshiary’s use of diverse sacred sonorities and transcendent imagery stages an inquiry into “breath” as the essential core of human being and, in doing so, dissolves conventional boundaries among art, spirituality, and culture. This study addressed how “Breath” shapes embodied experience and how the installation’s spatial properties, structural decisions, and sensory elements inform viewers’ perception and response. The findings indicate that “Breath,” by constructing a darkened, confined environment, engages spectators through enveloping images and soundscapes and redirects attention from the artwork as an autonomous object to the viewer’s personal, interior encounter. By foregrounding physical and perceptual presence, the installation blurs the distinction between art and everyday life and permits the viewer to become an integral part of the work. Thus, “Breath” not only confirms theatricality as a salient component of contemporary installation practice but also indicates a substantive rethinking of the relations among art, space, and the body. By cultivating an interactive relation between work and audience, Houshiary’s installation embraces theatricality not as a symptom of aesthetic decline but as an instrument for fostering deeper, meaningful experience. “Breath” stages a contemplative journey that probes ontological and spiritual questions; at the same time, as a contextualized spatial field, it actively

Table 1. Summary of Findings. Source: Authors.

Title	Key Findings
Installation as an Artistic Genre	- Installation, by dissolving traditional boundaries between artwork and exhibition space, creates an immersive and multisensory experience. - The viewer’s body functions as an active agent within the artistic experience. - Installation transforms the viewer’s role from passive observer to active participant.
Theatricality (Michael Fried)	- Theatricality refers to the relation between viewer and artwork that requires physical presence and the passage of time. - Fried interprets theatricality as a sign of decline in modern art.- The installation “Breath,” by creating an interactive environment, employs theatricality as a tool for generating a deeper experience.
Installation “Breath” by Shirazeh Houshiary	- “Breath” is a multimedia and video installation employing four simultaneous (four-channel) projections on the walls of a cube-shaped structure. - Through a dark, enclosed environment, the work immerses the viewer in enveloping soundscapes and imagery. - “Breath” explores the concept of breath as the essential core of human existence.
Interaction of Body and Space	- The viewer’s body becomes an inseparable part of the artistic experience. - By engaging the body within its spatial field, “Breath” generates an immersive and transformative experience.
Role of Time and Context	- “Breath” emphasizes the significance of time and contextual conditions, producing an inward and personal experience for the audience. - The work interacts with its historical, cultural, and institutional settings.
Institutional Critique	- “Breath” challenges the conventional role of museums and galleries and establishes a space for contemplation and critical reflection.
Cultural and Religious Synthesis	- The use of diverse religious chants (Islamic, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian) in “Breath” signifies spiritual unity amid cultural plurality.
Form and Content	- Houshiary’s works integrate geometric abstraction with mystical concepts. - The recurring, interwoven forms in her work serve as metaphors for the complexities of existence.

engages with the historical, cultural, and institutional circumstances that frame its reception. The work also stages a form of institutional critique by challenging the separation of museums and galleries from everyday life and by providing a site for reflection and critical thought. In sum, the video installation “Breath” constitutes both an immersive aesthetic event and a deliberate artistic intervention within contemporary cultural and social contexts. By engaging the body within space, contesting the artwork’s autonomy, and emphasizing the roles of duration and context in reception, the installation advances a renewed model for understanding the relation between artwork and spectator. “Breath” transcends the status of a discrete object and becomes a field for contemplation, critical reflection, and dialogue; its meaning emerges in relation to the viewer rather than solely within itself. As such, the work invites spectators to inhabit a space where limitation and release, silence and sound, spirituality and materiality are intertwined, producing a singular existential encounter.

### Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

### Endnotes

1. The extent to which minimalism defined the framework of the relationship among subsequent installations, time, space, and the viewer—and the extent to which installation, in turn, retroactively influenced the understanding of minimalism—became apparent in the remarks Fried made twenty years after writing his essay. In 1987, he emphasized that he preferred to refer to minimalist “works” as “installations.” This choice of wording was by no means accidental. It was likely Fried’s way of indicating that the validity of his “theatricality” thesis could be extended from minimalism, understood narrowly as an “-ism,” to installation art in a broader perspective.

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