XLIEUX, 2009

Concept: **Wun Ting Wendy TAI**

Execution: **Joe Chunzu LIAO**

              Wun Ting Wendy TAI

Museum as a Non-Place

The limitations of installation art, in the sense that is described by Rosalind Krauss in *Sculpture in an Expanded Field* (1979), has become increasingly apparent with the evolution of how art is received and understood. Indeed, as an art form, it can still be challenging and exciting, and by no means am I trying to delegitimize its potential within the realm of fine art. However, contemporary installation art has become so intimately interwoven into the institutional fabric of the art gallery/museum that it has lost its former transgressional streak. It is this challenge of reinjecting institutional confrontation into installations that is the primary motivation for this project. To do so would require a rethinking of what exactly contemporary installations should be.

Critique Through Engagement

The methods of institutional critique employed by artists like Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke has become the norm for contemporary artistic practice; while indeed their work has made a seminal art historical impact on how we critically regard the museum as an institution, such 'radical' practices have become so absorbed into the system that institutions themselves are paradoxically commissioning artists to create such works (eg: Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free),* 1992, in which viewers are invited into a gallery space transformed into a kitchen). Despite the 'immersion' that typical installation art provides for viewers (like inviting them to walk into a piece), it is still a game that the artist invents, and that the viewers are merely passengers in. So-called transgression has become a civilized activity that is embraced, preserved and promoted by art galleries/museums - it has become a dominant institutional discourse.

There seems to be a need to come up with an entirely different approach.

Claire Bishop, in her book *Installation Art: A Critical History*, suggests that contemporary installationism can be traced back to the radical art of the 1960s. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger observes that the avant-gardist art of the 1960's was primarily inspired by the

transgressive aesthetics of Duchamp, Dada and Surrealism, under what he termed at the time as 'deconstructive art'. According to Graham Coultier-Smith, if we consider installation art in a broader aesthetic-historical framework, we can then argue that the roots of contemporary installation art are found in 'deconstructive art'[1].This is the viewpoint that I have taken upon for my project.

Bürger states that deconstructive art begins as a transgressive force ('anti-art'), pulling apart the traditional concept of the work of art as precious and eternal; subverting the falseness of harmonious composition; critiquing the bourgeois institution of art at all levels; and, crucially, attempting to 'reintegrate art with life-praxis'[2]. As galleries/museums become all-embracing, artists have also become complacent towards the institution (and who wouldn't be, considering all the rewards to be reaped?); many pieces created today are intended to be gallery-bound and are hence socially segregated. A return to the approach expounded by deconstructive art may overcome this: that critiquing the notion of the high and mighty institution goes hand in hand with social involvement. Only when the art is accessible (mentally, physically, financially) to anyone, that the museum's authority can be taken into question. Walter Benjamin noted in his *Work of Art* (1936) essay that mechanical reproduction took over the social role that painting and sculpture once possessed. Seventy years later, Coulter-Smith suggests that if we move beyond sculptural installation art and embrace what is now known as digital interactive installation art, or 'new media art' (what was 'cinema' for Benjamin back in the day), "we may be able to find new alternatives to better reintegrate art with society and everyday life."[3] An example would be Oda Projesi's projects; with the use of new media, they function "as a field that exposed how the work of art acquired a place in everyday life, within a public space, and how it was coded with different meanings, thus engendering different readings"[4]. Perhaps this is where the answer lies, as media art is fundamentally interactive and entails a sociocentric, rather than an author-centric approach towards art.

Place vs. Non-place

The French legal expression *non-lieu* suggests a lack of trace or evidence of implication in a matter. As a clever play on words, the French anthropologist Marc Augé presents the concept of *non-lieux* as the antithesis of the anthropological notion of *lieux*, or "place". Briefly put, anthropological place signifies a space that is invested with meaning by its inhabitants who derive an identity and community from it; it has a history, it is ridden with rituals, there are relationships and interactions amongst individuals. A non-place would be what a place is not;

---

[1] Graham Coulter-Smith, *Deconstructing Installation Art* (Southampton: Casiad Publishing, 2006) 1-2
[2] Peter Bürger, *Theory of Avant Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 50
[3] Graham Coulter-Smith, *Deconstructing Installation Art* (Casiad Publishing, 2006) 1-2
[4] Oda Projesi, http://www.odaprojesi.org/12/galata-2.html (accessed March 12, 2009)

as Augé explains, it is the product of technological advances that have vastly increased local and global mobility. Non-places are devoid of meaning, identity, or community; the space creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude[5]. They are spaces formed in relation to certain ends, to get from one place to another. While Michel de Certeau draws a parallel between 'place' as an assembly of elements coexisting in a certain order, and 'space' as an animation of such places by the motion of the moving body[6], there is a greater polarity between 'place' and 'non-place'. Which is not to say that the latter two are not porous; neither exist independently of one another, and later on in Augé's career, he will revise his initial theory regarding non-place; rather than an observable fact, it is a matter of perception, how you perceive the space – "Un aéroport, par exemple, n'a pas le même statut aux yeux du passenger qui le traverse et aux yeux de celui qui y travaille tous les jours[7]" ("an airport, for example, has not the same status in the eyes of the passenger who passes through as in the eyes of those who work there everyday"[8]).
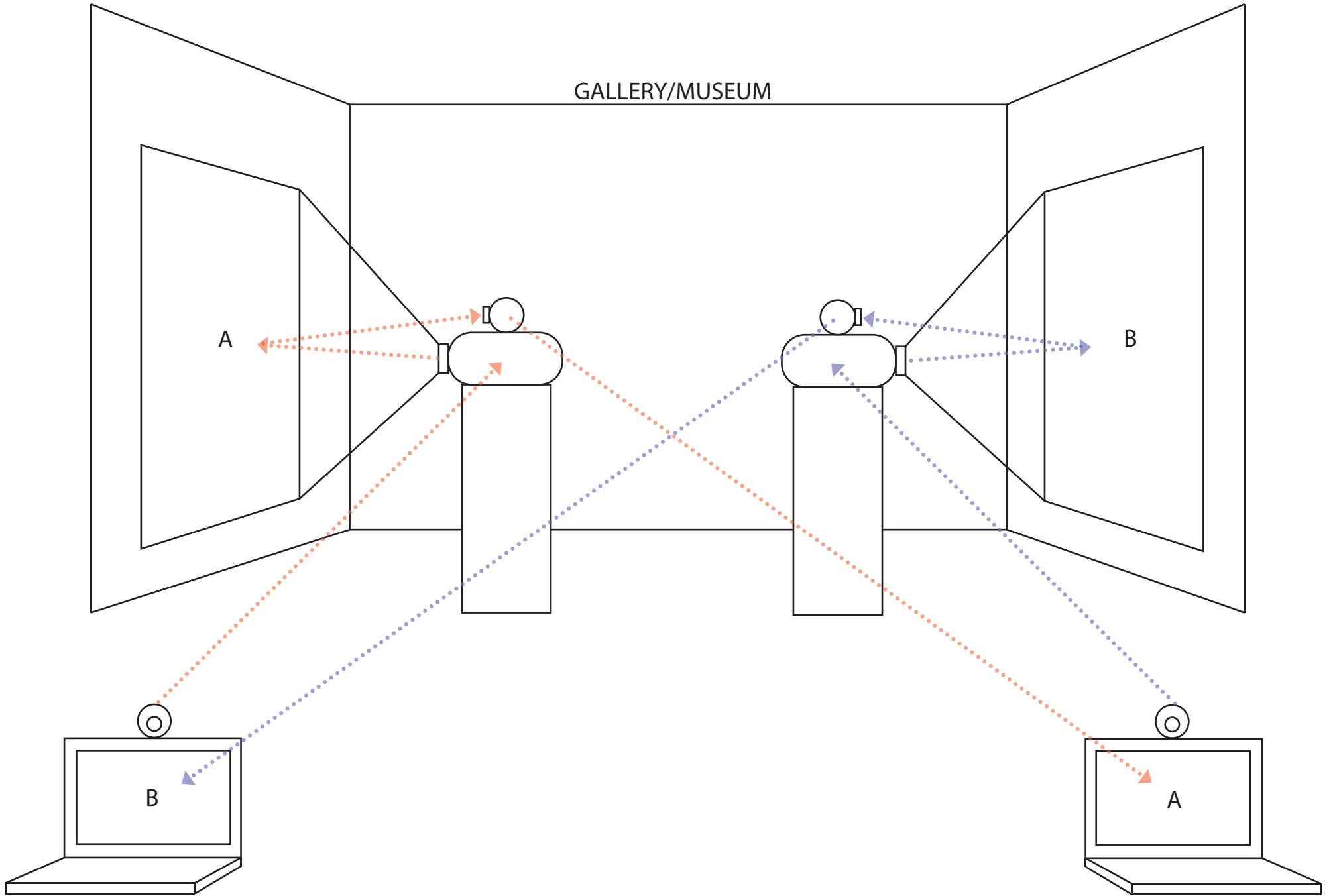
The Institution as a Non-Place

The gallery/museum is a place. I propose to turn the gallery into a non-place, through new media and social engagement. In order to do so, the gallery itself is symbolically eliminated; shut off from viewers, turned into something that no one would go to, no point to arrive at – hence the giant X blocking the entrance. Through the *xlieux* website (http://xlieux.net), viewers are encouraged to call in and interact, engage in conversation with and see each other by the use of webcams, just like everyday video conferencing. What is different, and what the participants may or may not know, is that the image of their faces is each fed to a projector in the gallery, turning it into a space in which individuals virtually permeate the gallery walls and 'pass through' (Diagram 1). Transforming the gallery into something like a computer router, we are challenging the notion of the gallery as a 'place' and an entity of authority, reducing it to a non-place, non-lieux, *xlieux*.

---

[5] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995) 103
[6] Michel de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) 117
[7] Marc Augé, *Pour une anthropologie des mondes contemporains* (Paris: Aubier, 1994) 157
[8] Own translation

GALLERY/MUSEUM

A

B

B

A

PERSON A

Diagram 1

PERSON B