

# you are here

mike bode  
ceal floyer

bill fontana

jeila galloway

mona hatoum

lynn hershman

rosie leventon

hanna łuczak

cildo meireles

kristin oppenheim

valeska soares

re-siting installations



## Kristin Oppenheim

*Theatre takes place in all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case.*

John Cage<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago, when the first cinema multiplexes started springing up alongside DIY warehouses and shopping malls in trading estates around Britain, a trip to see the latest Hollywood release was preceded by an event which rarely failed to impress. Immediately after the lights went down, a text would appear on the screen declaring that 'the audience is listening'. The effect was such that chatter in the stalls died down and the audience concentrated upon the screen and, as a result, could reflect on the sound of 300 people gazing intently upon this screen. A barely audible synthesized chord rose from what seemed to be the rear of the cinema and, increasing in volume as the chord twisted up the harmonic scale, soon threatened to deafen the listener with sheer noise. The event finished with a corporate

<sup>1</sup> Cage, John, '45 Minutes for a Speaker',  
*Silence*, 1961



logo on the screen and the gradual fading of the sound. As a piece of advertising for a sound system in operation in the cinema it was effective; as a theatrical event it captivated the spectator.

If theatre is the condition in which all human activity takes place, and art is the means by which we recognise this fact, then Kristin Oppenheim's *Tap Your Shoes*, 1996, illustrates Cage's comment by colliding the two spheres of activity into one. *Tap Your Shoes* is a sound and light installation which was originally shown at the New York Kunsthalle in June, 1996. The Kunsthalle is the site of a former theatre and sound stage, and it is to this previous role of the building as a site of performance that *Tap Your Shoes* refers. It was at the Kunsthalle that I first saw the work in *29°-0"/East*, a show which then travelled to the Kunstraum in Vienna.

Upon parting sumptuous blue velvet curtains the visitor enters a darkened space, illuminated only by a single spotlight, which creates a small pool of



light in the centre of the floor. The sound of a placid yet insistent female voice reverberates around the space, mouthing the words to a song: 'I saw a man on the uptown line ... tap your shoes ... come on.' Unsure of the surroundings one finds oneself in, the echo of the voice suggests a large space, although it is impossible to be sure in the darkness.

The effect of the spotlight in the dark is such that one is drawn towards the light in anticipation. By standing just outside the pool of light in what feels like the centre of the space, the voice seems to be more forceful: 'Tap your shoes ... tap your shoes.' The voice implores the visitor to stand in the light and perform, yet there is uncertainty as to whether this performance is for the spectator's benefit or someone else's. Is there a hidden audience in the recesses of the darkened space, who will applaud or condemn the visitor if they do as they are told? Would the move from the dark into the clean pool of light trigger some reaction or initiate a response? Is one in fact meant to avoid the light and resist its temptation? The only way to find out, of course, is to step forward into the light ...

*Hey Joe*, 1996, similarly addresses notions of the theatrical. Two spotlights loop their way around a darkened space to the sound of the artist pleading, 'Hey Joe, where you going with that gun in your hand?' The movement of the lights makes it impossible for the viewer to occupy the spotlight for more than a fleeting moment, whilst the soundtrack creates an even more tense atmosphere.

By inviting the viewer to participate in her work, Oppenheim requires him or her to embrace the theatricality of the scene and then 'complete' the work with a performance, whatever form that may take. That this experience is encountered in the context of an art gallery affirms Cage's belief that theatre is the structure around which human life operates and that only art can reveal this truth.

James Tate