



# On Affective Installation Art

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Accepted: 22 February 2024  
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## Abstract

In this paper, we look at installation art through the lens provided by the notion of “affective artifact” (Piredda 2019). We argue that affective character is central to some works of installation art and that some of those works can expand our knowledge of our affective lives, while others can contribute to the construction of our identities. Sections (2), (3), and (4) set the stage for our discussion of affective installation artworks by, respectively, situating it within the debate on affective artifacts, looking at some general issues concerning the affective character of artworks, and sketching out a view of the ontology of installation art. In section (5), we discuss the affective character of six works of installation art. In section (6), we show how those artworks can reveal aspects of who we are. Section (7) concludes.

**Keywords** Affective artifacts · Installation art · Interactive art · Self-knowledge · Collective identity

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we look at installation art through the lens provided by the notion of “affective artifact” (Piredda 2019). We argue that affective character is central to some works of installation art and that some of those works can expand our knowledge of our affective lives, while others can contribute to the construction of our identities. Section (2), (3), and (4) set the stage for our discussion of affective installation artworks by, respectively, situating it within the debate on affective artifacts, looking at some general issues concerning the affective character of artworks, and sketching out a view of the ontology of installation art. In Sect. (5), we discuss the affective character of six works of installation art. In Sect. (6), we show how those artworks can reveal aspects of who we are. Section (7) concludes.

## 2 Affective Scaffolds, Artifacts, and Artworks

In recent years, the notion of “affective scaffold” has been introduced in philosophical literature (see especially Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Colombetti 2020) within the broader context provided by the view of the mind as scaffolded (see, e.g., Sterelny 2010). The scaffolded mind view argues that cognitive agents rely on their environment and modify it to support and enhance their cognitive abilities. Giovanna Colombetti and Joel Krueger (2015) propose to expand the view, arguing that agents rely on their environment and modify it also to support and enhance their *affective* abilities: not only we, e.g., rely on maps to navigate around new cities, thus sustaining our cognitive abilities, but we also, e.g., eat comfort food to enhance our positive feelings. As Giulia Piredda stresses (2019: 563), that of affective scaffolds is a heterogeneous set, encompassing material substances (such as caffeine, which can make us nervous), actions (such as jogging, which can boost our mood), human beings (such as our partners, who can arouse in us a variety of feelings), and artifacts (such as teddy bears, which usually make children happy).

Affective artifacts, Piredda argues (563), are a subset of affective scaffolds: they are artifacts and, most importantly, the main feature of affective artifacts is the capacity to alter the affective condition of an agent, often through a direct manipulation of the object, thus contributing to her affective

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life. Moreover, some particularly significant affective artifacts can be experienced or perceived as a part of the self, or at least as important for one's sense of self. This is not necessarily true of every example of affective artifact and is most likely to be associated with personal affective artifacts [i.e., artifacts that can alter our affective condition on a regular basis (see p. 554)]. Lastly, not only the presence, but also the loss, of an affective artifact can influence an agent's affective state. (Piredda 2019: 556).

The “main feature” of, e.g., caffeine, human beings, and jogging, is not that of altering “the affective condition of an agent” and this is, according to Piredda, the chief reason why they are not good candidates for the status of affective artifact.<sup>1</sup> The main feature of teddy bears, on the contrary, is that of arousing positive feelings in children. Moreover, they are personal affective artifacts, and we often associate them with our childhood selves. Finally, our affective state is usually influenced by their loss. Thus, they are a compelling example of affective artifact.

Can artworks qualify as affective artifacts? As Piredda acknowledges (551), many artworks have, among their main features, the capability of altering our affective state. For instance, comedy movies are designed to boost a cheerful mood, while funeral marches have the opposite function. Those artworks, and many others, qualify as affective artifacts. However, artworks usually lack another property that, according to Piredda, is typical of the “most interesting affective artifacts” (554), such as teddy bears: that of being personal, i.e., of altering our affective states with a certain regularity. Usually, our encounters with a specific artwork are sporadic, if not singular, events. On the contrary, our beloved teddy bear is typically a toy that we spend (or have spent) a lot of time with, and that almost never fails to move us. Moreover, since, as Piredda claims, affective artifacts that we associate with our sense of self are usually personal ones, it is unlikely that we associate artworks with our sense of self – i.e., it is unlikely that we recognize ourselves in those artifacts, and that we describe those artifacts as extensions of our selves (see Belk 1988a: 139).

Note that there are counterexamples to this view. Imagine you are lucky enough to own Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943). The painting fills you with joyful feelings almost every time you look at it, and hangs in the middle of your living room, so that you can spend some time with it every day. Due to this, the painting is an artifact that you recognize yourself in. Interestingly, however, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* contingently acquired the power to regularly fill you with joy – it seems safe to claim that Mondrian did not design it with this goal on his mind – while teddy bears are designed to be such that many children can

develop an affective attachment to them and perceive them as part of their self.

Importantly, Piredda acknowledges (554) that some artworks may interact with us so strongly at the affective level that, even if we experience them only once, they might be relevant to our sense of who we are. Let us try to clarify this with an example. Imagine visiting for the first time the Bamiyan valley, in Afghanistan, while a teenager in the 1980s: here, you see the Buddhas of Bamiyan – a masterpiece of Gandhara art (a manifestation of Greek-Buddhist syncretism) – which arouse in you strong feelings of awe and reverence. The Buddhas open to you the doors to a spiritual dimension, and they become important to your identity as a person with a spiritual life. Developing on this same example, we can also show that some artworks can be such that our affective state is influenced by their loss. Consider, again, the Bamiyan Buddhas in our imaginary scenario: when the Taliban destroyed them in 2003, it is likely that you felt very sad, as you lost an affective artifact that was so important to your sense of self.

The above remarks show that while many artworks are affective artifacts in the limited sense that they can alter our affective states and that this is one of their key features, only some affective artworks, under certain circumstances, can play a role in constituting our sense of self. The latter, according to Piredda, are artworks that affect us strongly, even though we encounter them only once, and artworks that are so present in our lives that they can regularly affect us.

While we share Piredda's view, we also believe that the notion of affective artifacts can be particularly useful to cast light on the peculiarities of some works of installation art, and thus contribute to the limited philosophical debate on installation art. This is what we shall do in Sect. (5) below. Moreover, as we shall argue in Sect. (6), affective works of installation art can be strongly tied to the self, because they can reveal aspects of who we are. Before turning to affective installation art, however, we need to put forward some preliminary remarks on affective artworks (Sect. 3) and to sketch out a view of the ontology of installation art (Sect. 4).

### 3 Artworks and Affects

In this section, we make some general remarks on the affective character of artworks, to prepare the ground for our discussion of affective installation artworks in the following sections.

As Piredda observes (2019: 559), we can distinguish between artifacts with intended affective functions and artifacts with non-intended affective functions. While wedding albums are created with the purpose of evoking joyful

<sup>1</sup> Piredda (2019: 563) admits for the possibility that a natural object be used as an affective artifact.

memories of weddings in those who took part in them, the old plane ticket to La Habana that one has left on one's desk, and that makes one feel nostalgic as they are reminded of a wonderful trip, was not created for this. Now, one might argue that many or even all artworks qualify as artifacts with intended affective functions, by defending the view that aesthetic responses are a kind of affective response, in conjunction with the view that many or even all artworks have been created with the purpose of arousing aesthetic responses (for an overview of these accounts see Peacocke 2023: § 2.4). These are highly debated issues among aestheticians which, however, we shall not be concerned with in this paper. Our interest lies in affective experiences that are central to our encounter with some works of art, and that are not necessarily aesthetic experiences – experiences such as feeling amused by a comedy movie, moved by a work of music, or anguished by a work of installation art. More specifically, we shall concentrate on the peculiar case of installation art where, as we shall argue, our affective responses can be aroused by situations where we actively participate in the instantiation of the artworks.

If we leave aside the issue of the aesthetic (and thus, according to some, affective) character of artworks, we can see that the distinction between artifacts with intended affective functions and artifacts with non-intended affective functions applies to artworks too: on the one hand, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) is clearly intentionally endowed with the function of arousing cheerful feelings; on the other hand, one might fall in love with Sandro Botticelli's depiction of Venus in his *Birth of Venus* (1485–1486), but it would be wrong to claim that the painting has the *intended* affective function of arousing in its viewers feelings of love. In what follows, we focus on works of installation art with intended affective functions (other than that of arousing an aesthetic experience).

Before turning to installation art, however, let us briefly consider another important aspect of the connection between artworks and affective experiences, which will be relevant to our analyses of works of installation art. Often, our affective reactions to artworks are prompted by their expressive properties. As Antonia Peacocke explains, "An expressive property of an object is a property by which it expresses something—usually an emotion or other affect, but more rarely an attitude, a movement, a personality, or a way of experiencing the world as a whole." (Peacocke 2023: n.p.). Expressive properties may, although they need not, arouse affective reactions in perceivers. Chopin's *Piano Sonata No. 2* is expressive of sadness, and it is likely to arouse feelings of sadness. Still, feeling sad is not necessary to have a full appreciation of Chopin's sonata. That of feeling sad is a *conventional* affective reaction to Chopin's *Piano Sonata No. 2* (see Piredda 2019: 559). Still, one might, for personal

reasons, associate the sonata to some particularly joyful event in one's life, and thus feel happy while listening to it. This would be a *non-conventional* affective reaction to the work (559). In what follows, we will focus on *conventional* affective reactions to *intended affective functions* of works of installation art. Henceforth, for the sake of simplicity, we shall use the term "affective works of installation art" to refer only to works of installation art with intended affective functions.

## 4 Installation Art

In this section, we sketch out a view of the ontology of installation art, which provides the ground for our discussion of affective installation art in the following sections.

Installation art is a recent art form, which became prominent in the late 1960s (see, e.g., Reiss 1999; Bishop 2005; Ring Petersen 2015). All works of installation art present the public with environments to explore but, aside from this, they vary significantly in materials employed, complexity, and size. For instance, Carsten Höller's environments usually have sculptural character and monumental scale, Bruce Nauman's *Corridor* works present instead narrow environments, often lit with neon lights, Ernesto Neto usually produces complex environments, made of Lycra, wood, and yarn, and filled with the scent of spices, while several of Haroon Mirza's environments surround the public with sonic and video elements only.

Among art theorists and historians there is a consensus that works of installation art prompt the public to interact with them, and that they are not truly complete without the contribution of the public (see, e.g., Reiss 1999; Reben-tisch 2003; Bishop 2005; Ring Petersen 2015). According to this view, works of installation art have *processual and interactive* character. Rather than being just *environments* that we appreciate for qualities they would display even if we were not perceiving them – like, e.g., paintings display their visual properties even when we are not looking at them – those works are *situations* that develop across time, that originate from one's experience of the works' environments, and that one appreciates, among other things, because of the qualities they possess in virtue of one's interaction with those environments.

The appeal of the view that installation artworks have processual and interactive character lies in the fact that it is the view that better allows us to make sense of what we appreciate about paradigmatic works of installation art. Consider Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridor* (1969). The work presents the public with a narrow corridor, constituted by two symmetrical wood panels, one in front of the other, distant about 50 cm from each other, with a height of

about 250 cm, and a length of about 6 m. What we appreciate about this work are not so much the simple physical properties of its environment (the shape of the corridor, the color of the wood panels, etc.), but it is also, and mostly, what happens when we enter the corridor, and find ourselves within a space where, if we pay attention to what is going on, our awareness of our own body, our movements, and how we relate to the narrow space delimited by the two wood panels is significantly increased. Inside the corridor we can, for instance, focus on its narrowness and/or coziness, and notice the length and rhythm of our steps, as well as the position of our arms and hands. This is a process where we play center stage, and we can appreciate aspects of it. For instance, we can appreciate how balanced our brief stroll through the corridor is or, instead, how expressive of uncertainty and discomfort, and we can appreciate that our experience of the environment expresses peacefulness, or oppression, depending on whether we feel comfortable within such a minimalist space, or uncomfortable because of its narrowness (for a related account of the appreciation of processes we take part into see Nguyen 2020a: Chaps. 5, 7; 2020b: 9–12). What makes this appreciative experience possible are, on the one hand, the affordances of the environment created by Nauman (in particular, its corridor-like shape, which invites one to walk across it, and its narrowness, which can feel uncomfortable or hospitable) and, on the other hand, the fact that the public behaves in the way envisaged by the artist – exploring the environment from within, rather than, say, circling around it as if it were a sculpture.

*Performance Corridor* is the first in a series of works by Nauman that address our proprioceptive experiences. As Ted Mann explains,

*Performance Corridor* imposed certain physical limits on its audience, but Nauman nevertheless recalled feeling some frustration at not being able to more fully “control the situation.”<sup>2</sup> In subsequent corridors, he developed a number of devices to accomplish just this, from mirrors and intense, colored fluorescent light (see, for example, *Green Light Corridor*, made in 1970) to the closed-circuit video technology of contemporary surveillance systems.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to notice that with *Performance Corridor* Nauman became aware that, to prompt the public to explore an environment in specific ways (i.e., to have more “control”

on “the situation”), he had to design environments with more marked affordances – such as mirrors and fluorescent lights. This corroborates the view that Nauman’s goal was to produce specific situations, rather than just environments that one could experience with a high degree of freedom.

From an ontological viewpoint, the view of installation art as processual and interactive can be sketched out as follows. Any work of installation art is a type of spatial and temporal situations, of processes that unfurl across time within environments designed by artists, and that are instantiated whenever the work is exhibited (for related views see Irvin 2013 and 2022).<sup>4</sup> Nauman’s *Performance Corridor*, for instance, is instantiated only when the corridor is installed in an exhibition space: when the corridor’s components are taken apart and shielded in a warehouse, the work is not instantiated. Typically, works of installation art are interactive. Some works of installation art are *strongly interactive*: they are *partially* instantiated any time their environments are installed for exhibition and *fully* instantiated any time one of the installations of such environments is experienced by a member of the public according to the *rules for participation* governing the work at issue. Other works are *weakly interactive*: although they are fully instantiated any time their environments are installed for exhibition, their *authentic* instantiations take place when their environments are experienced by members of the public according to the *rules for participation* governing the works (this view refines the one put forward by Caldarola 2020). Let us briefly unpack these claims.

What are rules for participation? Irvin (2022) argues that while traditional artworks are governed by rules that were once fixed by social conventions (e.g., the rule that, in paintings, the painted surface should face away from the wall), many contemporary artworks are governed by custom rules fashioned by their makers – rules about display, public participation, and conservation. Some of the rules of contemporary art are sanctioned explicitly, e.g., by writing down instructions that museum staff is required to impart to the public, while others are sanctioned implicitly, e.g., by presenting objects that invite certain forms of experience. Nauman’s *Performance Corridor*, for instance, being shaped like a corridor, invites the public to experience it as

<sup>4</sup> This is not the place to discuss the ontology of works of installation art in detail. Thus, to capture straightforwardly the fact that different instantiations of a work of installation art are all instantiations of the *same work*, we claim that works of installation art are types that have multiple instantiations, in analogy with mainstream views in the ontology of music, such as Platonism (e.g. Dodd 2007) and the indicated structures view (e.g. Levinson 1990). A full-blown account of the ontology of installation art will require to establish whether those works are better understood as abstract objects or nominalistically, and which specific account is best equipped to make sense of them. This discussion is, however, orthogonal to the view developed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Nauman, interview with Michele de Angelus (May 27th and 30th, 1980), in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words; Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 258. In: <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3148>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3148>.



a corridor. In general, Irvin argues (Chap. 4), rules for public participation norm how the public is supposed to engage with interactive works, such as works of installation art.

To instantiate a strongly interactive work of installation art fully, one needs to engage with its environment by following the work's rules for participation – much like, to perform Bach's *First Cello Suite*, a cellist needs to follow – to a significant extent, at least – the work's score. Consider, again, Nauman's work. The situation envisaged by Nauman is produced if, and only if, a member of the public enters the corridor and moves through it, while it is not produced if, for instance, a member of the public circles around the structure constituting the corridor or does not engage with the corridor at all.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, to produce a full instantiation of a weakly interactive work of installation art it is sufficient to install the work's environment in a way that presents a good enough number of the work's key properties. However, to produce an *authentic instantiation* of the work, members of the public will need to interact with its environment in the appropriate way. Here, the analogy with the performance of musical works is again helpful. To produce not merely a performance, but an *authentic performance* of Bach's *First Cello Suite*, it is not sufficient to follow Bach's score – the *First Cello Suite* must be appropriately interpreted. If a cellist plays the suite with an excess of pathos, for instance, they stray away from the work's more restrained character, failing to understand the work.<sup>6</sup> To see how this illuminates the case of weakly interactive installation art let us briefly consider Mike Nelson's *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004), which we analyse in more detail in Sect. (5.1). This work's environment is constituted by three spaces arranged so that they represent a cinema foyer, an artist's studio, and a desert landscape. Those are complex situations, full of details – unlike Nauman's corridors, they are not spaces that, if not activated by the public, appear as nondescript and incapable of arousing our interest. Thus, it is reasonable to claim that *Triple Bluff Canyon* is fully instantiated once the three environments have been appropriately installed. However, we maintain that an *authentic instantiation* of the work, as opposed to a merely genuine

one (see footnote 5), is produced when one explores those environments and focuses not just on the properties they exhibit but also on the properties of one's experience of interaction with them. This is because the work is more insightful and interesting if it is construed as one that does not just aim at representing certain environments, but also aims at embedding the public within its space, casting members of the public as actors without a script, so to speak, and thus being such that its appreciative experience focuses also on the hesitant, uneasy interaction between the public and its spaces. A situation that, thanks to its interactivity, allows for these aspects of the work to emerge, constitutes a more authentic rendition of the work's thematic and expressive range.<sup>7</sup>

So far, we have highlighted some analogies between works of music and works of installation art. However, there is also an important difference between the two that we need to stress: while each member of the public who listens to a certain performance of a work of music experiences the same instantiation of the work, which is a publicly accessible object, each member of the public who engages in the appropriate way with the environment of a work of installation art experiences a different instantiation of the work, since each instantiation is, in part, a private experience undergone by each of those members of the public. This is true of both strongly interactive works and authentically instantiated weakly interactive works. As we have seen, the former are fully instantiated through a subject's interactions with their environment, while the latter are authentically instantiated in the same way. Consequently, full and/or authentic instantiations of works of installation art are interactive situations where the artistically salient aspects are, in part, aspects of the private experiences thereof. Those private aspects of the interactive situations, however, are not such that each of them is in all respects different from the others: in the first place, they are private experiences of the *same* environment (in case of situations arising from the same installation of the work's environment), or of the *same kind* of environment (in case of situations arising from different installations of the work's environment). In the second place, not everything works: only those experiences that are had because of following a work's participation rules qualify as completing the work's instantiation or contributing to instantiating it authentically. Those private interactive experiences, thus, share some aspects, and it is those shared aspects that matter to the appreciation of the works they are

<sup>5</sup> It is explanatorily helpful to understand works of installation art as norm-types, which admit of both properly and improperly formed tokens (see Wolterstorff 1980: 54–58; Dodd 2007: Chap. 1, § 5). Thus, they can have both correct and incorrect instantiations. An incorrect instantiation of a work of installation art is a genuine token of the work in so far as it does not lack too many properties that are normative to the work.

<sup>6</sup> The issue of what it takes to produce an *authentic* or *inauthentic* performance of a work of installation art cannot be explored fully here. Suffice to say that our ideas are shaped by Julian Dodd's (2020) view that, to perform works of music authentically, we ought to aim for *interpretive faithfulness* (faithfulness to the work) as opposed to, e.g., historical authenticity, or to faithfulness to the artistic personality of the performer.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, to produce not a mere full instantiation of, say, Nauman's *Performance Corridor*, but an *authentic* one, a member of the public needs to interpret the work appropriately. This happens if she walks through the corridor while paying attention to her proprioceptive situation, while it does not happen if, for instance, she runs across the corridor mindlessly.

experiences of. Our appreciative experiences of installation artworks, thus, are shareable, because they revolve around aspects that all the genuine private experiences of interaction with the works' environments have in common.

Now that we are equipped with some insights concerning affective artworks and works of installation art, it is time to look at affective works of installation art.

## 5 Affective Installation Art

In the above section, we saw that installation artworks are typically and/or authentically instantiated by interactive environments: they immerse the public in situations where they have a role to play. In Sect. (3), we saw that many artworks are designed so that it is likely that they will produce a certain kind of affective response in the public. In this section, we shall analyze six works of installation art that have affective character. Our goal here is to show that understanding their affective character is central to grasping how those works function – just like it is central to grasping how comedies and tragedies work.

As we shall show, affective works of installation art largely fit the taxonomy of affective material scaffolds provided by Colombetti (2020), who distinguishes between representational and non-representational affective artifacts. Piredda (2019: 557) is skeptical of the relevance of this form of distinction: she observes that, since any sort of object can be an affective artifact, then it is not something about the nature of an object (such as its being representational or non-representational) that will explain why it is an affective artifact. Our view is that, while this remark is valid if a taxonomy of all affective artifacts is at issue, it is not correct if only the taxonomy of affective installation artworks is at issue because, as we shall show, affective works of installation art are designed so that they are likely to elicit certain kinds of affective responses in virtue of their representational or nonrepresentational character.

Colombetti's taxonomy mirrors the taxonomy of cognitive artifacts previously offered by Heersmink (2013) and, like his, is inspired by Peirce's theory of signs (e.g., Peirce 1867). In the first place, Colombetti distinguishes between two broad categories of affective material scaffolds: representational ones and nonrepresentational ones. To arouse affective responses, the former rely on their being about something else, while the latter rely on their material qualities only. In the second place, Colombetti identifies three subcategories of representational, affective material scaffolds: iconic ones, which arouse affective responses in virtue of what they resemble to (e.g., pictures of loved ones); indexical ones, which arouse affective responses in virtue of objects or events they are causally connected with (e.g.

holiday souvenirs); and symbolic ones, which arouse affective responses in virtue of what they conventionally refer to (e.g., wedding rings). In the third place, Colombetti distinguishes between two subcategories of affective, non-representational material scaffolds: psychoactive ones and sensory ones, depending on whether they arouse affective responses because of their active ingredients, which produce affective changes in human physiology (e.g., caffeine), or because of their perceptual qualities (colors, textures, smells etc. – e.g., a green Alpine landscape).

Further insights on affective artifacts are provided by Viola (2021), who identifies three ways in which an artifact can be involved in an emotional episode: by altering a subject's bodily and/or phenomenal state; by supporting or even replacing human beings in assessing some stimuli; and by supporting or even replacing human beings in performing some life tasks that are relevant from an evolutionary and/or social viewpoint. As it shall emerge from the discussion of the case-studies, it seems to us that all the works under consideration are such that, because of their affective character, they can alter the public's bodily and/or phenomenal states, with the exception, perhaps, of Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing's *Ice Watch* (2014), which can be seen as a work that supports human beings in assessing negatively the phenomenon of global warming (see Sect. 5.2). Without further ado, let us now look at the six case-studies.

### 5.1 Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004): A Case of Iconic, Affective Installation Art

The environment of this work is constituted by a series of spaces which iconically and vividly represent three different scenes: an old-fashioned cinema foyer, the artist's studio, and a sandy desert landscape with a dilapidated timber structure, which evokes war-torn areas of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Our view is that an authentic instantiation of this work is produced when the public explores its environment with the attitude of someone who is inspecting potentially dangerous places, previously unknown to them, and who seeks to gather information about what is going on. This is because the installation space unfolds like an immersive narrative and, thanks to how it is structured, it invites the public to play along. First, one encounters the representation of the cinema foyer, where there are numerous doors, only one of whom leads to the next room, which represents the artist's

<sup>8</sup> For a description and pictures of the work see: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/mike-nelson-triple-bluff-canyon>. See also Cotter (2008). The desert landscape is a nod to Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970): while Smithson covered his woodshed in soil, Nelson buried his in desert sand, thus alluding to the Iraq War, which was ongoing at the time the work was created (O'Sullivan 2017: 295). For more information about Smithson's work see: <https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/partially-buried-woodshed>.

studio – a solitary space – where one can see a video of a man speaking about catastrophe, and urging listeners to react against it; from there, one proceeds to the final and key scene of the installation, representing the semi-buried construction in the desert.

An authentic instantiation of the work, we contend, is one where a member of the public does not just drift through the installation space looking at the scenes it represents, but one where one pretends to find oneself within the situations so effectively represented. Moreover, our view is that, as a result of being authentically instantiated, the work is likely to produce in the public certain affective responses envisaged by the artist. Most of the installation environment, as the artist Jeremy Deller puts it, “is a scene of decay”<sup>9</sup>, while the video and the representation of the artist’s studio bring an element of hope to the whole work: they suggest that civilization has not been completely lost, and that we can strive to reverse the dire situation depicted by the rest of the work’s environment. Those who explore the work’s space by pretending to find themselves within the represented situations are likely to experience a series of affective reactions: initially, one feels lost, not knowing the purpose of the work and whether any door in the first room will lead anywhere, and one begins to get a sense of loneliness; then one encounters the man in the video who, with his tale of catastrophe and insurgence can generate both negative and positive feelings; also, one finds oneself in a room where there are traces of human presence, and which is an artist’s studio – a place for creativity and reflection, which can feel somehow comfortable; finally, feelings of discomfort, anxiety, despondency, and concern are easily aroused by the third room. Since Nelson’s work is instantiated by iconically representational situations, it is an affective installation of the iconic kind.

Importantly, we do not claim that, to be authentically instantiated, this work requires the public to experience the affective responses envisaged by its maker; instead, we claim that, if the work is authentically instantiated through the interactive participation of the public, then *it is likely* that those audience members who choose to imagine being in the situations represented by the work will respond affectively to those situations. A comic movie is not completed by the public’s reaction to it: a comic movie with no audience is already a complete comic movie. However, the comic movie (assuming that it is good enough) is likely to elicit laughing in its audience: the capability of eliciting laughing is one of its key features. Analogously to other affective artworks, *Triple Bluff Canyon* is not completed by the public’s affective responses: the work is just an object that invites

affective responses. Being capable of eliciting feelings of both worry and hope, however, is one of its key features.

## 5.2 Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, *Ice Watch* (2014): A Case of Indexical, Affective Installation Art

*Ice Watch* was first installed in Copenhagen in 2014.<sup>10</sup> The installation presented 12 ice blocks with a total weight of 100 tonnes. Originally, they were flee-floating icebergs that had melted off from the Nuuk ice sheet, in Greenland, because of the climate crisis. They were placed in Copenhagen’s city hall square and arranged in a circle – suggesting a watch and thus, the passing of time, but also public spaces such as parliament halls, or campfires and, thus, public participation (see Jordan 2014).<sup>11</sup> The ice blocks had indexical character: like a snakeskin on the ground indicates the passage of a snake, the ice blocks in Copenhagen indicated the melting of the ice sheet of Nuuk in Greenland, where they originated from. At the same time, they also had more obvious iconic character: they were a sort of miniature sculpture of melting ice sheets. The work was exhibited between October 26th and 29th: at this time, the temperature was low enough for the installation not to deteriorate within hours, and yet high enough for the thawing of the ice blocks to be noticeable. The encounter with the ice blocks was conceived as a multisensory experience: one could walk around them, touch them, smell them, and even taste the melting water. Interestingly, by touching the ice blocks, the public accelerated (albeit minimally), their melting down process.

This work too, we submit, is *weakly* interactive: to instantiate it fully, it is sufficient to install ice blocks originating from icebergs, which are interesting enough to be contemplated as a sort of melting sculptures, and which indexically refer to the icebergs. Members of the public can contribute to producing a more *authentic* instantiation of the work, however, by touching the ice blocks wittingly – a kind of interaction that occurred quite often during the work’s instantiations (some people were even seen embracing them). Namely, those who touch the ice blocks wittingly, find themselves in the position to see the whole situation they are experiencing as exemplifying the class of situations where human beings contribute to the melting of ice – first and foremost the melting of ice sheets, because of the human-caused global warming process. Thus, they can draw a parallelism between the situation the ice blocks indexically

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKNzG9I8Ero>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information see: <https://glaciermelt.is/>. The Copenhagen exhibition of the work opened on October 26th, to coincide with the publication of the United Nations IPCC’s *Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change* and indicate that Eliasson’s work was meant to convey concern for climate change – a topic that has been key to his practice for decades. The work was subsequently exhibited in Paris (2015) and at two locations in London (2018–2019).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.soe.tv/video/ice-watch-2014>.



refer to, and the situation produced by their interaction with the work's environment. Interaction through touch, then, enhances the work's exemplificatory content.

Again, our view is that to instantiate this work fully, as well as authentically, no specific affective reaction is necessary on the part of the public. However, we submit that, by interacting with the installation environment, thus contributing to the authentic instantiation of the work, one is likely to have the following affective reactions, which the haptic experience of the ice blocks can intensify: to begin with, one's experience is likely to be tinged with sadness, as one perceives that the ice is melting, figures that the installation environment will not last long and, most importantly, understands that the ice blocks are meant to point to (indexically and/or pictorially) the melting of an ice sheet, caused by global warming. Furthermore, in those aware that the global warming process is caused by human activities, the experience of the work is also likely to be tinged with guilt. The feeling of guilt can be intensified, we submit, if one realizes that one has, if only minimally, contributed to the melting of the ice blocks by touching them and that this situation exemplifies the class of situations where we contribute to the melting of ice – first and foremost the melting of ice sheets, because of the global warming process.

*Ice Watch*, then, we submit, is another work of installation art that has affective character, grounded in its indexical and depictive properties, as one of its key features. As Viola (2021: 234–235) argues, some artifacts may trigger emotional judgements in virtue of the information retrieved from them: a xenophobic propaganda poster, for instance, “may scaffold appraisals of fear in some observers” (235). Similarly, it seems to us, *Ice Watch* triggers feelings of sadness and guilt in virtue of the fact that it conveys information about global warming.

### 5.3 Chiharu Shiota, *the Key and the Hand* (2015): A Case of Symbolic, Affective Installation Art

This work's environment is constituted by a huge web of red yarn suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space, two boats on the floor beneath the web, more than 50.000 keys attached to the end of each piece of yarn composing the web, a photograph of a child holding a key in the palms of her hands, and four monitors showing videos of small children recounting memories from before and immediately after they were born. Many elements of the environment have symbolic character, as the artist herself elucidates:

Through my installation objects (the boat and the keys), my aim is to represent memories, opportunities and hope. The hanging old keys represent all these human conditions. They are held by a boat which symbolizes

a hand wrapping and gathering each human being along with their important features. Visitors may feel as if walking around an ocean of memory. The keys are connected to each other by thousands of red strings. Keys are everyday objects that protect valuable things and by coming into contact with people's warmth on a daily basis, the keys accumulate a web of memories that coexist within us. They are a medium that conveys our true feelings and they are connected to one another just as humans are. They even resemble the shape of a human body.<sup>12</sup>

To put it simply: the keys symbolize human beings, the web symbolizes the many memories connecting a given subject to many other human beings, and the boat symbolizes the attempt to keep those connections together.

This is yet another case of weakly interactive installation art. The work is fully instantiated by installing the complex environment devised by Shiota. However, by mindfully entering the work's space, and especially the area encompassed by the web, any member of the public can produce a more authentic instantiation of the work. Namely, by focusing on one's presence inside the work, one can get a more vivid grasp of the view that memories connect each of us to our fellow human beings, which the artwork conveys symbolically also thanks to the fact that it places the public within a physical web where there is room for a few people. Furthermore, we submit that, by participating into a situation that instantiates the work authentically, one is likely to undergo an affective experience of feeling moved, nostalgic for the objects of one's memories, as well as emotionally close to other members of the public, because of the highly expressive character of the whole situation, where one literally finds oneself, along with others, inside a huge, but delicate web. Finally, this is another case of installation art whose affective character is one of its author's central preoccupations: “Visitors may feel as if walking around an ocean of memory”, says Shiota.

### 5.4 Richard Serra, *the Matter of Time* (2005): A Case of Sensory, Nonrepresentational Affective Installation Art

This work's environment is comprised of 8 giant weathering steel spirals and ellipses. All pieces are 4,3 m high and in total they weigh 1034 tonnes and cover a 5200 square meters wide area (Hughes 2005).<sup>13</sup> They are currently installed at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, where the architectural structure of the building allows to grasp the whole work

<sup>12</sup> <https://2015.veneziabiennale-japanpavilion.jp/en/project/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/jun/22/art>.



from above, with a single look. Serra, however, dismisses metaphorical and imagistic interpretations of his work, and stresses that what matters to him is perception (Serra and Foster 2018: 151). The work, thus, is conceived – successfully, it seems to us – as non-representational. Among perceptual qualities, Serra is more interested in shape, than in colour and haptic properties: “the work is more responsive to its form-making than to anything else. It has to be inventive as form first; if it’s not, it’s not going to function in any of these other ways, which are attributes” (115, see also pp. 12; 121).

Moreover, from Serra’s description of the making of this and similar works it emerges that the sculptural environment is envisaged as *strongly* interactive: a full instantiation of the work, we submit, is one in which the public interacts with the sculptural environment from within, and the appreciative focus of the work is the situation that is thus produced.

As the single Ellipses developed into the double Ellipses and then into the Spirals, and the configuration of the interiors became more complex, so did the experience of time. Once I placed a smaller ellipse inside a larger, it became evident that if I connected one to the other the connection would form a spiral. As you follow the given path in the Spirals, everything on both sides—right and left, up and down—changes as you walk, and that either condenses your sense of time or expands it, making you feel anxious or relaxed, as you try to anticipate what will happen next or attempt to reconstruct the path you’ve already walked. It can be a disorienting experience. Internal time is even more intensely registered in the Spirals than in the Ellipses. It’s not time on the clock, not literal time. This different temporality—it’s subliminal—distinguishes the experience of the sculpture from everyday experience. (Serra and Foster 2018: 112).

As Serra explains, the work’s function is to facilitate experiences that, thanks to the spatial affordances of the steel spirals, invite the public to experiment with the sense of time. A *full* instantiation of the work, then, we submit, takes place whenever a member of the public explores its place. Furthermore, an *authentic* instantiation of the work takes place whenever a member of the public figures out that the sculptural environment is supposed to make them focus their attention on how their sense of time changes depending on their surroundings.

Finally, as it emerges from Serra’s statement, the work is envisaged to be likely to elicit specific affective reactions in those members of the public who contribute to its authentic instantiations: the mindful performer is likely to

feel at times anxious and at times relaxed and, because of this, disoriented too. Again, affectively reacting to the work is not necessary to instantiate it fully or authentically, but it is a likely result of its authentic instantiation. Moreover, the capability of arousing affective reactions is a key feature of this work: as it emerges from Serra’s statement, the point of the work is to allow people to experiment with certain affective reactions to spatial experiences. Since the work is designed to have an impact on our affective states exclusively via its sensory qualities, it is a case of sensory, non-representational, affective installation art.

### 5.5 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 1990 (pad Thai)* (1990): A Case of Psychoactive, Nonrepresentational, Affective Installation Art

So far, we have examined works that are fully and/or authentically instantiated via the interaction between their environment and single members of the public – albeit they can be experienced by several members of the public at once. Those works can be compared to musical compositions for soloists. There are, however, some affective works of installation art that are fully and/or authentically instantiated by situations where different members of the public interact with each other. They can be compared to musical compositions for ensembles. A case in point is Tiravanija’s *Untitled 1990 (pad Thai)*. The work has been instantiated for the first and only time in 1990, at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York. It is, however, the first in a series of similar works produced by the artist. The gallery space was arranged as a sort of spartan communal kitchen, with all the necessary utensils for cooking, serving, and enjoying a Thai dish that was beginning to become widespread in the Western world at that time: pad Thai.<sup>14</sup> The artist, who is Thai, cooked pad Thai in the gallery, with the assistance of some friends, and invited the public to eat it.

The work had nonrepresentational character: it did not represent a kitchen environment; rather, it consisted, partly, in a kitchen environment. The work was, also, strongly interactive: its full instantiation consisted in the situation that took place when the artist and the public activated the kitchen space to prepare a meal and eat it. Moreover, the installation environment allowed each member of the public to interact not only with it but also with other human beings

<sup>14</sup> Tiravanija is aware that the popular history of pad Thai attributes its creation to a general who wanted to create a signature Thai dish by incorporating into Chinese noodles typical elements of traditional Thai national cuisine, such as peanuts, chili, and tamarind. According to this account, pad Thai is a product of colonialism, and it is ironic that it became strictly associated to Thai’s national culinary identity (<https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/the-lives-of-objects-rirkrit-tiravanija-in-conversation/>). For more information on the work see Yao (2019).

who were participating in the instantiation of the work. In so doing, we submit, participants produced more authentic instantiations of the work. Furthermore, we claim that by participating in the work one was likely to experience positive affective reactions produced by the whole convivial situation, and particularly by its psychoactive element: pad Thai. Consuming spicy, warm, flavourful food – a psychoactive substance – made the work likely to arouse positive feelings in the public interacting with it. Again, this is a work that has affective character at its core.

### 5.6 Jens Haaning, *Turkish Jokes* (1994): A Case of Sensory, Nonrepresentational, Affective Installation Art

This work is a sound installation, which was first instantiated in Oslo, and has then been instantiated in several European cities where Turkish immigrants live.<sup>15</sup> Being sound based, it is a sensory, nonrepresentational work. The artist recorded Turkish immigrants telling jokes in Turkish and then broadcasted the recordings through loudspeakers attached to lampposts in the Turkish areas of the cities where he installed the work.

*Turkish Jokes*, we maintain, is weakly interactive: to instantiate it fully it is sufficient to install it in urban locations selected by the artist. To instantiate it authentically, however, it is necessary that people who speak Turkish hear and understand the jokes. An authentic instantiation of the work is a situation that allows people who can speak Turkish to pay attention to the unusual fact that Turkish jokes are being broadcasted in the streets of a European city. The number of people who contribute to the authentic instantiation can, of course, vary: the joke-broadcasting situation is authentic enough if there is just one person listening to the jokes, but the work is clearly conceived for being experienced by various people at the same time, and it is such that it facilitates interaction between listeners. An authentic instantiation of the work, we submit, is likely to provoke an affective reaction in the public: Turkish speakers who hear the jokes can laugh to them and enjoy sharing the funny moment. *Turkish Jokes* is, as it were, a case of *comedic* installation art.

## 6 Affective Installation Art and the Self

So far, we have seen that the notion of affective artifact and Colombetti's taxonomy of affective artifacts help elucidate how some works of installation art are structured. In this section, we consider how the works of affective installation

art under consideration can help us cast more light on the links between affective artifacts and the self.

As we have seen (Sect. 2), there are plenty of affective artifacts, some of which matter to our sense of self because we recognize ourselves in them and sometimes even describe them as extensions of our selves – Piredda calls them “personal affective artifacts”. As already stressed, typically, affective artworks are not personal. In what follows, we claim that the affective works of installation art examined above can however entertain other interesting relations to the self, in virtue of their affective and interactive character: some can expand our knowledge of our affective lives and others can contribute to the construction of our identity.

Our view is that the works examined in Sect. (5.1) to (5.4) can enhance our knowledge of our affective lives. How does this happen? As argued above, all the affective works of installation art discussed in this paper are, like e.g., a comedy movie, or a tragic novel, works that have affective character at their core. Unlike movie, novels, and works in many other art forms, however, affective works of installation art immerse the public in interactive situations. Our affective responses to them are reactions not to objects or events we experience from a distance, but to situations we are part of. In particular, the situations we experience while interacting with the works examined in Sect. (5.1) to (5.4) are highly unusual ones, while the ones we encounter with *Untitled 1990 (pad Thai)* and *Turkish Jokes* (Sect. 5.5. and 5.6) are, to a certain extent, common ones (consuming a meal with other people and listening to jokes). Consider *Triple Bluff Canyon*. Nelson has his public go, so to speak, on an imaginative, immersive journey from places where art is consumed (the cinema) and produced (the artist's studio) to war-stricken areas of the Middle East – environmentally and culturally damaged landscapes that, arguably, usually feel remote and unrelatable to most of the public of his work, which lives in other parts of the world. He makes sure that, during this journey, the public has a good chance to feel negatively affected by what they imaginatively experience and to look for hope in the promise of the survival of civilization. The immersive situation of Eliasson's *Ice Watch* is unusual, too: the work prompts the public to inspect and touch massive ice blocks – which used to be icebergs – in the process of melting down, thus confronting the public with the heart-breaking reality of global warming. Shiota, too, with *The Key and The Hand*, devises an extraordinary situation, where one is surrounded by everyday objects and sculptural elements with easily accessible symbolic character, that are well suited to provoke feelings of nostalgia as well as of connection. Serra, finally, with *The Matter of Time* immerses the public within a monumental, unique sculptural installation, which allows one to experiment with how one feels and emotionally reacts to the passing of time,

<sup>15</sup> For several descriptions and critical assessments of the work see Pécoil and Haaning (2003), pp. 104-6; 125; 144-5.

depending on how one's physical environment is structured. When these works succeed in arousing the envisaged feelings and emotions in the public, the situations instantiating the works *exemplify* those affective responses – they make them salient, they direct the public's attention towards them (see e.g. Goodman 1976: chs. 2 and 6). This is facilitated by the fact that, if we react affectively to a certain situation that, albeit immersive, we know to be experiencing within an artistic context, our behaviour is likely to look remarkable to us. Relatedly: it is because we do not react affectively to any artwork, and because not any artwork that is capable of arousing feelings has affective character at its core (recall Botticelli's *Venus*) that it is natural to take our affective reaction to the installations discussed in this paper as a sign of those works' success. Interestingly, as Elgin (2017: 190; 205–220) and Briesen (2023: 2655–2660) argue, exemplification plays an important epistemic role, because it helps us appreciate aspects of the world that we would otherwise overlook. This is true, we submit, of our affective reactions to the situations presented by the four works under consideration. By exemplifying our affective reactions to them, those situations reveal to us how we can be emotionally affected by things that, under normal conditions, we might otherwise not notice, because of lack of access and/or attention: the physical and cultural devastation caused by wars we do not directly take part into, extreme consequences of the climate crisis that we hardly or seldom experience firsthand, the value of human relationships, and how the structure of the physical environment impacts us. We conclude, then, that the affective works of installation art examined in Sect. (5.1) to (5.4) can expand our knowledge of our affective lives.

Let us now go back to the works examined in Sect. (5.5) and (5.6): *Untitled 1990 (pad Thai)* and *Turkish Jokes*. Our view is that these works of installation art can contribute to the construction of our identity, in virtue of their affective character. The two works are such that their authentic instantiations can prompt experiences of collective action, where collective identities are construed – experiences that can be made more powerful by the affective responses the works typically arouse in the public. In experiences of collective action, the “I” can discover that they are part of a “we”. Our view is grounded in social psychology theories of collective identity. As David Snow explains,

Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘others.’

Embedded within the shared sense of ‘we’ is a corresponding sense of ‘collective agency.’ This latter sense, which is the action component of collective identity, not only suggests the possibility of collective action in pursuit of common interests but even invites such action. (Snow 2001: 2213).

Collective identities can be construed in a variety of contexts: from groups of friends to members of the same religious community, from supporters of a certain sport team to dwellers of the same neighborhood (2214). Thus, it seems that a collective identity can also be construed in the art public context. Interestingly, the experience of collective action can ground the constitution of a collective identity (see, e.g., Calhoun 1991; Melucci 1989). Finally, since our collective identities are part of our personal identities (Gamson 1991), we claim that affective works of installation art that can contribute to the construction of our collective identities can also contribute to the construction of our personal identities.

Consider *Untitled 1990 (pad Thai)*: to be fully and authentically instantiated, the work required various members of the public, as well as the artist and some of his friends, to act jointly. The impact of this work was such that it became a paradigm case of “relational art” – a term coined by Bourriaud (2002) to refer to a series of works which gained prominence in the 1990s by facilitating various forms of relationship among members of the audience. Namely, as Claire Bishop observes: “His [Tiravanija’s] installations reflect Bourriaud’s understanding of the relations produced by relational artworks as fundamentally harmonious because they are addressed to a community of viewing subjects with something in common” (Bishop 2004: 68–69). Tiravanija, we submit, designed the work so that the public could perform a collective action where its collective identity as a peculiar community was construed. This was, essentially, a community of likeminded people: subjects interested in avantgarde art, and willing to contribute to an innovative artistic practice. Importantly, the situation designed by Tiravanija had remarkable affective features: the participants’ sense of conviviality was tied to the feeling of comfortableness provided by the food and there likely was also a sense of excitement at being part of an innovative artistic experimentation. These feelings, we submit, could enhance the sense that a collective identity was being built – much like our feelings of excitement can enhance our sense of belonging to the community of supporters of our football team when we attend one of its matches, and like how our feelings of indignation can enhance our sense of belonging to a certain political community when we join a political demonstration.

Let us now look at *Turkish Jokes*. Here, with a simple device, the artist makes it possible for some passers-by to



laugh together in a way that is conducive to the construction of a community whose members, of course, tend to be the Turkish immigrants present at a given time where the work is installed. Obviously, however, the work does not contribute to the construction of the collective identity of (most of) the laughers as Turkish immigrants, as that identity is, presumably, already well-formed. Rather, it leads to the construction of another form of collective identity, that challenges the usual self-perception of immigrants as out of place: an identity based on the awareness of belonging to the community of people *who are in the right place*, since they can get the jokes and laugh at them. The affective character of the situation does not merely enhance the capsizing of the usual immigrant experience and the building of the community of laughers but, in point of fact, makes it possible.

In this section, we have argued that some affective works of installation art can expand our knowledge of our affective life, while others can contribute to the construction of our identities. This raises the hypotheses that those works, in addition to being affective artifacts, could also be cognitive artifacts, i.e., “physical objects that have been created or modified to contribute to the completion of a cognitive task, providing us with representations that we employ for substituting, constituting or complementing our cognitive processes, thus modifying the original cognitive task or creating a new one” (Fasoli 2018: 681). More specifically, it seems that the works under consideration are well-suited to complement our cognitive processes, by revealing aspects of who we are. To assess this hypothesis, however, we would need to discuss whether the works analysed in this paper have been *created* to perform cognitive functions or they are such that they can only *accidentally* reveal aspects of who we are. This is matter for another paper.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at some works of installation art through the lens offered by the notion of “affective artifact”. In the first place, this allowed us to show that various works of installation art have affective functions at their core, not unlike comedies and tragedies. In the second place, it has emerged that, although affective works of installation art, just like other affective artworks, do not typically contribute to the constitution of our sense of self, they entertain other peculiar relationships with the self: some are especially suited to contributing to expanding our knowledge of our affective lives, while others can contribute to the construction of our identities.

**Acknowledgements** We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. Elisa Caldarola’s work for this paper was funded by the European

Union under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Program (Project 101068795 - IEIA) of the European Research Executive Agency. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or of the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

**Author Contributions** Elisa Caldarola wrote sections 1,2,3,4, 6 and 7 of the paper, while section 5 (and its subsections) were written collaboratively by Elisa Caldarola and Javier Leñador.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Torino within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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