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The Artistic Installation as a Form of Transmitting of Socially Significant Meanings*

Alexandra V. Krylova

Rostov State S. V. Rachmaninoff Conservatory, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation, a.v.krilova@rambler.ru™, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3718-0810

Abstract. The connection between art and society presents the main subject of the article. Briefly touching upon the causes of this phenomenon, which stem from the high level of communicative activity of the modern context of our lives, the author shows the connection of these processes and the need of art to absorb the vital problems of our existence — war and peace, ecology, a healthy lifestyle, the role of art, etc. Many artists today think that the absence of that connection leaves art beyond the boundaries of its relevant and called-for forms. One sign of that global tendency is the special interest in the documentary artistic practices, as well as the drifting of art outside of its traditional environment of museums and concert halls. The result is wide dissemination of the performative forms of presentation of socially significant artistic concepts, one of which is installation. While characterizing the environmental side of the issue and tracing the key points of the historical development of the art of installation, the author observes that it is genetically determined to reflect the socially significant problems. Considering the different examples of installation artefacts, the author points out their predisposition to the synthesis of arts. Introducing music to the broad palette of expression means that it not simply intensifies this influence, but, because of the processual nature of music, it possesses the effect of theatricality that manifests itself in the process of exploration of artistically organized environments on the part of the audience. Analyzing the examples of installation constructs that are situated in urban landscapes from this perspective, the author arrives at the idea that the natural consequence of the aforementioned processes is the emergence of artistically presented installations. One of the possible examples is the installation by Heiner Goebbels Everything that Happened and Would Happen based

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on texts from *Europeana: A Brief History of the 20th Century* by Patrik Ourednik. The main aim of the analysis of all the examples is to identify some of the new forms of involvement of audiences in the process of perception. While traversing through the liminal state, it is involved in the meaning-generating process and in the process of search and comprehension of the meaning, the audience acquires the chance to understand profoundly the difficult problems of modern social life.

Keywords: installation, society, performance, synthesis of the arts

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Музыка в системе культуры

Научная статья

Арт-инсталляция как форма трансляции социально значимых смыслов**

Александра Владимировна Крылова

Ростовская государственная консерватория имени С. В. Рахманинова, г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация, a.v.krilova@rambler.ru™, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3718-0810

Аннотация. Связь искусства с социумом — главная тема статьи. Кратко касаясь причин данного явления, заключающихся в высокой степени коммуникативной активности современного контекста жизни, автор указывает на связь этих процессов с потребностью искусства вобрать в свою орбиту то главное, что составляет жизненно важные проблемы экологии, войны и мира, здорового образа жизни, роли творчества и пр. Отсутствие этой связи, по мнению многих современных художников, выводит искусство за рамки актуализированных и востребованных форм его бытования. Знаком данной глобальной тенденции выступает особый интерес к документальным формам искусства, а также выход артефактов за пределы традиционных пространств — музейных и концертных залов. Следствием же становится широкое распространение перформативных форм преподнесения этих социально-значимых художественных концептов, одной из которых является инсталляция. Характеризуя энвайронментальную суть явления и прослеживая ключевые вехи исторического развития инсталляционного искусства, автор статьи указывает на генетическую его приверженность к отражению социально-значимой тематики. При рассмотрении разных примеров инсталляционных артефактов отмечается их предрасположенность к синтезу искусств. В статье акцентируется, что введение музыкальной составляющей в палитру средств не просто

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усиливает эффект воздействия на слушателя, но придаёт целому, в силу процессуальных свойств музыки, эффект театрализации, возникающий в процессе освоения публикой инсталляционных художественно организованных пространств. Анализируя с этой точки зрения примеры инсталляционных конструктов, расположенных в городских ландшафтах, автор подводит к мысли о том, что естественным следствием отмеченных процессов становится возникновение художественно-преподносимых инсталляций. В качестве одного из возможных примеров такого рода выступает инсталляция Хайнера Геббельса «Всё, что произошло и могло произойти» на тексты Патрика Оуржедника «Еигореапа: краткая история двадцатого века». Ключевой установкой анализа всей совокупности примеров становится выявление новых форм участия зрителя в процессе восприятия. Проходя через лиминальное состояние, он оказывается соучастником конструирования смыслов, и в этом процессе их активного постижения и поиска с высокой степенью силы и глубины принимает на себя сложные проблемы современной социальной жизни.

Ключевые слова: инсталляция, социум, перформанс, синтез искусств

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I am interested only in that art that changes the ideology of society... Art that only reproduces aesthetic values is inferior.

Marina Abramovich¹

arina Abramovich's words, which were brought out in the epigraph of the present article, express in an extremely precise way her basic idea: in the 21st century art cannot be free from the problems of reality, it cannot be "pure." Art, including the art of music, when drawing the Human Being into its orbit, is aimed at the activation of his consciousness, at the process of analysis of the complex, acute, painful, and, at the same time, seminal problems of contemporary society.

The answer to why this is the case can be found, once again, appearing from the founder of performative practices Marina Abramovich, who asserts: "...if we regard art in an isolated way, as something sacred and existing separately from everything, then it is not life. Art, after all, must be part of life."²

It is possible that the given assertion would be perceived by many to be too peremptory, however, it is doubtless that the concretion of art and reality is one of the global tendencies of contemporaneity, the proof of which can be provided by the development of documentary forms in all the arts, the denotation of existential objects as artistic ones in the conditions of transferring them into an environment that disfurnishes them of their initial functional belonging, and many other processes. One researcher of the contemporary musical theater writes about them the following way: "When choosing the storyline basis for their compositions, composers turn

¹ Abramović M. *Proiti skvoz' steny. Avtobiografiya [Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*]. Moscow: AST, 2019. P. 229.

² Ibid. P. 240.

to socially significant themes, raising questions of global, panhuman proportions. Similar to the experience of video art, documentary materials – texts, photographs and video recordings become for composers both a point of reliance for creating a libretto and the basic (and, at times, the sole) source, stipulating all the aspects of the artistic whole." [1, p. 132]

At the same time, we must understand that, obviously, we are claiming not that contemporary art is called upon to comprise a certain part of a normal person's being, but that the nature of the latter is changing. The consumer of art, living in the epicenter of numerous communicative practices, acquires a different demand towards the arts offered to him. The format of the "ready-made" is successful only within the framework of tradition and the classics marked by the imperishable test of time. The art of the present moment has required a different approach already during the course of several decades. The comprehension of it "not as a ready-made answer to the problematic questions of being, but rather as an impulse towards contemplation through experience, has led to implication of the public into the process of construction of meanings," has provoked the consumer of art "towards the comprehension of various levels of reality and a more profound understanding of one." [2, pp. 191-192] One of the key components of art turns out to be interactive element with a heightened degree of communicative involvement. In the format of real time, the listener/ viewer immerses into a special artificially constructed space, which, reorienting it, transforms the passive contemplator into

a participant who combines the achievement of meanings with their construction. The latter occurs on the basis of the sharp impulses received during the process of an active form of perception, instigating a search of meanings of what has been seen, not endowed with direct analogies with realities through personal experience. In 1957, Guy Debord wrote: "Culture reflects, but also prefigures, the possibilities of organization of life in a given society."3 The directedness of the artists working in the vein of an indicated tendency of transformation of life towards active contacts with society has the basis for the development of new forms of perception of art, and the first in this set, in addition to performance, is presented by installation, about which it is referred.

Installations are an environmental art4 based on the conception of the inner interconnection of the artistic object with the surrounding environment, creating an impact on the viewer involved in the process of mastery of an unusual artistic space. As the art of the surrounding milieu, it appeared by having separated itself from painting, which was more inclined towards the artistic mastery over space. The roots phenomenon of this stem towards the early 20th century avant-garde art, towards the works of Pablo Picasso within the framework of analytic Cubism with its collage technique, towards Vladimir Tatlin's counter-relief constructions, and Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and assemblages, into a constructivist kinetic sculpture.

But what is milieu? In the broad sense, it is the surrounding, the summation of the conditions in which a person's living

³ Cit. ex: Foster H., Krauss R., Bua I., Buchloh B., Joslit D. *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism. Third edition.* New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2016. P. 456.

⁴ Environment — surrounding, milieu.

activities pass. Numerous scholarly works are devoted to the impact of the milieu — whether the natural, the social, or the psychological. Installation as an artistically oriented artificial "mounting" of a limited environmental space declared in the status of art is directed towards suggestion, concentrating on socially significant themes. It is not by accident that its emergence associated with the Conceptualism 1960s. **Demonstrating** of the itself as a museum phenomenon, installation has opposed dynamicism to the academic staticism of architecture and paintings demonstrated at exhibitions.

When characterizing the researched phenomenon, Anne Ring Petersen delineates its most important distinctive features, indicating that installation:

- activates physical space and the contexts into which it is implanted;
- extends a work of art in time, thereby endowing it with a situational character;
- places the viewer's "real" experiences of a phenomenological character at the center of attention, trying to arouse the realization of the interconnection of corporeal perception, its subjectivity with a temporal expansion of artistic experience.⁵

The aforementioned particular features explain to a certain degree the directedness of the phenomenon towards the socially oriented problem range capable of transforming the organization of life. Konstantin Bohorov notes that installation: "...should not only represent in a most accessible form a certain information in a spatially unfolded form, but

problematize the very structure of representation as derivative of global historical transformations." [3, p. 169] Let us confirm by means of examples what we have asserted. Thereby, Marcel Duchamp's installation device bearing the title "1200 Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove," created for an international exhibition devoted to Surrealism in Paris in 1938, according to Hal Foster's description, presented a "...conflation of spaces industrial work and artistic entertainment..."6 This effect was predetermined by the fact that the realities of industrial labor in the guise of coal sacks⁷ were complemented by an audio setting in the form of insane laughter, German march music, as well as a hysterical dance bearing the title L'acte interrompue [The Interrupted Act]. Each detail of this symbolic space possessed social significance and, overall, conveyed the atmosphere of the indeterminacy and tension (social hysteria) perceived in society on the eve of the war.

In 1950s, the late the artists of the "New Realism" movement brought out the installation from insular frames exhibitions and museums onto the street. The interaction with the city public landscapes instigated the enhancement of the social meanings of the art of installation. Thereby, the self-destructing installation Homage to New York was characterized by its creator Jean Tinguely as "a simulacra of catastrophe" (Il. 1).

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's installation Wall of Barrels. Iron Curtain (Il. 2)

⁵ Peterson A. R. *Spatial Formations. Installation Art Between Image and Stage*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2015. 509 p.

⁶ Foster H., Krauss R., Bua I., Buchloh B., Joslit D. Op. cit. P. 354.

⁷ The configuration of space became more complicated by the fact that as a result the placement of the bags on the ceiling, the upper and the lower parts changed positions.



II. 1. Jean Tinguely. *Homage to New York*. Self-destructing installation. 1960



II. 2. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Wall of Barrels, Iron Curtain.* 1961–1962

presented a barricade of 240 oil barrels on rue Visconti in Paris, referring directly to the then recently built Berlin Wall.⁸ There are numerous examples to this.

The semantic filling of the installation constructs has affected the most varied issues of society, for example, the installation 12 Cavalli (12 Horses) by Jannis Kounellis accentuated the idea of Italy's primary connection with agrarian economics, bringing out natural values to the forefront and forcefully inscribing them into the context of the institutional American economic system (Il. 3).



II. 3. Jannis Kounellis. *12 Cavalli (12 Horses*). 1969

⁸ Foster H., Krauss R., Bua I., Buchloh B., Joslit D. Op. cit. P. 505.

⁹ Foster notes that incorporating installations into the institutional context had aroused a shock: "...shock of the reappearance of nature within the spaces of acculturation. Consisting of twelve workhorses displayed in the gallery over the duration of the exhibition, *12 Cavalli* emphatically countered any assumption about the sculptural object as either a discrete form, or a technologically wrought thing, or a discursive structure. Instead it insisted on the model of prelinguistic experience, as well as on nondiscursive structures, and nontechnological, nonscientific, nonphenomenological artistic conventions." Ibid. P. 585.

The works of Adrian Piper raise the problems of racial inequality and human rights — as can be seen, for example, in the video installation *Cornered* (II. 4).



II. 4. Adrian Piper. Cornered. 1988

Mona Hatoum's installation *The Light at the End* (1989) is devoted to the repudiation of stereotypes and clichés existent in the social conscience.¹⁰ There are numerous examples of this. It is apparent that any socially significant problematic aspect could be fit into the semantic field by installation art.

However, let us turn to the fact that the physical presence of the audience member within the space of the installation actualized new emotions oriented towards either unravelling or constructing the meanings encoded into new substantive objects or their unusual combination brought the participants into a liminal condition. This was conducive in many ways to the fact that the art of installation is synthetic, since it was formed at the

intersection of various arts, the capability of the phenomenon to assimilate any objects of the animate and inanimate world was also directly connected to various types of the artistic practices brought into the artists' range of vision. By virtue of this, musical and — to take it more broadly — sound realities have become no less significant materials for creation of installation works (see about this: [4].)

It is a curious fact that the first installation that introduced the Soviet audiences with this phenomenon, which was called "Rai" ["Paradise"] (by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, 1973), presented the space of an apartment permeated with objective symbols of various religions, the immersion into which took place with the light from a flashlight and with music. Unfortunately, it was not possible to find any information about what this musical accompaniment represented. One thing became apparent: music as a procedural temporal art when connected with the spatial plastic elements of the installation constructions endowed the resultant phenomenon with features of theatricalized reality.

While contemplating over the nature of sound installations, Nikolay Khrust notes: "Just as in self-sufficient sound installations, so in the applied sound design of exhibitory space, what seems to us as being extremely important is the prospect of the *creation of multi-variance*, which may be achieved by a multitude of means: for example, by the introduction of chance-based, interactive algorithms. As the result

[&]quot;In a dark apex of a triangular gallery in London, she [Mona Hatoum. — A. K.] set six electrical rods in a vertical steel frame in a way that resembled an abstract cage. The viewer was attracted by the sheer beauty of the red-hot rods, only, on approach, to be repelled by the extreme heat <...> Contra the cliché, 'the light at the end' of this particular tunnel brooked no escape or reprieve; as Hatoum commented, only 'imprisonment, torture, and pain' were evoked." Ibid. P. 739.

of the sound, the exhibit item really becomes a character with whom 'it is possible to speak'; with each new time, it would 'say' something new to you, while avoiding turning into a mechanical device, such as a clock with a cuckoo [the author's italics. — A. K.]."11 The audial component in the structure of installations, undoubtedly, not only endows the total work of art with dynamics, but it brings in the element of dramaturgy and play, it enhances the feeling of interaction with the surroundings. These qualities are extremely important for the realization of socially significant themes. Let us examine a few examples from the present-day temporal context.

The development of digital computer technologies has opened up new possibilities for the manifestation of socially oriented subject matter. Just as in the museum space, so in the city landscape, the art of installation attracts people by its ability to "open" our eyes towards many problems of contemporaneity. Nathalie Rotenberg, when describing the musical installation Music Works created by the "City Peloto" studio (with architect Ilan Behrman and artist Anat Behrman), situated in the center of Jerusalem and presenting a construction in the form of a gramophone, from which it is possible to emit sounds only by turning the handle, writes: "In this effort there is something more than a simple pressing of a button, — this is a peculiar summons of defiance to the Clicking Man. To a certain degree, the gramophone functions 'fitness machine': herein lies the reference to the corporeal practices

of modernity — the enthusiasm towards the healthy way of living, the struggle against physical inactivity, and a certain type of de-virtualization aroused by physical activity reminding us that music (the 'production' of music in various hypostases, or music-making) is not merely a form of diversion, but a type of work worthy of respect" (Il. 5).



II. 5. Ilan Behrman and Anat Behrman. Installation *Music Works* (City Peloton studio)

Sport and the healthy way of living is a socially significant theme realized numerous times by the selfsame studio. Such is the installation *Going Nowhere Fast*, which presents bicycles attached to bases. When the pedal is pressed, the sounds of the gramophone and drums and the light of lamps, the speedometer and the fan are activated — they become turned on, creating a visual, tactile and auditory experience of a highly emotional scale (II. 6).

Even more impressing with the idea of attraction of attention to the art of music is the

¹¹ Khrust N. Yu. The Real Aleatory in an Interactive Sound Installation. *Bulletin of the Vaganova Ballet Academy*. 2018. No. 4. P. 145. (In Russ.)

¹² Rotenberg N. Music of Public Spaces: Sounding Art-Objects in Urban Design. *Manuscript*. 2018. Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 170–171. (In Russ.) https://doi.org/10.30853/manuscript.2018-12-1.37



II. 6. Ilan Behrman and Anat Behrman. Installation *Going Nowhere Fast* (City Peloton studio)

installation The Royal Playback Orchestra, presenting a podium and twenty so-called "orchestral chairs" set up seemingly on an orchestral stage. Any passerby, when siting down to rest, unwittingly finds himself in the role of an oboist or violinist, depending on the place he sat in. The spontaneous concert achieves a culminating tutti, as soon as all the "musicians" are seated in their places. Nathalie Rotenberg writes: "The playback orchestra is 'accordant' with the playback theater — the performative artistic practice of group improvisation that intrudes into real life, erasing the boundaries between the actor, the audience member, the producer and the author-scenarist; the playback theater, just as the playback orchestra is oriented on the production meanings within the framework of of the milieu."13 As the result of the art of installation, the city is being transformed into a certain type of theatrical plaza. One such global project is *The City of Memory* by the well-known French media artists Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon, created in collaboration with the playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, who wrote the scenario

for each fragment of the installation, and composer Maxim Lepage, who created original music for this project. This monumental installation "canvas" adorns the historical part of Montreal and returns its residents to the city's sources, to history, acquainting it with the people who have invested their labor into it: their spirit is imperceptibly present within the walls of the old city. [5]

The disclosure of the theatrical potential of the interactive musical installations provoke their transferal into the theatrical milieu, at the same time, the social substantive keynote of the phenomenon remains in force. A brilliant example of such a scenic installation is Heiner Goebbels' work Everything that Happened and Would Happen. The word combination "theatrical milieu" is quite conditional for this type of work; more probably, this is a territory with an indicated division into the venue where the action is taking place and the place where the audience member is present. Thereby, the premiere demonstration of the aforementioned installation took place on an immense deserted railway station

¹³ Rotenberg N. Op. cit. P. 169.

in Manchester. This is important, since the immersion into the thicket of social life would be bereft of credibility in a refined interior of a traditional space. Regine Müller characterizes Goebbels' composition as "multimedia theater." Let us examine the constituents of this definition.

The nature of installations manifests itself in the fact that we are dealing here with the art of the environment that is purposefully constructed by the Master and saturated with messages provoking the viewer to a search for associations, the experience stressful intellectually emotional states. But this is not a static composition, everything lives, moves, glitters, and changes, which does make it possible to doubt the theatrical essence of the action. The multimedia quality is predetermined by the palette of means that realize the social underpinning. Fragments of contemporary Czech writer Patrick Ourednik's book Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century¹⁵ are placed at the basis of Heiner Goebbels's installation. In correspondence with the literary source, the installation was infiltrated with fragments of the most varied events from the beginning of World War I to the invention of the Barbie doll presented outside of a temporal succession in various language, presenting the viewer with a factual "cocktail" from what had already occurred at a particular temporal point, as well as that which is yet to come in the future.

The second strata is comprised of video sequences presenting excerpts from the program "No Comments" of the news channel *Euronews* in a similarly spontaneous

order: the atomic reactor in England, the climate in Berlin, refugees aspiring to reach the island of Lampedusa, mass protests in Hong Kong, as well as texts from various books (in the forms of titles) sounded out by performers in various languages and recounting of facts that are terrible in their absurdity: the spontaneous ceasefires on the fronts of World War I, bearing such aims as exchanging chocolates for cigarettes; 15 kilometers of killed Germans counted with the consideration of the average age of each corpse of 172 centimeters, about the project of the competition of monuments to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin, representing a motor park with red busses, where each one, instead of bearing the indication of the final station, has an inscription of the name of one of the various Nazi concentration camps and the sign "Where are you going? I am going to Maidanek"...

The most important artistic-expressive stratum of the performance is sound. Similar to the composer possessing radio technologies on a level of perfection and understanding profoundly the nature of the audio theater with its specificity of formation of an emotionally charged milieu, Goebbels forms the sound aura of the scenic installation through delicate, dynamic and diversified means.

If one could imagine sound complexes in the forms of objective substances, then within the space of installations each one of them possesses its concrete dislocation. These sound "isles" are situated along the side perimeter of the broad stage. The predominating sound constituent part of a composition turns out to be the aggressively

¹⁴ Müller R. Taumeln um die leere Mitte.

URL: https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/texts/reviews/read/1397 (accessed: 04.02.2024).

¹⁵ Ourednik P. Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century. Dalkey Archive Press, 2005. 120 p.

colored percussion texture; the latter is competed against by saxophones, their sounds directed at nontrivial means of sound production that complement the pulsation of the percussion by creaking, seemingly "sniveling" or "barking" sounds. The Ondes Martenot, the organ and the guitar form an "isle" of the softer timbral-acoustic sphere, which is rarefied by whistling and rattling electronic sounds. Regine Müller notes, that, as a result, this sound-and-noise suggestion leads to the conclusion that "you are struck by a shrill, noisy soundtrack which possesses something captivating in it." 16

A personal dramaturgy developing in a parallel way is owned by the light, the color and the landscape of the stage that changes "as the sea or a garden change in windy weather. Arches appear from mist, black buildings move by themselves on stage, performers with plangent scraping noises carry empty pedestals (while we love to dismount gods from them) along the black linoleum — moreover, the floor changes its color."¹⁷

The basis of the scenography of the performance was comprised by decorations created by Klaus Grünberg in 2012 for the project *Europeras 1 & 2* featuring music of John Cage within the frameworks of the international festival for contemporary art "Ruhrtriennale,"

the director of which at that time was Heiner Goebbels. The material attributes of this project in its disassembled appearance, albeit, which at the same time preserves the splendor of luxury, comprised the decorative party of the installation, with the consideration of the permanent realignment of its substantive visual environment. "The background drawings are not fully adjusted, but, just as the parts of the stage furnishings and technical means, are organized so to create a new object-related theater."18 Just as at times it becomes difficult to understand the words of the rumbling reverberating texts, so the visual pictures do not carry any concrete programmed meanings. This contradict the aesthetics of absence advocated by Goebbels, the producer and composer.¹⁹ The failure to understand becomes the chief meaning of the presented action, which is from the start inherent to installations, the most important element turns out to be the raucous space of associations, which in itself may be varied. For example, the interpretation of the unclosed finale, wherein the chaos of objects, colors and sounds may be associatively compared to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Arctic Sea (Failed Hope)* (II. 7, 8).

The space for imagination and the construction of meanings is presented

¹⁶ Müller R. Op. cit.

¹⁷ Shenderova A. Otdel'naya nedostatochnost'. "Vsyo, chto proizoshlo i moglo proizoiti" Hainera Gebbelsa na Teatral'noi olimpiade [Separate Insufficiency. *Everything that Happened and Would Happen* by Heiner Goebbels at the Theatrical Olympiad]. *Kommersant*. 2019. № 203. P. 11.

¹⁸ Das Theater der rätselhaften Dinge Heiner Goebbels: *Everything that Happened and Would Happen. Detlev Brandenburg German Stage (DE).* 24 August 2019.

URL: https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/texts/reviews/read/1401 (accessed: 04.02.2024).

¹⁹ Goebbels H. Estetika Otsutstviya. Teksty o muzyke i teatre. Seriya "Teatr i ego dnevnik" [The Aesthetics of Absence. Texts about Music and Theater. The Series: "The Theater and Its Diary"]. Trans. by O. Fedyanina. Moscow: Teatr i ego dnevnik, 2015. 271 p.



II. 7. Scene from the play by Heiner Goebbels Everything that Happened and Would Happen



II. 8. Caspar David Friedrich. *The Arctic Sea (Failed Hope).* 1823–1824

by Heiner Goebbels to all the participants of this multimedia installation environment, and each person finds his answer to the question: is the "ship" of European civilization sinking, or, moving in a vicious circle, does it repeat the mistakes of the past, or ...? What other versions are available?

Life does not provide any final answers...

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Information about the author:

Alexandra V. Krylova — Dr.Sci. (Culturology), Cand.Sci. (Arts), Professor, Pro-Rector for Research, Head of Department of Performing Arts Production.

Информация об авторе:

А. В. Крылова — доктор культурологии, кандидат искусствоведения, профессор, проректор по научной работе, заведующая кафедрой продюсерства исполнительских искусств.

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