

The Shower Piece - Bik Fillingham Van der Pol - 1995

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The Shower Piece- is that what it is called?

Did you ever shower in a work of art? I have been walking around the object many times. Photographed it - from far away, from close by - but now I have dragged the chair covered with Scottish plaid near to it. I am sitting three metres away from it. Occasionally the sun comes out and filters through the sunblinds on to my neck. From this position the shower is a lovely object and I would like to photograph it as such.

I am sitting in front of a monument - a memorial. The steps are part of it, and one imagines inside the memorial a movement upward (like the steps in Lenin's tomb).

I am sitting in front of an element out of a showroom for bathroom fittings.

I am sitting in front of a telephone booth, a bath cabin, an elevator on a base... the steps are fixed on the base so I can enter conveniently - an indicator of utility and access.

I am sitting in front of a piece of furniture - one of the three main elements (table, bed, shower) of my temporary dwelling.

Am I sitting in front of an art work? Yes. When you start to perceive this as an artwork, the thing has an enormous, complicated quality. I do not want to think about it - where does it lead to? - aimlessly, an exercise of thought. Follows: The choice. The description of the image.

This morning I stepped into this space. Was surprised by the size, the light and the emptiness. Loved the deep blue blanket next to the blue red plaid on the chair. At the left, on a white base - a wooden box - was the copy of my shower, standing on its own in the space; connection pipes for water and gas striped through the space between the cabin, geyser, gas bottle and wall. I was surprised because of the precision and detailed accuracy with which my shower was reconstructed. The ceiling rafter, useless here; the plastic ivy. The shower curtain was painted by hand with white polka dots. The original was not available anymore.

I could not express my admiration as fully as I wanted to. I consider it as a fantastic gift, worked on with an enormous resoluteness, pleasure for details and craftsmanship. Because of the base (ambivalently both functional and echoing the idea of a plinth), it is brought into a new dimension. You look up at it, into the ornamented ceiling, as in a chapel.

I circled a lot around the shower, thought about the use of it. And I realised that it would be a different object after my first shower in it. Already, now, its status was ambiguous.

But after using it it might be impossible to perceive it as a work of art. Is it possible that everything up until the point at which we put it into use, is a work of art? Is there an exact traceable moment of change of status? Or are all meanings, all the time, continuously present in a work? Is it possible to consider art as life, landscape as art? Let me consider this as a work of art while I am still able to. Or is this already a kind of colonization. A form of visual colonisation based on ideological principles?

This work, 'The Shower Piece', has been made by three artists, Liesbeth Bik, Jos van der Pol and Peter Fillingham. It is unique - there is only one copy - a wonderful, though not completely perfect, reconstruction of my shower at home. Previously, they made The Kitchen Piece in collaboration, and soon there will be The Bookshop Piece, all as faithful as possible to the originals - reproductions of an existing kitchen, an existing bookshop. Yet the word 'Piece' in the title indicates that it is not a kitchen, a shower, a bookshop which is at stake, but a sublimation of these things into a work, a 'piece'. Because of practical reasons (the drain), the shower had to be raised, seventy centimetres above the ground. Hence the steps and the white base. The steps make the shower easy to enter.

I will be living here in this space and I have said many times that, except when I am writing, I can only think well while taking a shower. And I think this is why they built the shower for me. Complicated: It being a shower which I can use or a shower which makes me think. An article of use (the steps, the trouble taken to make the whole thing watertight, the connections to the water supply and the drain, everything has been made for optimal functioning), a piece of furniture, an architectonic element. But it also is a 'piece' - a sublimation of the everyday object.

The observation of it, the confrontation with it accomplishes a consciousness that is different from the awareness of it in daily functional intercourse. It is one of a series, of an oeuvre. So I have to call it a work of art. The base creates a dilemma: is it part of the image or is it a plinth? The work of art is sculpture and installation: site specific and autonomous.

The original - the shower at my place - was built in a former toilet. The size of the walls was given and the format of the shower was based on that. An already existing inside space was covered, arranged and made functional for its new purpose. This interior, namely that which makes the concerned space - the former toilet - a shower, has been conceived by the artists as an image. For the Shower Piece, this image has been reconstructed (with identical materials and means, insofar as is possible) - just as was the case with the Kitchen Piece. The original inside space is taken as the defining factor for the total form of the object; also and especially for the construction of the outside. A reversal of constructive and ornamental elements also came about (This morning, the first of September, when I took a shower, I discovered that the fake supporting beam on the ceiling, was even hollow). Making the reconstruction of the original functional was a condition for the ultimate form of the Shower Piece. Functionality defines the height and the placing in the space.

This morning (Friday 1st September - brilliant blue sky with white clouds coming from the west) I did use it, after a lot of hesitating. I really wanted to keep the image intact. Using it felt like taking its virginity (Could art be defined as the pure undamaged appearance of reality? And how is this virginity being mutilated?). I felt uncomfortable - and hardly dared to mount the stairs vertically and perpendicular in my nudity, as one should do, certainly the first time - to take a shower. Maybe I think while taking a shower because vision is blocked and the body does not know other needs.

Once inside the shower, I felt safe because of the familiar shape, recognisable attributes and curtain and because I was showering at a familiar moment, after waking up. Hardly conscious of the fact that I was standing in a work of art. Except for the theatrical effect of the curtain: the act at the top of a staircase in a decor - absurd.

The curtain revealed: through the material the painted dots were visible, all different, the brush movements are frozen, and during the showering, continuous changing patterns of tiny drops developed on the cloth. They magnified the structure of the curtain, like lenses. After a while, and influenced by gravity the drops converged and glided down as sharp, rapid little streams from the waving surface of

the curtain.

Diverse different layers, transparency, several patterns on top of each other, the attention to the materials. But also minimal, conceptual and kinetic. Nothing is what it seems to be. No thing is a thing.

* REST is an initiative by four artists (Liesbeth Bik, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Jos van der Pol, Hans Snoek) in Rotterdam. The underlying idea is that REST considers not a single aspect of our culture as more meaningful or important than any other. She investigates different points of views, blows up what seems to be too small, lights what has been in the dark. REST does not want to have the final word, therefore she creates spaces for other words. She invites co-operators (not necessarily from out the 'art-world'), who are given the space to show their motives, their drive. Each co-operator may invite, during a certain period of time, other co-operators, and make proposals. REST will stimulate and support her guests as far as possible: she creates the necessary space, offers her energy, and will try to make the impossible possible. Arno van Roosmalen was the first co-operator, invited by REST. He lived in the studio of one of the initiators for three weeks, studying, experiencing and describing his selection of art works, texts and music. He also invited guests to talk about the meaning and concept of the project. There was no publicity made; after this period he talked about REST and its impact during lectures at art-schools and artist-run-spaces.

The Shower Piece is a copy of his shower at home, the only place to think. It was fully operative during REST. After REST The Shower Piece was shown as a 'non-functional' object, at Cubitt Gallery, London (1995).