

Experience and conceptualisation of Installation Art

Marga van Mechelen

Lecture on invitation by the Stichting Behoud Moderne Kunst (SBMK) as part of the seminar Theory & Semantics of Installation Art, May 11 2006, Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht. The seminar is part of the European project Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art.

‘Over the past ten years installation art has become a mainstream art form..’

If we take the quote literally, both the cases I initially chose from the list of project case studies are either not installations or have to be considered as predecessors, dating from a time in which installation was not yet mainstream. In the case of Joseph Kosuth’s One and Three Glasses this seems to be obvious, because in the mid sixties the term ‘installation’ in the sense we use it today, did not exist yet. Revolution however is made in 1990. In the course of my talk it will become clear why this nosing into terminology and dating is important.

Though the starting point of installation art in the actual sense is questionable, there is no discussion about the list of predecessors. To name only a few canonical works such as Monument to the Third International of Tatlin, Proun Room of El Lissitzky, Merzbau of Kurt Schwitters, Porte, 12, Rue Larrey of Marcel Duchamp and other works after the Second World War such as Yves Kleins Le Vide, Le Plein of Piero Manzoni, The Store of Claes Oldenburg, Il Presente of Michelangelo Pistoletti, Specific Objects of Donald Judd, Cavalli of Jannis Kounellis, Observatory of Robert Morris, Conical Intersect of Gordon Matta Clark and La Salle Blanche of Marcel Broodthaers.

If we look at books about Installation Art (those of Erika Suderberg a.o., Nick Kaye and Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry) we will not easily find a work or the name of an artist that could be considered as at least a symbolic starting point. It is for good reason that I think all authors are avoiding the question of where to start. However, the first undisputable case seem to be in the book of Suderberg Michael Asher’ installations of around 1974. Nick Kaye’s first examples are from the time everyone still spoke about ambient art, the sixties art of arte povera. So he uses the term retroactively. Besides Arte Povera he also mentions Daniel Buren, who indeed, around 1970, used the term for his own work.

Though we get the impression from Claire Bishop’s book Installation Art, published in 2005, that examples such as Yayoi Kusama’s Peep Show or Endless Love Show (1966), Lucas Samaras, Mirror Room (1966), Vito Acconci’s Seedbed (1972) and Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro’s Womanhouse (1972) should not be called otherwise than installations, we have to keep in mind that the term is here also used retroactively. Maybe not in the case of Acconci, but Seedbed is usually considered a performance and not so much an installation. I think the shift from environment – the common term till the early seventies - to installation is easier to understand from the perspective of today than the shift from performance to installation. All the authors I mentioned hesitate to define the concept of installation art and for good reason. Is it a genre? Is it a medium? Is it an exhibition or display, a curatorial practice: to install?

Installation as a post-medium

This has not only to do with the phenomenon itself but also with the reflection on modern or contemporary art in general. The most radical changes of the last hundred fifty years started with the revolt against genre divisions. And so, more recently, for the notion of the medium. Can we still talk about media in the age of the post-medium condition? This is the question one of the most influential art historians of today, Rosalind Krauss, asks and her answer is ‘yes’, surprisingly just because of the fact that installation art is a mainstream phenomenon.

As many American art historians and art critics Rosalind Krauss thinking about media is influenced by the critique on Modernist criticism, that is to say on Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Only the utterance of the word 'medium' meant in this context invoking Greenberg. In spite of her critique, not only on the Modernist reductionism but also on the concept of medium, Krauss decided to retain the word 'medium'. What else she could have done? Another option would have been deleting the concept of medium altogether, as others did.

Joseph Kosuth for example stated that since and because of the Modernist effort to reduce arts to the essence of its media, art in general came to the fore. I quote Kosuth: 'If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific.'

Before speaking about installations one already spoke about installing works of art. The difference seems to be obvious: installing is a curatorial practice; here the individual works of art that are installed are of primary importance. Nevertheless there are certain developments within curatorial practices that don't always make it easy to distinguish between both.

In my quote from the press release of the Inside Installations project, the word art form is used and not medium. I don't know if the author deliberately avoided the word medium and chose the more general and therefore less outspoken word 'art form'. He or she is however fully aware of the difference between traditional art objects and the nature of installation works of art. I am quoting from the press release: 'Works incorporating time-based media, such as audio-visual & electronic media, net.art or performance are understood in terms of their behaviors as much as their component parts. These works often anticipate an active involvement by the spectator (interactivity) and evoke a multi-sensorial experience (sound, vision, touch and smell). These works are often created for site and time specific occasions, and demonstrate specific vulnerabilities both in terms of the contexts and technologies on which they are dependent.'

My case studies hook on a few of these characteristics. I chose an undisputable interactive work and a work that *could be* considered as site specific. My question however will be: it is site specific? Another crucial concept in this quote is the word 'experience'. What do we mean by this?

There are to say a few more things about the concept of installation. It refers to a hybrid and heterogeneous discipline that includes architecture, performance art, interventions, interaction, events, projects, land art, site specific and site sensitive art, despite the fact that it is primarily connected to the developments of the last fifteen years. It became an umbrella concept.

There is another approach I would like to draw your attention to, that of Julie Reiss. She says installation is: 'Work in which the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work'. I will argue why it is important to approach installations from the spectator's point of view.

De Appel's environments, situation art and installations

Before discussing the two cases, I would like to discuss the question of environment, situation art or installation in relation to what was presented by De Appel and how it was called in the seventies. It was a surprise to me that while I was writing my book about De Appel Foundation, a centre for environments, situation art and performances, to read that in the book of Oliviera a.o about Installation Art, De Appel was mentioned as the first venue for installation art in the actual sense.

However it was not founded as the book says in the early seventies, but in the mid seventies, in the year 1975 and was founded as a 'kind of gallery having as *its main purpose to bring about a confrontation between the public and that specific form of art which concerns the making and showing of environments, situation-art and performances*'. It was not until 1978 that the term 'installation' came into use in De Appel and was defined through Antje von Graevenitz.

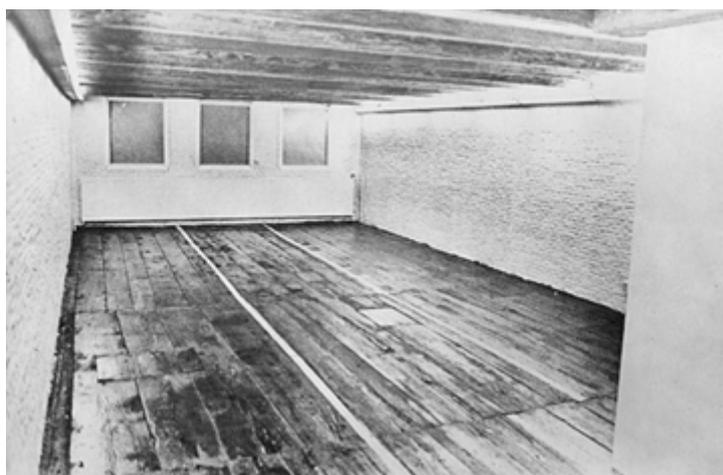
The reference in *Installation Art* to De Appel raised a few questions. Do they know where they are talking about? Is the mistake of the date of its foundation a signal? They do not mention examples and I am wondering still if they had some specific works in mind. So I was filling in what was lacking in this book. In fact there are only two options:

The first 'installation' in the year De Appel started, 1975, or one of the works that were first presented in official records as 'installations', one of them had the word in its title and was made by two world famous artists Marina Abramovic and Uwe Laysiepen.

Was it Gerrit Dekker *Een gebeuren* [an event], the first environment or situation art in De Appel? What meant 'an event'? Is it a title or the naming of the medium? Both he as well as another Dutch performance artist, Ben d' Armagnac with whom he worked a couple of years, often used the term 'an event', both in cases we would say 'environments' and 'performances'.

During his frequent wanderings in the city during which he regularly retired into public lavatories, Dekkers got the idea of soaking a floor in De Appel in chlorine. He decided to thoroughly scrub the wooden floor of the exhibition space with chlorine prior to it being opened to the public. The visitors stepped into an empty, wet space and were overwhelmed by the smell. To what extent people realized that a fairly intense event or performance had preceded this 'environment' - a performance without public? What we do know, however, is that, despite the minimal intervention, the environment did incite a lot of reactions and discussions, ranging from the justification of the environment as a work of art to philosophical discussions about purification. As I said, at the time we are talking about, 1975, the notion of 'installation' was not yet in use in the circle of De Appel.

This piece by Dekker was referred to as an environment, although the term 'situation-art' would also be conceivable. Nowadays, perhaps, we would prefer to call it an installation.



Gerrit Dekker, *Een gebeuren* [An Event], 1975

Whatever the case may be, Dekker's chlorine floor was indisputably a highly striking work that lives on in the memory of many of those who saw it at the time, even to the extent that the smell comes into their noses again when you ask them about it. Smell rarely plays a dominant role in art, but when it does it usually leaves an indelible impression. In the quote of the press release smell was mentioned as a feature of some installations.

What I want to stress is that in this case, but I could mention numerous other examples in the seventies as well, that performance and environment or situation art were entwined. An installation as the result of a performance, an installation as part of the performance. They were often considered as two sides of one coin.

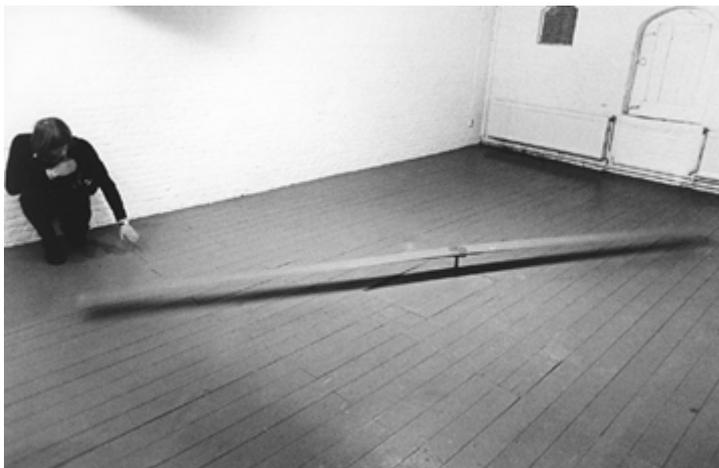
When I saw the Inside Installation project's list of cases, I was at first a bit disappointed. Compared to the examples I had in mind, I found the cases as pilot cases relatively simple. Though I realize that the opinion of people involved might be completely different. I know by now that they are complicated enough, but having the floor of Gerrit Dekker in mind, I wondered what to do with shelves of maybe 400 years old wood in a 400 years old storehouse?

The approaches of Wim Beeren en Antje von Graevenitz

In the early seventies concepts as situation art and environment in Holland were to a large extent influenced by two manifestations: *Op losse schroeven*, made by Wim Beeren in 1969 and *Sonsbeek* 1971. It is striking that though the word environment is still in use in those days; Beeren puts already more weight to the notion of situation-art. 'In situation-art', so he says, 'objects sensitize the spectator. The autonomy of the art object is completely abolished in favor of the relationship to the immediate surroundings, the "situation". Compared with the environment, situation-art takes up a more conceptual position as regards space; it can correct space, chart it, affect it, and so on.' The *Sonsbeek* exhibition gave room to participation and this we can find back in the definition of situation art of Antje von Graevenitz: situation art is not only about experience but also about participation.

In 1977, one member of the board of De Appel, the artist and art historian Frank Gribling wrote that in the next year the emphasis would be on 'environments', but these would be of a different nature than the environments from the 1960s. The new type of 'environment', was connected with the artist performing in a space. It is thus an environment that is less autonomous. Moreover, the audience is confronted with it without themselves being active in it. A year later these will be called 'installations'.

Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Installation One* is the first work made in the context of De Appel that used the term 'installation'. De Appel asked in the months before this work was realized financial support for three installations. This one, an installation of the Italian artist Francesco Mauri and The Peplemobile of Vito Acconci, a work that asked people to participate.



The description that accompanied *Installation One*, written by Marina Abramovic and Ulay, stresses that the installation emerged from their experience with performances. 'The installation (...) is based on our performance experience, and attempts to convey what we have also tried to convey by means of our performances. On the basis of its specific physical properties, the installation creates the possibility of generating e.g. a "mobile energy" without the necessity of our physical participation. This "mobile energy" can lead to an "energy or existence dialogue" with the "inhabitants".' The viewer is seen as a participant, since, as the invitation states, he realizes that the situation embraces and encloses him.



Marina Abramovic and Uwe laysiepen, *Installation One*, 1979

In 1978 Von Graevenitz, invited by De Appel, formulates the features of several types of installations. She regards the installation as a broader concept than environments or situation-art and distinguished two main types. One type in which the space plays a subordinate role and the apparatus or objects in that space are essential, was the type of installation dominant in De Appel. A second type: works in public space. In the course of time artists felt a growing need to make installations at specific locations outside the walls of De Appel, what she considered as another type. This development started already around 1979, but ultimately the concept of installation turned out to be less suitable for the presentations artists were making in the early 1980s and an even broader and, at first sight, less specific notion would be seized upon, namely the term 'project'.

Although some 'projects' did result in 'installations', the use of this term does betray a shift in emphasis: from the concrete, material situation that an artist creates and that can be experienced by the public to the (conceptual) process of investigation.

The Peplemobile of Vito Acconci and laserperformances of Botschuijver and Shaw

The Peplemobile (Project for town squares in Holland) by Vito Acconci (b. 1940) was the biggest project carried out by De Appel within the framework of sound environments. Acconci, known in the early seventies as a poet and performer felt around 1978 that he no longer needed to be present as a performer and substituted his presence in space for video and audiotapes. The works became installations, which he defined as *Cultural Space Pieces*. The Peplemobile realised in the spring of 1979, can be seen as one of the first *Cultural Space Pieces*. The Peplemobile was a Volkswagen pick-up truck which was used as the

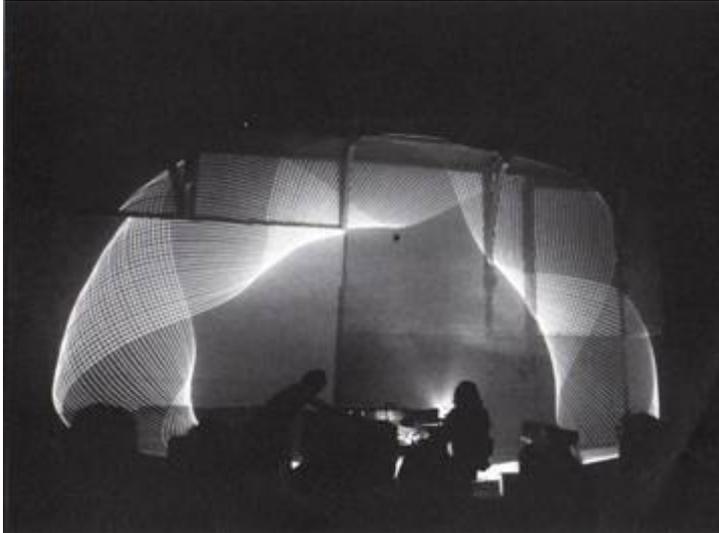
basis for a number of removable and changeable constructions that could be assembled with the aid of iron plates. A loudspeaker mounted on the truck served as the construction's voice, emitting various sorts of sounds that had to do with the urban environment, such as chiming bells and motor traffic, as well as the threatening voices of Acconci and a woman. The construction could be set up in three ways: as a table and bench, as a shelter and as a wall.



Vito Acconci, The Peplemobile, 1979

The installation travelled around the Netherlands. His insistent preaching warned the viewer of the danger of terrorism, at that time a new phenomenon in Western society. The viewer was confronted with the fact that he was sharing public space at that moment with a potential terrorist and that his life might be in danger. At the same time the viewer was invited to make use of the installation's security and to share the space with a terrorist

In the same year as the other two examples Botschuijver and Shaw did laserperformances, commissioned by De Appel. They began working with lasers already in 1972 under the auspices of the English band Genesis. The laser effects system they created was used by Genesis on two world tours and would be further developed for their tours to come. This laser system was able to create large 3D light forms in space, by means of fast spinning and scanning of the laser beam, which then materialized these forms on dust or smoke in the air. The performance for De Appel was the first time this system was shown independent of Genesis and on its own terms as a generator of light sculpture. Sound was used during the performances, both to control and controlled by the movement of the laser beam.



I hoped that I made clear by these examples how strongly the ties were between performance and installation. I think this background is important for my approach of Revolution of Jeffrey Shaw, in spite of the fact that this work was realized more than ten years later. It was and is still embedded in this tradition.

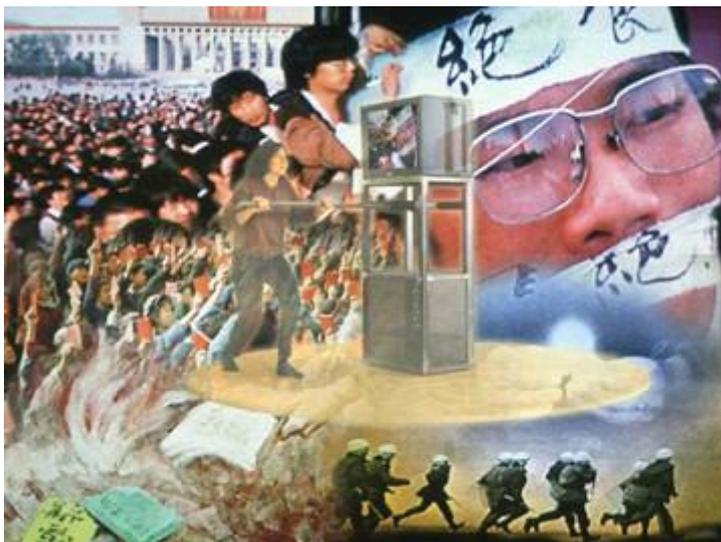
Theo Botschuijver and Jeffrey Shaw, Laserperformance, 1978

Revolution of Jeffrey Shaw

Revolution was created for the traveling exhibition 'Imago, fin de siècle in Dutch contemporary art' in 1990 as co production between the Nederlands Office for Fine Arts, now ICN and the Netherlands Media Art Institute Montevideo/Time based arts. It was acquired by the ICN in the same year. The technical devices as well as the laserdisc with the images became part of the audiovisual collection of Montevideo. In 2004 and 2005 it was to be seen in Graz and Basel after an examination of three experts. There were several problems, installation instructions were not complete, laser disc, audio player and monitor were in a vulnerable state and the question was and still is if they can be replaced. Besides that, it was not clear if all the elements were assembled.

Simone Vermaat, ICN curator has contextualized the work. To be brief: the work is related to the main issues of the sixties as there are the relation between art and life and the wish to break through established museum conventions. It was a time of experiments, events, happenings, performances intended to involve the public in art, to let it participate. Vermaat thinks the machine-like exterior is important as well as the fact that it invites to take action, to perform some physical movement and effort.

The images are collages (montages is maybe a better term), made of images dating from the



Jeffrey Shaw, Revolution, 1990

time of several revolutions. The images start with the French Revolution and show 200 years of revolutions.

Pushing the bar anti-clockwise the monitor screen shows a millstone grinding grain to flour.

I think that the basic principles of the installation are clear. It is not surprising that the emphasis is put on the technical details: what problems are we facing now, what problems we will face in the future? For that it is I think crucial to look at it from a different perspective, that of perception and use.

We all will agree about the priority of interactivity as well as the experience of a history of revolutions passing by, that is the outcome of the effort of the participant, to be precise: his physical effort. Also sound, maybe not *the* sound is important. It makes an appeal to different senses and capacities that one should experience. The impossibility of going back in history is demonstrated but is primarily an idea that could be addressed in different ways too. The 180 images are an idea as well, but the rhythm of passing two degrees at the time is an important experience.

Therefore my thesis would be: preserve the experience implied by the concept of the installation, not only or primarily the material object. Do consider it as a work that belongs to what Joseph Kosuth called 'art in general' or Rosalind Krauss 'the post-medium condition'. My advice would be: preserve the intended experience. I need to explain this. You may also call it the ideal experience if not understood in the sense of 'perfect'. I refer to the anonymous agent or agency of a receiver or participant that *the work*, not the artist, brings forward. In this case a man or woman of average length, strength, intellect and sensual capacities. It is an agency, not a specific person or actual social group. It is the addressee of the installation. When Simone Vermaat was saying that the installation *invites* to take action, this word 'invites' implied two things: 1. the intentionality of the installation – being there not only for looking at but also for doing something with, and that there is agent to whom the installation speaks.

Invitation means communication, means bringing a message, means that a process of signification is taking place, in which a addressee is implied. This agent is the 'you', a second-personhood addressed by the first personhood, the 'I' of the installation. In semiotic and narratological theories this intentionality, and the dialogue of deictic markers, are discussed more and more. And also the focalisation of vision and that which is seen, the relationship of subject and object of vision. Therefore we also, or maybe primarily have to look from the position of this addressee. Compared to more traditional works of art and media this addressee is no longer a locus of looking or a disembodied subject. The appeal of the installation is addressed to an embodied subject that has to act. I hope you agree with me that we as art historians, curators, restorers have to act accordingly in our approach of installation art.

Joseph Kosuth One and three glasses/Glasses one and three, 1965/1977

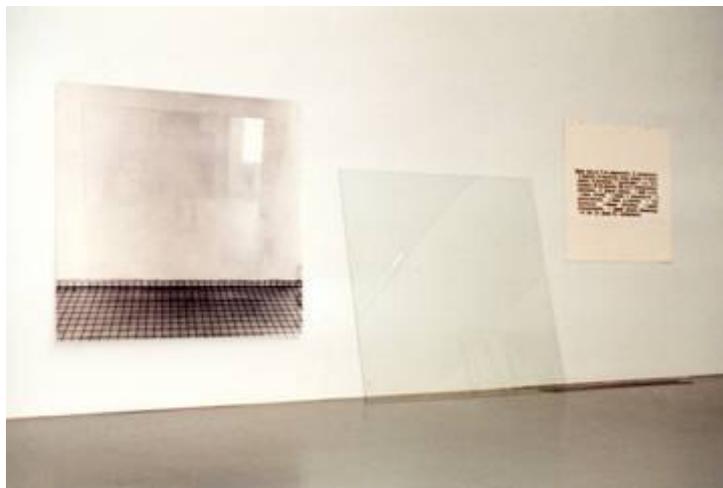
Joseph Kosuth One and three glasses/Glasses one and three is represented in three different ways: in the form of a large glass plate, by language in the form of a dictionary definition of the word glass – a Flemish/ Dutch dictionary - the photographic technique called for it is photostat - and an image in the form of a photograph of the same glass plate in the installation. The work was bought by the private collector Geertjan Visser even before it existed as a material object. A pane was delivered and somewhat later a photographer came to take a photo of the pane leaning against a wall in the house of Mr. Visser. The photo shows the white tiles of the floor in this house. Nothing in this installation is carried out by the artist himself.

Sanneke Stigter, restaurator of the Kröller-Müller Museum that is now the owner of the work of Kosuth interprets the work as follows: 'With these kinds of works he (Kosuth MvM) seeks to 'de-objectify' the object of art. He wanted to present art as an idea, without any reference to materiality, let alone a personal touch'.

What to do when the work has to be replaced from its original setting to another, as happened when it came into the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum and when it was on loan in the Conceptual Art exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam? There happened to be a disagreement between the both museums about the question to replace the photograph with a photograph of a new site, yes or no. This was proposed by the Stedelijk Museum and has been supported as it suggested by the artist.

The work is accompanied by a certificate that states: 'It is the intention of Joseph Kosuth that this work be owned or exhibited exclusively in a Flemish speaking cultural/linguistic

context. Fulfilment of this requirement is absolutely essential to the existence of the work (as art). The Kröller-Müller Museum thought that this requirement was still fulfilled when the work was moved from Belgium to the Netherlands because the dictionary that was used was a combined Flemish and Dutch dictionary. The language alone should prescribe the context of exhibiting.



Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Glasses, 1977

Sanneke Sigter uses in her analysis of the work, the word 'record'. I think this is a significant word. In semiotic terms we could also say that the work is a token that refers as a number of other tokens to the same type. We have to realize that the work from the Visser collection was and is not an authentic, original, initial, One and three Glasses. It was made in 1977, twelve years after the first sketch or proposition. And it is not the only One and three Glasses; there are more.

All the glasses photographed on different locations and all the definitions of the word 'glass' in different language editions refer to one conceptually existing and not materially existing type. The type/token relation as introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce has been applied on different subjects, amongst others on rituals as the Holy Supper. I think it could be useful here as well.

We get an idea of the current intention of the artist, if what is said about replacing the photo in the Stedelijk Museum is true. It addresses the focus on the visual site-specificness. Sanneke Sigter added some – in my opinion – very crucial and critical remarks. First she remarks that the certificate does not mention anything about the site-specific nature of the photograph, nor do other certificates of comparable works. What the Kröller Müller certificate does not tell, but the graphic sketch does, that is to say the working sketch for the executors, along with the certificates of other works, is that the image of the plate and the plate itself ought to have the same size, what is as I understood, not the case.

The question therefore is: is it a site-specific work? The certificate does not help us any further. There are in fact two for the time being, questions that have to be ask: 1. how to contextualize this proto-investigation of Kosuth and 2. how to valuate the present intention and the intentio auctoris what so ever.

There can be much dispute about how to situate Kosuth. As we know he is associated with, not to say one of the most well known representatives of conceptual art. He was the American editor of Art-Language, the journal of the English Art & Language group that praised itself as the pure conceptualists. Do we consider Kosuth also as a pure conceptualist? Do we consider his proto-investigations as 'already pure conceptual', or maybe not even conceptual yet? We should not forget that the naming of proto-investigations is done afterwards by him, with the hindsight of his development later on. His political ideas changed a lot later on. At first his thoughts were highly influenced by transcendental philosophy and metaphysics, later on he considered himself a more historical materialist 'antropologist'. What are the consequences of this postponement? I have an answer that to a larger extent overlaps with the interpretation of Charles Harrison the main advocate of Art & Language, though we have to look at some of his evaluations with some suspicion. My answer would also lead to answering the question if the work is site-specific. I think it is not. If it was indeed site-specific, the opticality of the work would be most important. I think this is

not the case, not at all the case. The work is about conceptualizing and imagining as an intellectual effort, not specifically considered as a sensorial activity. The form however is, compared to his later investigations, a pedagogical form.

If one supports the former viewpoint of the the Kröller-Müller Museum, namely that the photo should not be replaced, one could interpret this as follows: the spectator will be able to conceptualize the work, going from this token to the type. It could also be interpreted as: this work is authentic; implying that it is seen as a material object and not foremost as art is an idea is an idea. Again we have to realize that we should start with the implied or addressed spectator, as I argued in the case of Jeffrey Shaw's Revolution.

If one supports the decision of the Stedelijk Museum and to a certain extent also the Moma in New York, one should not do so because of the present intentions of the author, Joseph Kosuth, not because the artist said so, but because of the pedagogical implication of the intentionality of the work. The site-specific nature was certainly an instrument for this pedagogical aspect, but not more than that. New photographs on new photographic paper as RC-prints do not prevent us from seeing it as a token or record of a type. As we drink now French wine as sign of the blood of Christ and not Israelian wine anymore, we still are aware of its type.

Literature

Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005

Iles, Chrissie (red.). *Marina Abramovic: objects performances video sound*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1995

Kaye, Nick, *Site-specific art. Performance, place and documentation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000

Marina Abramovic. Artist Body. Performances 1969-1997. Milano: Charta, 1998

Mechelen, Marga van, *De Appel. Performances, Installations, Video, Projects*. Amsterdam: De Appel, 2006

Oliveira, Nicolas de, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry. *Installation art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994

Oliveira, Nicolas de, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry. *Installation art in the new millennium; the empire of the senses*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2003

Suderberg, Erika (red.). *Space, site, intervention: situating installation art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

More information on Marga van Mechelen:

<http://home.hum.uva.nl/oz/mechelenm>