

The Discursive Sculpture, Maria Lind, in: Collect/Recollect, NAI publishers/Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 1999

Minimalism as an artistic trend and attitude has suddenly acquired a new pertinence in the 1990s- in particular, minimalism as a potential political and existential alarm clock. Through confronting us with our own presence, it obliges us to think about where we are, and in extension, also about who we are- and not least, about how we have become what we are. It is also clear that minimalism stimulated and continues to stimulate interest in the place or site, for its historical, social, and psychological implications. These are aspects which over the last decade have formed the foundations for the understanding of site specificity in general and institutional criticism in particular.

In the summer of 1996, after wandering through a series of rooms in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam containing older paintings and after having passed many meters of shelves with design objects, including a collection of baroque mirrors, one came across a genuinely interactive post minimalist sculpture, full of information.

In front of a cube of several metres in height, width and length, a young woman was posted at a desk, equipped with a cashbox, receipt pad and notebook.

While some people passed in and out of the cube, others remained leafing through books.

In what could be thought of as the most remote room in the museum, Liesbeth Bik, Peter Fillingham and Jos van der Pol had constructed an exact and fully functioning copy of the theoretical art of ICA's bookshop in London, including its stock.

This three-dimensional facsimile was filled with the same crossdisciplinarity literature as that found in the excellent bookshop in London; the part containing diverse more or less ironic art objects had been resolutely left out in Rotterdam.

The literature that was included, sociological, philosophical, psycho analytical, etc- places art in relation to the surrounding reality, attempts to understand art as a private and public activity and connects art to other discourses. It was, in short, literature that opens up rather than closes. At the same time, both ICA's bookshop and The Bookshop Piece are deceptively easy to take in: for a moment one is tempted to think that despite all, it may be possible - like a Renaissance person to comprehend all the collected knowledge contained in a bookshop. But this lasts only a few heady moments before one is overwhelmed by the volume and extent of its contents. It is at this point that one can experience the work's brilliance- almost like an intellectual atomic reactor, whose radioactivity penetrates everywhere.

The Bookshop Piece is an autonomous sculpture that openly alludes to minimalism's sculpture tradition. But in contrast to Donald Judd's aluminium boxes, Carl Andre's metal plates and Tony Smith's Die, The Bookshop Piece is neither easily moved, exchanged or even objective. Like these sculptures, it makes the observer conscious of him or herself- in more than one way: physically and phenomenologically through its form and intellectually through its content.

In this, it resembles two other 'sculpture spaces' by Hans Haacke and Lars Nilsson that refer to minimalism as an authoritative language of power. Hans Haacke's US Isolation Box, Grenada 1983 from 1984 is a replica of the isolation cell American troops used in a prison camp in Grenada; and Lars Nilsson's 6m' glass cell, Go to Jail from 1996, in which the artist

lived for the nine weeks it was on view at Rooseum in Malmö, was built in accordance with Swedish penal authorities' recommendations. Just as in Nilsson's work, it is crucial that The Bookshop Piece is put into function, it is a sculpture that encompasses an act. Without its use value, it quite simply loses its grounds for existence. However, in contrast to Haacke and Nilsson's works, this 'sculpture space' is constructed in a good idealistic spirit: it makes it possible for visitors to acquire new knowledge and broaden their views.

The Bookshop Piece relates to minimalist art at the same time as it is about a place- Boijmans Van Beuningen's structure and way of functioning- but it is also about Rotterdam's local art scene. The piece literally covered, if temporarily, a gap in the city's intellectual life - the lack of a bookshop well stocked with books on art and cultural theory. That it was placed in the room where the museum's own shop had been located in the past was of course no accident. The Bookshop Piece functioned as an alternative to the present museum shop, which is dominated by coffee table books and art souvenirs, things that also fill the generous window space that faces the street. The bookshop was therefore in part a duplication, but at the same time, it posed a challenge to the museum's own openly commercial activities.

The local connection expressed by The Bookshop Piece also reflects Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen's collection. Most art museums have collections of national and international art, which are usually contemporary or historical. Boijmans Van Beuningen has adopted the 19th century hope and desire to be able to encompass everything and has actually succeeded. It also contains a strictly local collection of art from the immediate vicinity of the museum, Rotterdam, and it is within the framework of this so-called City Collection that The Bookshop Piece came about.

Moreover, the work was set up during the period when the museum hosted the first Manifesta, a new European biennial for contemporary art, which consciously aims to focus on the periphery rather than the established centre. However, The Bookshop Piece would hardly have existed had not a broad network of international publishers been involved. In other words, this is about geopolitics, but on an institutional microlevel- and in a literal sense as well since The Bookshop Piece was placed on the museum's own periphery. In Boijmans Van Beuningen divisions into spatial categories do not stop with regions but with the city. In our 'glocal' age, when we are continually reminded of how the global and the local hook into each other and blend together, the borders between the near and the far seem to fade away. The 'glocal' seems a fortuitous combination of a previous opposition- the general and the specific. In fact, the 'local' in this situation becomes more and more interesting in accordance with the principle that the more general something becomes, the greater becomes the importance of the specific.

Postmodernism's favourite paradigm- centre/periphery has increasingly been replaced during the 1990s by the paradigm, global/local. However, while the centre refers to a handful of specific key points and the periphery to what is around or surrounding, the 'glocal' is always and everywhere present and the local becomes the specific.

The need for and interest in the locally specific- or authentic if you will- is hardly negative or even risky. As long as a general decipherability prevails, there can be a conscious local identity - as long as it is not taken to be essentialist, but on the contrary, a strength. One

example of this is Glasgow, where the local scene has become fertile soil for not only a handful of prominent international art works but also a whole group of exciting artists who engage themselves in local issues. Nevertheless, local art activity is often considered a necessary evil in institutional contexts, something required in order to avoid confrontations with influential local opinion. Alongside their international activities, Bik and Van der Pol, who reside in Rotterdam, are very active locally. As members of the artists' organization Duende they have established a small-scale residency programme and also arrange exhibitions and symposia. In this way, they try indefatigably find new ways of carrying on dialogues, of continuing the conversation.

The Bookshop Piece emphasizes the importance of talking about art and its domicile, and about the rest of reality, in different ways. Bik and Van der Pol thematize this in their working method, which is based on cooperation in all possible forms: between themselves and together with others – for instance, Peter Fillingham. Like several of their other works, cooperation is used also as a platform for various kinds of communicative activities, viz book presentations, with for example Stuart Morgan's collection of essays, *What the Butler Saw*, and performances like *Hello, de Kooning, Pronto Tiepolo* by David Medalla and Adam Narkevis. In this way *The Bookshop Piece* is closely related to relational aesthetics, which according to Nicolas Bourriaud, 'highlight social methods of exchange, interactivity with onlooker within the aesthetic experience proposed to him/her, and communication processes, in their tangible dimensions as tools for linking human beings and groups to one another.'

Bik Fillingham Van der Pol have in several of their works used transference as a method. *The Kitchen Piece*, for instance, was a three-dimensional mirror image - with a functioning inventory of Van der Pol's kitchen, which was shown at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam among other places. *The Shower Piece* was an exact copy of curator Amo van Roosmalen's shower and placed in the artists' studio. Bik and Van der Pol have also reconstructed Konrad Fischer's gallery for the group show *EAST* in Norwich. Spatial facsimiles which are moved also crop up in other artist's works- Simon Starling's and Glenn Seater's, among others. On several occasions Rirkrit Tiravanija has constructed and moved spatial facsimiles which, like Bik Fillingham Van der Pol's work, accommodate an activity. Indeed, these works can be seen as large ready-mades, but their activities ensure that they land far from, for instance, Marcel Duchamp's relics.

In light of all this *The Bookshop Piece* is an example of a new type of site-specific art, which belongs neither to site specificity as formalism- which one often encounters at art festivals and in the context of designated cultural capitals- nor as a political instrument – common especially in American academically oriented art. *The Bookshop Piece* is based on both indexicality and transference, on the paradoxical combination of being rooted and being displaced. Like the site-specific art of the 1970s, *The Bookshop Piece* maintains contact with the place or site through containing an exact spatial copy- as the foot remains as a footprint and as the wind steers the weathervane and its history and function. But on the other hand, it is also transference in the sense meant by Robert Smithson in the 1960s in his dialectic non-sites when he went into a landscape, collected some of its elements in order to move them into art institutions where their origins were indicated by maps and other descriptions of the sites. Whereas Smithson moved a bit of nature's landscape into art institution, Bik

Fillingham Van der Pol have transferred a bit of an intellectual landscape. Since Smithson, transference has in part acquired new meanings through the revolution in information technology.

Miwon Kwon's 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity' is an ambitious analysis of the 1990's site specific art- from a mainly American perspective. Instead of talking about 'Site-specific', she prefers the term 'site-oriented' in order to stress contemporary art's focus on the discursive and fluid. Today a site can be virtual, but it can also accommodate more intellectually discursive questions or debate. Borrowing Kwon's historical perspective, one can say that The Bookshop Piece has elements of all three paradigms demonstrated by site-specific art since the 1960s: the phenomenological, the social/ institutional and the discursive. It is physically predominating and makes the visitor aware of him or herself; it relates to Boijmans Van Beuningen as an institution, and it relates to a discussion about the role and function of art and of the museum in present day society.

Exchange is a key word in all these works: the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and experiences with both the host institution and the public - a kind of dialogue principle, very different from the confrontational attitude prevailing in much of contemporary site-specific art. The site-specific has increasingly been equated with criticism of institutions, especially in the American discussion prompted by the harsh political and cultural climate of the Reagan era. The magazine October is main mouthpiece or vehicle for a rigorous ideological debate whose purpose is to show the need for art to take a political stand. Along with this, are other types of site-specific and critical works and it is among these that The Bookshop Piece belongs. Their creators are no less engaged, but they primarily seek dialogue. Through its use value and closeness to the commercial- in this case in the form of popular music- The Bookshop Piece has something in common with Richard Shusterman's attempt to reformulate the role of art in the surrounding world by seeking a pragmatic golden mean between analytical philosophy and deconstruction.

In these cases, 'site-specificity' is a less appropriate term than 'site-sensitivity'- or even better, 'context-sensitivity'. It is about being sensitive to the context, about listening and feeling oneself into the situation in a wide, sense-wider than the mere physical place. This context sensitivity can naturally encompass site-specificity, but at the same time it gives scope for much more- the feeling and reflective subject, for instance, for personal contributions. Criticism of institution in this connection is constructive: it tries to build up rather than tear down; or if it is absolutely necessary to tear down, one builds up again afterwards. In other words, the artists scrutinize institutions more or less critically. Significantly, the consumption aspect of art is not rejected in The Bookshop Piece; on the contrary, it is a structural principle in the work - and for that matter, also one way among others of communicating.

The museum context is central in The Bookshop Piece. The artists' reflections concerning this host institution show a further parallel with Smithson's work. His scepticism about museums is well known; he thought that museums were mausoleums and to visit them entailed blinding and depriving one's senses when one wandered from one 'void' or empty space to another. Museums were compared to prisons and mental hospitals, and the art

works in them were treated like convalescents waiting for the experts to say whether they will recover or not.

'The museum tends to exclude any kind of life-forcing position', wrote Smithson in 1967 and simultaneously noted how museum directors tried to enliven them by, for instance, making them resemble a discotheque.

This kind of criticism of institutions forms some of the background to Smithson's going out into reality, to both a mythical wilderness and a prosaic suburban industrial landscape in order to do his art. He did not spurn museums but instead- as Per Boym has noted - asserted the necessity of being conscious of the area in which one acts, of being very clear about where one is. Interestingly, Smithson continued to exhibit in art institutions until his death in 1973. The attitudes informing *The Bookshop Piece* are reminiscent of Smithson's: to be critical but not repudiating, to reflect but not exclude. But whereas Smithson, in addition to his sculptural projects, primarily chose a one-way communication with texts that were published in art journals, Bik and Van der Pol conduct a multi sided communication- moreover, inside the institution.

With *The Bookshop Piece*, Bik Fillingham Van der Pol went straight to the heart of the dilemma confronting many art institutions today. It is far from self-evident that art museums should emphasize their collections and temporary exhibitions. The truth is that up to 70 percent of museum space is occupied by something other than collections and exhibitions - namely, offices, storage space, foyers, restaurants, shops, etc, many of which are strictly commercial. With the pressure on state institutions to generate income, it is no longer possible to run a museum without these sidelines. Exceptions to this include a few private institutions that can afford to confine themselves to exhibitions.

This also touches upon the question of the role of museums vis-a-vis contemporary art, what is being created right now, often produced on site and ephemeral. Should museums mainly reflect art that already exists, or should they stimulate new things? As regards *The Bookshop Piece*, the museum has co-produced a new work.

How should museums relate to the fact that art and artists venture more and more out into reality in order to avoid institutions? What is certain is that when art wants to have a discussion – to 'converse' - in the long run, institutions have no other choice than to respond.

Maria Lind, 1999