



Brenda Tempelaar THINK STUPID/BEAST

Two aluminium paint canisters stand beside one another on the floor, with them a fat and a thin board, a plaster cast of something – erosionish, and a mould that is enclosed by a blue rubber band. This is a fragment of *Branches* by Nina Fránková, an installation after ceramics.

Or an installation after Internet Art. Four wooden beams, shaped into triangles, all of at least one meter in length. One of the triangular beams has its apex towards the floor with two small mint green plinths placed on its levelled upper side. Two triangles on either side, their apices pointing left and right, with two horizontal and two vertical posts and a triangle on top, pointing upwards. The posts allow for a small amount of room between the beams. The work is called *Spacebar* and was made by Jasper van Aarle.

Or an installation after Duchamp. Blue Styrofoam in industrial beams, piled on top of one another. Six dark red angle irons, folded into one another. A blue tube, rolled up on the edge of another object. Insulators, packed in chequered plastic bags. Concrete stones, upon which a pair of narrow staves are balanced. *Baustelle*, by Rosa Sijben, is a raster of readymades, but wishes to be more than a mere collection of *objets trouvés*.

Young artists like Van Aarle, Frankova and Sijben – recently graduated at different academies – with their strategically chosen objects – aim for a sum total that is more than its constituent parts. Their installations wish to offer a new perspective on existing image. They appeal to me because I find them well chosen, but I am curious as to why it is these objects they have chosen, not others. Why were the

objects in these installations arranged so precisely? I wonder for instance, whether *Spacebar* would have been a better work if the plinths, the containers of space, hadn't been painted in such a trend sensitive mint green tint? Actually, I think I shouldn't be judging in such a manner. I use the word 'better', merely to describe an imaginary scenario in which the work – after being adjusted – would comply with my own expectations of a successful work of art.

CONSENSUS

While sometimes it seems as if there exists consensus on what success is, this idea was questioned not so long ago by the art critic Sven Lütticken in his essay *Other* ^① *Criteria*. Therein, among other things, he maintains that museums suggest consensus exists on the quality of artistic practices by consistently repeating 'collector friendly' work to the detriment of the rest:

When Stedelijk director Beatrix Ruf proclaims that Magali Reus is an important artist and that "every important Dutch artist must get an exhibition at the Stedelijk," this suggests that there is a certain degree of consensus about who counts as an important Dutch artist, or as important artists working in Holland, or indeed about what matters in art today. In fact, there is no such consensus. To make up for this lack, a concerted effort is made to impose a hegemonic view of art and culture through repetition. In the resulting New Normality, it will be clear to all what good art is and where it belongs. ^②

In his essay, Lütticken comments on *Stedelijk Contemporaries*, an exhibition programme that shows mostly videos of documented performances and flexible installations belonging to promising artists. It is, as posed by Lütticken, more than unclear which criteria are being held to conflate the flexible stance assumed by young artists as artistic quality. But it is also surprising that in the programme of the Stedelijk Museum no artists are elected who openly dialecticize the value of object-based art. Even outside of the selection of the Stedelijk Museum, I can barely think of a handful of young artists who in their work speak out against museal politics.

But I do know many artists who work as compilers, like Van Aarle, Fránková and Sijben. When I see their work I wonder what value they bestow upon the object, and whether or not during the compilation of their work they have considered the power that institutions like the Stedelijk Museum exert over the place of the object within art. What kind of future awaits that artist keen on fumbling with the New Normality of large museal institutions? Surely such an artist must not expect any response from the institutional echelons? Moreover, it seems as if the youngest generation of artists prefers emulating museal conditions for being successful, rather than wanting to change them. The person questioning the museum falls into repetition or is considered a daydreamer, so it seems. Instead, manifold artists make curated installations, that suggest that an artist living today must be exceptionally adroit at making decisions; that this profession revolves around making relevant choices and that these choices ultimately will bring us notice. Installation artists who do not settle for an aesthetically unified whole have few competitors, but their articulated opinions can not expect ample visibility. Those in favour of exhibiting more often, or even those wishing to sell something, can opt to drop the critical tones of a work, even if it is just for once...

A compiler who does such, distances himself from the origin of the installation as form. The medium, that won territory in the sixties and seventies, stood for the freedom of choice of the artist and reflected the importance of ideals and an unequivocal voice in society. Institutional critique, for which the installation was often used, politicized the museum and used the wheelbarrow for a critical message. But if the critical message disappears, or is swallowed, what is left besides a few non-artistic objects in grid formation or a mould without its sculpture?

According to art critic and philosopher Boris Groys installations are not simply political if they are made with that intention, but their political dimension is determined by the way in which the artist compiles objects:

Every installation represents a particular selection process that determines which objects are included and which excluded in an installation, and in which locations inside the space of the installation they must be placed according to the overall organization of the space. The person responsible for the selection procedure is an individual artist, but every individual selection is supposed not only to exemplify a system of private judgements, preferences and attitudes, but also to be socially, culturally and politically anchored and thus to some degree 'representative'. The installation can become the site of ideological critique precisely because it operates on the same terrain of selective thinking that ideology does.

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Groys' insight develops the idea that there are all but a handful of artists, who don't arbitrarily opt for fashionable means of working, but also give thought to why certain means can become more common than others. In this sense there is little difference between contemporary installation artists and those active fifty years ago. Art, in the sixties and seventies was more critical, but that arose as a result of a more general tendency to position oneself critically towards the world, artist or not. Choices for political involvement or distance from exactly that, appear now and then defined by the *zeitgeist*. So the Belgian poet Freddy de Vree described his time as:

[...] jungle of incapables, chatterboxes, fence-sitters, fence-artists, political demagogues, puritanical exhibitionists, champagne socialists, theoreticians steeped in pseudo-philosophical language who can write only about their own work. They are, each and every one of them, young artists (one Douglas Huebler, one of the first and most consequential conceptuels excepted) who perform their hit-singles for the public, reciting their pamphlets, they address the strikers and then calmly sit down to eat their salmon.

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The critical possibilities of the installation, that were exploited by the contemporaries of De Vree, were by

many artists only considered interesting if they were accompanied by appreciation and confirmation, by which they could uphold their bourgeois lifestyle.

CHARISMA

In that jungle of oh so critical installations Boris Groys and Freddy de Vree noticed at least one artist that was able to use the selective thought-process that is intrinsic to installations, in order to draw into doubt the relationship between ideology and art. In 1964 Marcel Broodthaers placed his only partially unpacked collection of poems in a plaster cast and stuck in it a mother-of-pearl coloured ball. Like the poetry collection he entitled his work *Le Pense-Bête: Think Stupid/Beast*. In the same year the opening took place of his exhibition: *Moi aussi je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie... I too have asked myself whether I couldn't sell something and succeed in life*. A signifier of meaning whose lightness typifies the critical nature of his construction. The work of Broodthaers was according to Groys discernibly critical, without sifting into pamphletism:

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Projects like those of Broodthaers or Kabakov are critical of ideology in a very explicit way because they fundamentally call into question certain procedures of systematisation and generalisation with which modern ideologies of various kinds operate. In this respect, minimal and conceptual art cooperated with the general spirit of institutional and ideological critique in the 1960s and 1970s, even though it was not explicitly utopian, rebellious or politically illustrative.

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As one of the few of his generation, Broodthaers delivered commentary on the forthcoming commercialization of the arts. With *Le Pense-Bête* he criticized on the one hand the willingness with which artists around him, mostly minimalists and conceptual artists, chose commercial success. On the other hand his critique was directed at museums, who acquired these forms of art in order to commodify the aesthetic experience. Director of Kunstmuseum Winterthur Dieter Schwarz described the work as follows:

These books, partially still bundled together in the original wrapping paper, inserted into the base of plaster that barely covered their lower half, allowing them to be removed with ease from the assemblage object. This plaster pedestal extends from the book bundle across a wooden base serving as the support for the assemblage, to hold at its other end a plastic ball that Broodthaers had inserted into the soft material. The plaster pedestal serves many functions at once: it arrests the mobility of the books and negates their existence as objects of consumption: it establishes a relationship with older artistic practices as implied in the material of plaster itself: it denies the works relation to the tradition either, of the readymade or the surrealist 'poetic object'. Since in these cases access to the object would not be withheld in such a manner.

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The small adjustment made to his poetry collection, had large consequences for the career of Broodthaers. He diverted attention with it: if first one was to open the book, now nothing but its presentation remained to be viewed. In the ensuing twelve years the public got used to this mode in which viewing typified his oeuvre. If you look at *Le Pense-Bête* you see the selective thought-processes to which Groys points: a choice between confirmation and rebuke, yes and no, between leaving something intact and calling it an artwork. But strategy aside, one can't deny humour in the pithy display of a poem collection in plaster. With this adjustment Broodthaers made a fraudulent lurch towards a charismatic artwork, in the manner of contemporaries such as Joseph Beuys, Piero Manzoni and Lucio Fontana, and in keeping with the way in which Broodthaers perceived every artwork to rely on fraudulence. That fraudulence lies, so he claimed, enclosed in the moment in which the artist places his signature and elevates the object to artwork.

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But even if the adjustment of his collection was a cynical joke, the same couldn't be said for its impact upon the artworld. The adaptation was his way of unravelling the limitations and mediations that society and politics impose on the artist. He

showed how these limitations condition the production and perception of art.

CONVICTION

It is interesting that young artist compilers are once again showing interest for Broodthaers' villainous constructions, now that the museum itself scarcely makes an effort to be a channel for critique. Critical installations were throughout the years embraced, acquired, and encouraged, and by that very fact was its production made practically impossible. New interest in Broodthaers could mean that the impetus is there to relativize the chemistry between installations and museums.

The unravelling of institutional limitations is perhaps old-fashioned, but giving thought to the choices one makes appears timeless to me. Just the other day I read a reflection of a work of Sijben, in which the author, Arthur Steiner, posits that Sijben is interested in "things that change meaning through the situation in which they are found while simultaneously actively giving meaning to that situation." He writes:

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Sijben shows various objects and photos of objects in her studio, for instance, a photo of hands holding two objects. The left thing appears to be a spliced skin coloured ball packed in a plastic suspensory bag. The plastic bag leaves the impression that it once was for sale in a shop and contains a certain functionality. At closer inspection it appears impossible to know exactly what the thing was intended for. The right object appears to be of a more natural material and leaves the impression that it is hand-shaped. Here too is the first impression that it has a certain function inside the grasp of the hand in which it is presented. But it is impossible to figure out what that function is. According to Sijben this is because they are presented in a context in which they could function as more than one things.

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The fact that museums have adopted such adjustments of function does not have to impede an investigation into the production and perception of art. Artists can easily – also from a successful position – investigate why objects are viewed as art, while

still receiving their paycheque at the end of the month. Broodthaers does not completely reject ‘collector friendly’ practices, but does recommend that artists don’t allow commerce to be the only assumption. The comparison between Broodthaers and contemporary installation makers such as Sijben reveals the silent battle they deliver, wrestling with the entangled requirements in which their formalist abstractions are situated. But why don’t young artists simply ask these questions aloud, like Broodthaers? Why is their vision so far removed behind a form that resembles art, that it is barely capable of being unmasked? The composition is deprived of its critical function when a meaningless formula for success consisting of two or more objects is done in pure earnestness.

Much like Lütticken and many young artists in Holland, Broodthaers would have listened attentively to Beatrix Ruf, when she says that all important artists should be given an exhibition in the Stedelijk. He would have raised his hand and asked whether such a serious definition of art is possible. He would have pointed to the Styrofoam of Rosa Sijben, that – much like the plaster in which Broodthaers enclosed his collection – points at the history that is enclosed inside the material. In the case of Styrofoam the material indicates the building of models, isolation and construction; worlds that coincide much with art. He would emphasize that Styrofoam by Sijben’s composition would increase in value when exhibited, but that builders who use it to construct houses keep working for the same monthly salary. Ruf’s interest would be awakened, because if anyone knows how to convince a director of a museum it would be Broodthaers.

He would want, much like me, that the choice of young artists to allow for art historical references in their work counts for more than a remedy against failure. That an adjustment to an object doesn’t have to mean subjugation to the museum. That would mean that not only does the right shade of green need to be sought, but also a more general argument needs to be found that is convincing. But us compilers

are mere pamphletists and salmon eaters: critical about the way in which the museal environment accords value to objects, but flattered enough to accept an invitation that doesn’t allow room for a way of seeing that can transcend formalism.

- 1 This essay by Sven Lütticken was originally published as *Other Criteria: Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Zachary Formwalt*.
- 2 Sven Lütticken. (2016). *Other Criteria*. Available at: <https://svenlutticken.org/?s=Other+Criteria&submit=>
- 3 Boris Groys. (2005). In: Donna De Salvo, *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c1970*. London: Tate Publishing. p. 54.
- 4 Freddy de Vree, (1979). *Marcel Broodthaers*. Manteau Marginaal. p. 71.
- 5 Galerie Saint Laurent, April 10–25, 1964.
- 6 Boris Groys. (2005). In: Donna De Salvo, *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c1970*. London: Tate Publishing. p. 54.
- 7 Dieter Schwarz. (1988). *Look! Books in plaster! On the 1st phase of the work of Marcel Broodthaers*. In: Benjamin H.D. *Buchloh Broodthaers writing, interviews, photographs*. October. p. 61.
- 8 The signature of the creator – painter, poet, film director... – seems to me the point where the system of lies begins, the system that every poet, every artist, attempts to construct in order to protect himself... though I am not sure exactly what against...’ In: *Marcel Broodthaers aan het woord*, Anna Hakkens ed. Ludion, Ghent/Amsterdam 1998, p. 78.
- 9 Arthur Steiner. (2016). ‘Indecisive Objects’. *Tubelight magazine*. 99.
- 10 Ibid.