

*Abstract*

This paper discusses the issue of replacement of photographic material in (conceptual) installation art in relation to a site-specific character, illustrated by an installation by Joseph Kosuth, 'One and Three Glass' (1965) and a sculpture by Ger van Elk, 'The Wider, the Flatter' (1972). A lot of questions arise when these matters are discussed and contradicting opinions become apparent. These different views combined with art historical research gradually lead up to the decision-making process of possible conservation treatments and a guideline to re-installation as part of the EU-funded research project 'Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art'.

*Keywords*

modern sculpture, photography, conceptual art, site-specific installations, conservation ethics, artist's intent, artist's opinion, retrospective view

## To replace or not to replace? Photographic material in site-specific conceptual art

Sanneke Stigter

Kröller-Müller Museum  
Houtkampweg 6  
6731 AW Otterlo, The Netherlands  
Tel.: + 31 318 59 6176  
Fax: + 31 318 59 1515  
E-mail: Sanneke@kmm.nl  
Web site: <http://www.kmm.nl>

### Introduction

Photography is often used by conceptual artists because of the objective and mechanical nature of the medium, which suits their ideas. The desired possibility of endless reproduction inherent to the technique liberates the image from the personal touch of the artist. Interestingly enough the ethics of conservation are based on the unique quality of an artwork, including the original materials, which seems to contradict the idea of conceptual art.

When photography is used in modern art, conservation problems are likely to arise because of its vulnerability and insufficient preventive conservation measures. When photography is used in installation art additional difficulties may arise, especially when non-material matter determines the meaning of the artwork. When on top of that a site-specific context is part of it and the installation guidelines are not defined precisely, it is likely that future conservation or installation problems will arise. These are all issues that are subject of investigation in relation to an installation by Joseph Kosuth, 'One and Three Glass' (1965) and a sculpture by Ger van Elk, 'The Wider, the Flatter' (1972) which will be dealt with during the EU-funded research project 'Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art'.<sup>1</sup>

### Case-study I: 'One and Three Glass'

Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth explores the nature of art while he seeks 'to 'de-objectify' the object'<sup>2</sup> as in 'One and Three Glass', dated 1965, but first realised in 1977. In this 'object definition' the matter 'glass' is depicted by the material itself in the form of a large glass plate, by language in the form of the dictionary definition of glass and by image in the form of a photograph of the same glass plate in the installation.<sup>3</sup> Photography is clearly used here to solely generate an image of the object. A description of the art making process shows how little the artist has to do with the materialization of the work: 'At the end of 1976 a sheet of glass was delivered to Geertjan Visser's Antwerp apartment; a little later a photographer appeared to take a picture of it standing on the white-tiled floor of the living-room, leaning against the wall. That life-size photograph was hung beside the sheet of glass, together with an enlarged photograph of the definition of the word 'glas' in a Dutch dictionary'.<sup>4</sup> The photograph shows the very white tiles on which the piece is installed, generating a visual connection to the site.

The photograph is not only an image in this installation, but also an object. This draws attention to the fact that the photograph has additional visual characteristics apart from the depiction. These are related to time and to the choices the artist must have made. For instance the photograph is black and white, a silver gelatine print, typical of large format photographs at the time the work originated in 1965. Originally this must have been photographic paper with a barite layer, because polyethylene resin-coated paper (RC-paper) was not introduced until the early 1970s. Furthermore we learn from old pictures of the first 'object definition' 'One and Three Chair' (1965) that the photograph was attached on the wall with pushpins.<sup>5</sup> It had large white borders and the bottom part touched the floor. These characteristics contribute importantly to the visual quality of the work. In later installations and other versions of Kosuth's 'object definitions', all dated 1965, the photographs show no white borders and there are

no pushpins used to hold them up. They hang from the wall in a more sophisticated manner, most of them being RC-prints mounted on aluminium.

### **Replacement as part of the concept?**

These notions may seem of no importance when it is clear that the function of the photograph in this work is solely depicting the object within the artwork. However, they should be defined nonetheless, especially if replacement of the photograph is under discussion. What are the conditions the photograph should fulfil? This goes for the material properties as well as the depiction, because should the photograph be made anew every time the piece is re-installed in a different location?

The issue became current when 'One and Three Glass' was loaned for the retrospective exhibition 'Conceptual Art in The Netherlands and Belgium: 1965–1975' at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.<sup>6</sup> During the exhibition the work was installed with a new photograph taken at the exhibition site to meet the visual site-specific idea. It was claimed this was according to the artist's idea.<sup>7</sup>

### **Site dictated by specific form?**

It is unclear, however, how 'original' the idea of changing the photograph is, because the certificate of 'One and Three Glass' does not state such a condition. Compared with the history of similar works, such as 'One and Three Chair', we learn that Kosuth's work is installed as much outside a site-specific context, showing the supposedly 'original' photograph in a different setting, as well as with a newly made photograph related to the site where the work is installed. What the certificate of when 'One and Three Glass' does state, from a ready-made stamp, is that:

'It is the intention of Joseph Kosuth that this work be owned or exhibited exclusively in a FLEMISH [filled out by hand] speaking cultural/linguistic context. Fulfilment of this requirement is absolutely essential to the existence of the work (as art).'<sup>8</sup>

This statement is quite specific. Nothing is said about interchanging the dictionary definition, but it is made clear that the work cannot be exhibited outside the area where one speaks Flemish. So what can be concluded from the certificate is that the form of the installation dictates the context rather than the other way around. The depiction probably does not limit the installation possibilities to the site where the photograph is taken, because to prescribe a context that is determined by language implies that there are more options within this set region. The diagram on the certificate shows that the photograph should be a square print and that it should be taken from the front side of the glass plate, but nothing is said about changing out the photograph at every other location (Figure 1).

So it appears that replacing the photograph with a site-related version derives from the interpretation of Kosuth's 'object definitions' rather than from a clearly defined condition. If this idea developed at a later date, it is important to document on what occasion and when this was induced, otherwise art history can be changed unnoticed.

### **Can modern art be historic?**

The Kröller-Müller Museum did not replace the photograph after acquiring the work from Visser because the certificate does not dictate this. What materials and factors do determine the artwork? Is non-material matter part of the artwork? Yes, we know from the certificate, a Flemish area. Flemish is basically the same language as Dutch, so there should be no problem installing the work in The Netherlands instead of Belgium as the same dictionary is used. The visual site-specific character of the installation on the tiled floor in Visser's Antwerp apartment is lost when the same photograph is used in a new environment.

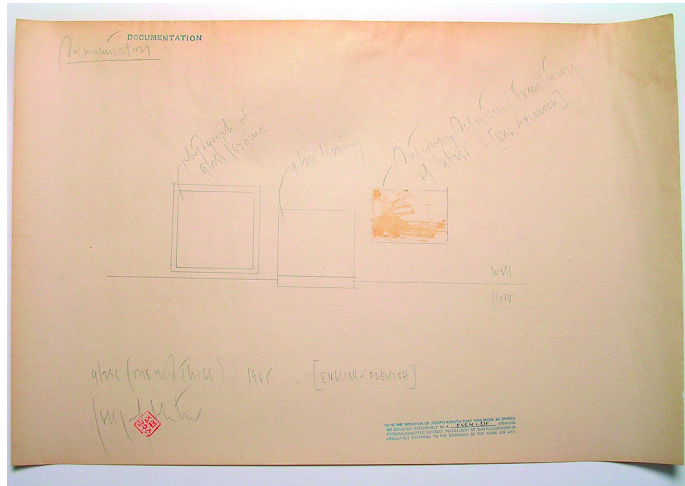


Figure 1. Joseph Kosuth, 'One and Three Glass' (certificate), 1976, pencil and ink on paper, 30.3 cm × 45.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 125.436. Photograph: Sanneke Stigter 2004

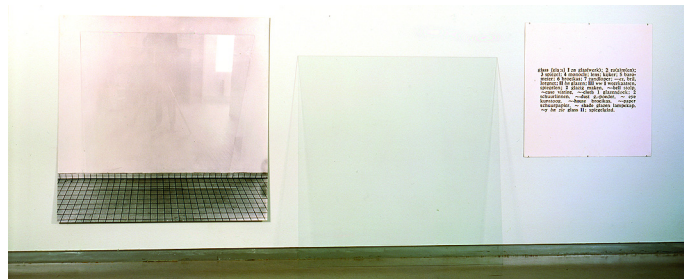


Figure 2. Joseph Kosuth, 'One and Three Glass', 1965, glass, silver gelatine prints, aluminium, installation size about 150 cm × 390 cm × 27.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 122.078. Photograph: Cary Markerink 1992

Without replacement of the photograph 'One and Three Glass' will be shown in its 'historic' form, as a piece from the Visser Collection, an important collection for the Kröller-Müller Museum, which houses most of it (Figure 2).

This may spoil the effect of the work as art if it initially was intended differently, so it is necessary to investigate this further before the artist will be consulted. Historic documents, certificates and photographs of similar works contemporary to the time when they first originated are objective and closer to the truth, then when the artist is asked about his work in retrospect. His ideas may have evolved over time, which could easily lead to fine-tuning or even a reinvention of the original work.

### Case-study II: 'The Wider, the Flatter'

'The Wider, the Flatter' (1972) from Ger van Elk consists of a triangular frame of narrow strips of aluminium, each describing a wider angle from 90 to 180°, which is flat (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> The work is made to fit into a specific corner of the Kröller-Müller Museum: a beige painted stonewall which is depicted on the chromogenic prints that are mounted on the aluminium frame. The work is to hang in front of the very same spot that is visible on the photographs, in such a way that the sculpture is covering the real area, replacing it with its depiction. The idea is that the angle in the corner of the museum is visually straightened out by the sculpture.

'The Wider, the Flatter' was first created at Ger van Elk's one-man show in the Van Abbemuseum in 1972. Here the sculpture had a different appearance, showing the white painted cloth that covered the walls of the museum at that time. The work was bought at this occasion by the Kröller-Müller Museum and shortly hereafter the artist chose a new site to present the work together with former director Dr Rudi Oxenaar. The same photographer who made the

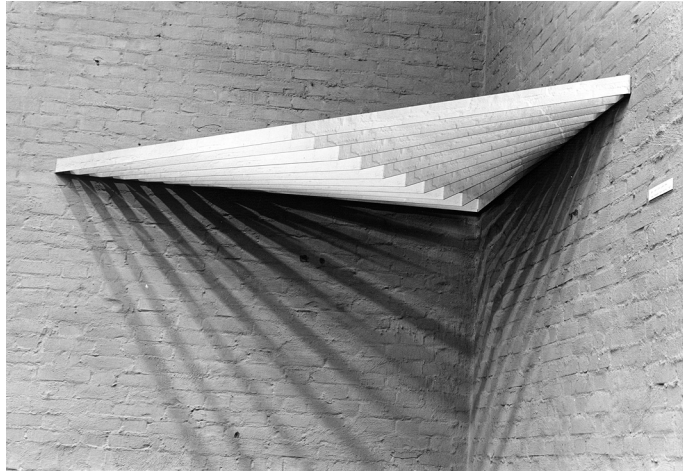


Figure 3. Ger van Elk, 'The Wider, the Flatter', 1972 (originated), 1973 (Kröller-Müller version), 1976 (current version), chromogenic prints on aluminium, 6 cm × 170 cm × 134 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 107.781. Photograph: Kröller-Müller Museum 1974

photographs of the first location was commissioned to make new photographs and a museum staff member completed the work adhering the photographs on the aluminium frame.

### Specific site or site-specific?

It could be argued that the work reached its final state upon completion in its new context after it was bought, because it was never meant to be a temporary installation. Oxenaar clearly stated that 'The Wider, the Flatter' was made for this specific corner in the museum.<sup>10</sup> There was no question of moving the artwork around. This is upheld by the fact that it was the artist himself who asked the work on loan for his one-man show at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1974 without considering interchanging the photographs. We know from correspondence the artist wished to install the work there accompanied by a photograph of the work explaining the site-specific situation.<sup>11</sup>

### Dislocation of a site-specific sculpture?

'The Wider, the Flatter' has not been on display for almost two decades because the chromogenic photographs have discoloured severely, mainly caused by the light in the bright exhibition area where the site is located, coupled with the fact that the surface is physically damaged. A lot of dust is trapped into the gelatine topcoat and even the gelatine layers beneath, describing a horizontal pattern obviously caused by an attempt to clean the artwork with a damp cloth. Furthermore the white base of the RC-paper is showing through on several places, caused by visitors who pass by too closely while the object is located in a confined space approached by steps (Figure 4).

The surface of the photographs has a so called 'silk-screen' pattern, typical of matt photo paper in the 1970s, no longer commercially available. This makes the photographs look authentic, but in fact they are not. The original photographs have been replaced after mechanical damage had incurred during transport when it travelled to Brussels after the loan to the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1975. New prints from the original negatives did not satisfy the artist at that time because the colour did not match the wall anymore. To solve this problem new photographs were made from the corner at the Kröller-Müller Museum by another photographer and the resulting prints replaced the originals.

In an elaborate interview with Ger van Elk, the artist stated that he would like the photographs to be replaced by new ones.<sup>12</sup> He furthermore stressed that the original corner once chosen by him and the former director is no longer an imperative. Any corner may be chosen, even one with tubing, as long as the photographs on the frame reflect the same corner. One should be aware of the

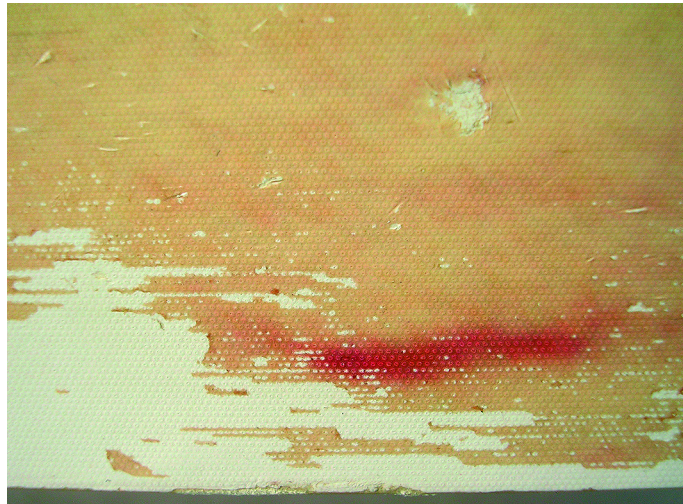


Figure 4. Ger van Elk, 'The Wider, the Flatter', 1972, 1976 (current version), Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 107.781. Detail of damaged chromogenic prints on aluminium: pigmented polyethylene base is showing through damaged gelatine layers. Photograph: Sanneke Stigter 2004

fact that the artist is interested in renewing works from his own oeuvre, constantly exploring new techniques to visualize his ideas.<sup>13</sup> The question is, however, was this work intended to be movable or is this just something the artist wants in order to breath new life into his work? There is no certificate defining the conditions in case the sculpture would be re-installed elsewhere, 'The Wider, the Flatter' seems to have been given a fixed site. When confronted with the fact that in 1974 he borrowed the artwork for his show in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam without replacing the photographs, Van Elk now says, in retrospect, that this was wrong. This illustrates how an artist's opinion can evolve over the years. His wish to disconnect the work from its original site could be nourished by fact that the work is never shown anymore. Broadening the installation possibilities raises the exhibition potential, something that is attractive to curators as well, who can easily encourage the artist in this direction.

To dislocate a site-specific sculpture and then change its appearance cannot be done without regard to the original site. Why was it chosen? Does the site contribute to the meaning of the artwork? 'The Wider, the Flatter' is located in such a manner that visitors can observe it from above and below while taking the steps. Another important connection to this site is that it is a passageway that all visitors would use to get to the paintings by Vincent van Gogh. The space is narrowed down by Ger van Elk's sculpture, so the public has to be confronted with his work, whether they like it or not. The artist liked this idea of art as a disturbing factor.<sup>14</sup> These aspects can be considered additional compared with the first location at the Van Abbemuseum, but they are true to the artist's intention with the Kröller-Müller version and should be weighed during the decision-making process. Apparently it was never intended to install the site-specific sculpture outside of the chosen corner and since its original site is still left unchanged, the sculpture's form could remain true to its specific site.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Site-specific installations and conceptual artworks give rise to many questions and ideas about material matters especially in a later phase of their existence, when time has left its traces or has taken the work on an 'artistic journey' directed by different owners, curators or even the artist himself. Various opinions and interpretations easily lead to a different or an unjust re-installation of an artwork, which will then gradually change art history. The artist may even encourage this at a later date, which is why a retrospective view should be validated with art historical research. Unconventional use of materials that have a specific or even a non-material relation to the meaning of the work, ask for a sound documentation that foresees in future conservation and installation problems.

Only then the artist's later ideas can be clearly defined and documented as can the different forms in which an installation may (have) exist(ed), to keep safe contemporary art and its future history.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

- 1 The 3-year project is part of the EU-program Culture 2000 and is coordinated by the Netherlands Institute of Cultural Heritage (ICN). Co-organisers are the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK), TATE, Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf, SMAK and MNCA Reina Sofia.
- 2 Kosuth, J, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, Guercio, G (ed.), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1991, 1993 p. 30, from 'Art after Philosophy – Part 3', first published in *Studio International* no. 917, December 1969, 212–213.
- 3 'One and Three Glass', glass, silver gelatine prints, aluminium. Installation size about 150 cm × 390 cm × 27.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 122.078. Purchased in 1995 with support of the Mondriaan Stichting from first owner Geerjan Visser, who bought it through Art & Project/MTL Antwerp, after which the work was first realised in Vissers apartment (personal conversation with Adriaan van Ravesteijn from Art & Project, 13 December 2004).
- 4 Bosch, P van den, 2000, *The Collection Visser at the Kröller-Müller Museum*, Stichting Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, 219.
- 5 As seen on plate 6 in Kosuth (see reference in note 2).
- 6 *Conceptual Art in The Netherlands and Belgium 1965–1975: Artists, Collectors, Galleries, Documents, Exhibitions, Events*, 20.04.2002–23.06.2002, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.
- 7 Rudi Fuchs, former director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, claims this is the right way to install Kosuth's 'object definitions' (personal conversation and correspondence with Piet de Jonge, curator of the Kröller-Müller Museum, 9 November 2004). Jan Hoet, former director of the SMAK in Gent, has the same opinion (personal conversation with Frederika Huys, conservator at the SMAK, 5 November 2004). Both former directors are acquainted with the artist.
- 8 Joseph Kosuth, 'One and Three Glass' (certificate), pencil and ink on paper, 30.3 cm × 45.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 125.436.
- 9 *Hoe hoeker hoe platter*, 1972 (originated), 1973 (Kröller-Müller version), 1976 (current version), chromogenic prints on aluminium, 6 cm × 170 cm × 134 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 107.781.
- 10 Conversation by Toos van Kooten with Rudi Oxenaar, August 2004.
- 11 Letter from Edy de Wilde/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam to Ellen Joosten/Kröller-Müller Museum dd. 8 November 1974, archive Kröller-Müller Museum.
- 12 Interview with Ger van Elk by Piet de Jonge and Sanneke Stigter, Amsterdam 4 April 2003, Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (SBMK).
- 13 Stigter, S, 'Living artist, living artwork? The problem of faded colour photographs in the work of Ger van Elk', in Roy, A and Smith, P (eds.), *Modern Art, Modern Museums? Contributions to the Bilbao Congress 12–17 September 2004*, IIC London, 105–108.
- 14 Evert J van Straaten, director of the Kröller-Müller Museum, remembers this from the time when the work was installed in the museum (personal conversation, 2 November 2004).
- 15 Reinstallation and conservation treatment will be conducted in close cooperation with the artist during the Installation project.