

Text read at January 15, 2009 opening at ArtSpace New Haven.

The piece I've created for ArtSpace is called "Dirt" and for those of you who haven't had a chance to go into the installation yet, it's made up of the empty gallery space, the scent of dirt, and a soundtrack. The soundtrack is a 1964 recording of a drum solo by the musician and artist Walter de Maria.

The intent of Dirt is to provide a certain experience for the audience, and the piece does not have any meaningful presence apart from the experiences it enables. While you could say that all visual art is partially realized through its reception, in this case there is literally nothing else, since the piece does not exist as a physical object that can be viewed, or touched, or passed from one person to another.

So why is this worth mentioning? One answer might be that these features make the piece virtually un-saleable, and that therefore it could be interpreted as critique of the relationship between art and capitalism. I wouldn't argue against this interpretation since I don't think it can be avoided, but it doesn't reflect my primary intent.

What seems more important is that the environment that constitutes Dirt – the aforementioned white room, scent, and drum solo – provides a catalyst to change how we experience being in the world. The effect may be fleeting, but it is undoubtedly real, and I believe there are at least two mechanisms in play.

First, the immediacy of a familiar but displaced smell makes us very aware that we are smelling. This doesn't seem like a big deal, but rarely are we conscious of this process of smelling. And this first instance, when smell meets consciousness, can't be repeated. It is a one-shot deal – a moment of unique experience that is valuable in itself.

But what happens after this first impact? A few die-hard minimalists might be reminiscing about de Maria's Earth Room, which is a sort of predecessor to this piece. But for most people, they will have their own memories and associations that come up, and maybe a few questions as well. What am I really smelling? What is dirt, anyway? What is clean? Is a white gallery clean? Etc. Last week I was reading a book called "Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life" and in about 1/2 an hour I came up with 150 words somehow related to dirt. So you get the idea: the piece is a catalyst.

There's one other thing I'd like to mention, which is the music. Walter de Maria recorded this drum solo, called "Cricket Music" in 1964, which around the time he transitioned from professional musician to visual artist. I've included it in the installation for a couple reasons, some practical and others more theoretical.

From a practical perspective, the music lets visitors know they didn't accidentally wander into a part of the gallery that was closed because it smells weird.

There's also the idea that the music encourages people to hang around a bit. I personally find that the repetitious nature of Cricket Music encourages a sort of low key

thoughtfulness but this may not be a universal response, so I'm curious to hear how some of you experience it.

On the theoretical front, simply because of the time that de Maria recorded it, for me Cricket Music represents a transition towards a dematerialized form of visual art as well as a certain ambivalence about creating art objects. De Maria went one way, from music to objects, and perhaps I am going the other way, from objects to scent.