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### INSTALLATIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS \*

In 1993 in the Kunsthhaus, Zürich, Harald Szeemann organised a retrospective exhibition of the work of Joseph Beuys who died in 1986. The exhibition was conceived as a "comprehensive homage to Joseph Beuys" and concentrated on the artist's "compelling sculptural productions".<sup>1</sup> The exhibition presented the artist primarily as a sculptor.

The art critic Camiel van Winkel wrote at the time: "This exhibition placed a one-sided emphasis on the constructive aspects of Beuys's artistic practice. An image was conjured up for visitors of a controlled and restrained oeuvre, an almost systematically arranged, comprehensive body of finished works... Evidently ways of representing the deconstructive and reconstructive components within the museum context were not sought. With much respect – too much respect – for the artistic aura of the often materially worthless objects, the works were isolated from each other, with some being placed in vitrines. Nowhere, not for a moment, is the finished-unfinished made unfinished again."<sup>2</sup> For Van Winkel, Beuys was first and foremost a performer and to present the remains of his actions as independent sculptures was pointless and wrong.

The controversy surrounding Beuys clearly illustrates the extreme polarisation of the debate about re-exhibiting temporary and/or site-specific installations like those made in the sixties and seventies by artists such as Beuys. On the one hand there is the opinion that (parts of) these installations can be shown elsewhere, independently of their original contexts. Szeemann concentrated on the finished objects which resulted from Beuys's actions: he did not hesitate to finish what in his opinion were incomplete works 'in the spirit of the artist' wherever this was necessary to make them presentable as sculptures. On the other hand, there is the opinion that installations are the material remnants of an act that has no meaning without the determining intervention of the artist. Van Winkel argued in favour of a presentation which focused on the incomplete and allowed the public to reconstruct the original impulse in their minds.<sup>3</sup>

The example of Beuys shows how two visions of the work of one artist can be diametrically opposed to one another. This example touches on the core of the problem related to re-exhibiting temporary installations, particularly if the artist is deceased.

The basis for every presentation is an interpretation by the exhibition-maker. This point of departure makes the establishment of generally applicable rules exceptionally problematic.

In 1995, Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam organised a retrospective exhibition of work by the American artist Paul Thek (1933-1988).<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was preceded by thorough research into the meaning and intentions of Thek's work.

Paul Thek was one of the pioneers of temporary installation. Between 1969 and 1974 he made a series of environments in various museums in collaboration with a group of artist friends, the Artist's Co-op.<sup>5</sup> The environments were built up from an enormous range of materials including sand, scrap wood, chicken wire, painted newspapers, utility objects, flowers and stuffed animals. Many of the materials and constructions in the environments were very ephemeral. Theatrical lighting and tapes with music and sounds from nature intensified the experience for the visitor. The public was invited to make a ritualistic passage through the enormous environments.

Thek called these environments 'processions', referring to both the working process in which they were produced and the ritual character of the process. How could Thek's environments be represented in the exhibition? His working methods confronted us with a variety of problems concerning content and technique. The environments were not so much finished art works as stills from a working process that was necessarily stopped because the exhibition had to be opened to the public. The 'unfinished' was as important as the 'finished'. Some components travelled on to other locations where they were given a new purpose. Only Dwarf Parade Table (1969) and Fishman in Excelsis Table (1970) were preserved. Could we show these 'parts' as works?

Besides the environments, Thek left behind an extensive oeuvre of autonomous works such as paintings, sculptures and drawings on newspaper. The exhibition at Witte de With largely consisted of a selection of these pieces. However, the environments could not be left out of a retrospective representation of Thek's work. It became apparent that attempts to reconstruct these environments were doomed to failure. A very free interpretation of the photographs and eye-witness accounts – all that remained of the environments – would only lead to confusion about the status of what was being shown. Instead of attempting to reconstruct the environments, we decided to present documentation: photographs, a video programme showing the environments, and texts in which they were described. This documentation replaced the original temporary and site-specific works.

The publication that accompanied the exhibition seemed to be the best means of documenting these extensive environments in word and image and making them 'accessible' to the public. Dwarf Parade Table and Fishman in Excelsis Table were shown in the exhibition.

The presentation of Dwarf Parade Table was based on the way the Artist's Co-op presented it at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1969. The table – mainly made in Thek's studio – was installed in one of the galleries, with newspapers spread along the walls, on the floor. In this form, Dwarf Parade Table could be considered as an independent work. Only later, Thek used it as a part of larger environments. Furthermore, all the essential materials – apart from the newspapers and a few empty champagne bottles and pieces of crockery – were still present.

The presentation of Dwarf Parade Table in Witte de With received mixed reactions from the press. Besides the appreciation for the restraint shown with respect to reconstructions, a few people expressed objections to "champagne bottles with bar codes on newspapers dating from 1995 surfacing in a context that celebrated the 1960s".<sup>6</sup> However, more important for us than using original objects and newspapers from 1969, was the question why the artist had used them in the first place. Thek indicated the passage of time by adding newspapers to the work every day; a newspaper is news on the day it is published – and the next day it becomes old paper. Newspapers from 1969 would have had an enormous nostalgia value and would have distracted attention away from Thek's intentions.

The problems associated with re-exhibiting temporary art works is gaining in importance now that a new generation of artists is occupied with a process-related practice. One of these, the Belgian artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx, had a solo exhibition – entitled 'à partir DE PAS D'HISTOIRE, PAS D'HISTOIRE une exposition de Joëlle Tuerlinckx' – in Witte de With in 1994. Using balls of paper, confetti, plastic, plasticine, string and tape, Tuerlinckx makes fragile arrangements in response to the exhibition space. Tuerlinckx's working methods are characterised by a continuous search for form without it ever taking on a fixed composition. She describes this process of adding and subtracting as follows: "I never stop starting (or I never start stopping)".<sup>7</sup>

In the future, the process-based practice of artists like Tuerlinckx will present conservators with the difficulty or sometimes impossibility of showing works in their original material form again, as is the case with Beuys and Thek. Should we then search for ways of preserving this work for the future?

Tuerlinckx herself offered a solution to the problem. She documents her experiments in series of photographs.<sup>8</sup> This documentation replaces the work which no longer exists once the exhibition is over. Beuys had a similar solution. When he sold his piece *Strassenbahnhaltestelle* to the Kröller-Müller Museum after showing it at the Venice Biennale in 1976, he surprised the buyers by placing the components on the ground alongside one another, rather than installing the work as it had been in Venice. When the museum remarked that this could not possibly be the work they had purchased, Beuys answered that the work had now been "discarded".<sup>9</sup>

The exhibiting, purchasing and conservation of art are still approached too much from the perspective of the traditional notion of the art work as an object. The question of how ephemeral and temporary works should be dealt with is difficult to answer from within this traditional framework. The actions of Beuys, the environments of Thek and the processes of Tuerlinckx can all be interpreted

as a reaction to the museum. Their ways of working can be read as alternatives to this 'mausoleum' atmosphere, where forced attempts are made to 'embalm' art works in their original state and preserve them for eternity. When, in 1976, Thek found himself obliged to cease collaborating with the Artist's Co-op on the environments, he held the object-oriented attitude of the museums responsible:

"It seems silly to have to throw away efforts like *Ark, Pyramid-Easter* just because the museum system can't find a way to accept it. (...) Can't you educate your museum friends (...) of the importance of the shows? For them and for us! Can't you educate them so that they will become willing to spend some thousands of dollars for a show that does not remain, that is not purchasable, that cannot be resold? That is the point of shows like *Ark, Pyramid-Easter*. And now it all has to stop, because no one bothered to find a way to support it. What a pity. And we're back where we started, looking at OBJETS D'ART."<sup>10</sup>

By ignoring the temporal aspects in the work of artists like Beuys, Thek and Tuerlinckx, we are denying their meaning, a meaning that Thek argued strongly for in the above-mentioned reaction. The fixing of these processes denies the temporality chosen by these artists. Memory and absence are concepts that art historians and conservators should respect and accept more readily. This is precisely what is important in the alternative practices of artists like Beuys, Thek and Tuerlinckx.

1 Information available to the public at the Joseph Beuys exhibition at the Kunsthhaus, Zürich, also at the Reina Sofia, Madrid and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1993-4.

2 Camiel van Winkel, 'Chaque homme est un artiste', in: e Witte Raaf, September 1994, p. 15.

3 Camiel van Winkel, 'Speleologie van de Vrije Ruimte: over afgelegde beelden en de kinetische impuls', in: Witte de With – Cahier #1, Witte de With, Rotterdam and Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf 1993, pp. 10-37.

4 After the presentation at Witte de With, the exhibition 'Paul Thek – The Wonderful World that Almost Was' travelled to the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; Kunsthalle Zürich/Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich; MAC, galeries contemporaines des Musées de Marseille.

5 The first environment that Thek made with the Artist's Co-op was The Procession/The Artist's Co-op in 1969 for the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Then followed the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (*Pyramid/A Work in Progress*, 1971-2), Documenta 5 in Kassel (*Ark/Pyramid*, 1972) and the Kunstmuseum Lucerne (*Ark, Pyramid-Easter*, 1973).

6 Paul Willemsen, 'Kunst van Paul Thek is liturgie', in: De Standaard, 8 August 1995.

7 Joëlle Tuerlinckx, 'à partir de PAS D'HISTOIRE, PAS D'HISTOIRE une exposition de Joëlle Tuerlinckx', in: Witte de With – Cahier #3, Witte de With, Rotterdam, Richter Verlag, Düsseldorf, 1995, pp. 149-153.

8 See Witte de With – Cahier #3, note 7, pp. 132-148.

9 See Camiel van Winkel, note 3, pp. 24-5.

10 Letter from Paul Thek to Jean-Christophe Ammann, then director of the Kunstmuseum Lucerne, 17 May 1976.

#### *Introduction text to Seminar 7: Registration and re-installation of installations*

\*The article has been published in: Hummelen, IJ., Sillé, D., *Modern Art: Who Cares?*, Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art/ Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999, p. 343-346.