



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Edited Video and Film Installations

Noël de Tilly, A.

Publication date
2011

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Noël de Tilly, A. (2011). *Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Edited Video and Film Installations*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Editioned Video and Film Installations

Summary

Since the end of the 1960s, an increasing number of moving-image works have been presented in exhibition venues. The medium of production of these time-based works (multi-channel videos, video installations, film installations, etc.) makes them more conducive to replication. Consequently, they are, like photographs and lithographs, sold in limited editions, meaning that more than one institution or collector can acquire the same artwork. In addition to being editioned, these artworks are also made of many versions since they can change depending on the exhibition space and also on account of the ephemeral technology used to create and exhibit them. This dissertation examines the *socialization* of editioned video and film installations, i.e., the intersecting events occurring in their life cycles: their exhibition, distribution, and preservation. Throughout the study, I demonstrate that the examination of these events is crucial for a better understanding of the identity of these variable artworks. The aim of this dissertation is first, to understand how the exhibition, distribution and preservation contribute to the shaping of the identity of editioned video and film installations and second, to develop a model for describing these works taking into account their variable nature.

The first two chapters set the framework of this study. In Chapter One, by referring to specific artworks selected for their exemplary features, I show how the exhibition, distribution and preservation of video and film installations can lead to changes in the manner of framing and displaying these works, in how they circulate, and in finding ways to ensure that they can still be exhibited despite the fact that the technology used at the moment of their creation became ephemeral. The artworks analyzed in the first chapter also have the purpose of illustrating how video and film-based artworks change continuously and that they need to be envisaged as continuums.

In Chapter Two, I present the theoretical and conceptual framework of the dissertation. Drawing on existing definitions of scripts such as the one proposed by Madeleine Akrich in the field of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and by Gérard Genette in the field of literary studies, I develop the notion of script as a methodological tool. The purpose of this tool is to study the mediations and mediators at work in the life cycles of editioned video and film installations. Whereas for Akrich the script is a set of instructions implicit in the technical object, I propose an active theoretical standpoint: *scripting artworks*, a process-based

approach that enables one – in this case me – to grasp the necessary conditions for time-based artworks’ instantiations. Scripting an artwork is the conceptualization of what happens during the socialization process of an artwork. It enables one to identify the mediators, both human and non-human, that shape the identity of the artwork. By developing a model to study editioned video and film installations, this dissertation aims to help identify what these artworks actually consist of conceptually and materially, taking into account that rather than being clearly defined and static, their identity takes shape during an ongoing process. To reach the level of conceptualization targeted, I adapted Akrich’s method of *de-description*, a method used to describe and analyze the interactions between humans and objects in different social settings. With this method, I proceed with the exercise of putting into language the socialization process of three artworks, the three case studies of this dissertation. *De-describing* an artwork is a process wherein the researcher, or the conservator, or the curator, writes down descriptions of the work’s life cycle: how it has been exhibited, distributed and preserved. It is a way to acknowledge all the mediators making its existence possible and a process that leads to more informed decisions on how to exhibit, distribute and preserve works of art.

Chapters Three to Five are dedicated to case studies. In Chapter Three, I raise the following question: what happens if one of the editions of an editioned artwork is modified? To answer this question, I proceed with the reconstruction of the life cycle of Douglas Gordon’s *Play Dead; Real Time* (2003). The *de-description* of this artwork focuses on its exhibition history, as it is mainly during this phase that its identity is shaped. The chapter begins with the explanation of how this artwork came into being and what kind of relationship it had with its inaugural exhibition site. I argue that the inaugural exhibition of *Play Dead; Real Time* can be interpreted as a form of institutional critique. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the subsequent exhibitions of the work and contend that the artwork is made of different versions. The exercise of putting into language the socialization process of *Play Dead; Real Time* leads to the identification of influential mediators in its life cycle; among them, the artist and the exhibition space where the work was initially presented. In the last section of the chapter, I consider the inclusion of *Play Dead; Real Time* in another work by Douglas Gordon: *Pretty Much Every Film and Video Work from 1992 Until Now. To be seen on monitors, some with headphones, others run silently, and all simultaneously* and discuss how Gordon constantly revisits and reinterprets his works, which makes it impossible to speak of a finished version of a work.

Chapter Four examines the fragmentation of artworks and large-scale projects after their inaugural exhibition. It explores possible ways of scripting projects that produce a great

variety of offspring. In this chapter, the peculiar distribution of Mike Kelley's large-scale project *Day Is Done* (2005) is studied, as it comprises a substantial number of offspring that have been acquired by different institutions and private collections and have been re-exhibited a few times. I first analyze the inaugural exhibition of *Day Is Done*, which I qualify as a landmark exhibition because of its scale, but also because of its irreproducible features. I then proceed to the examination of the re-exhibition of certain of its offspring and discuss how they continue (or do not continue) to relate to one another. In the last part of the chapter, I conclude that the scripting process of *Day Is Done* has branched off after the inaugural exhibition, but that despite the fragmentation and the release of other offspring, a film and a book, the 2005 exhibition is still looming large in the background of all of *Day Is Done*'s offspring.

The fifth chapter investigates the case of an artwork which has had different manifestations and has been through varied technical and material appearances. It discusses the fact that a non-editioned artwork can become, at some point in its life cycle, an editioned artwork. In that last case study chapter, I examine John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* (1982), since it became an editioned artwork about twenty years after its creation and consists of many versions. The chapter focuses on the preservation history of the work since it has played a crucial role in defining its identity. The first section of the chapter depicts the inaugural exhibition of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and the technical problems that the work encountered. The second section of the chapter considers the migration of the work to a more recent format and the different configurations it went through over the years. It is during the different preservation processes that the identity of the work was shaped: from a film installation, it became a video installation. In the last section of the chapter, I analyze how the transfer of the work to a video format also triggered the possibility of turning it into an editioned work. Now that two editions of the work exist, it increases its chances of being exhibited. The *de-description* done in the chapter helped identify influential mediators in the identity formation of this work such as the exhibition reviews, which have played a double role: that of influencing the perception of the work and its identity formation, and that of a source of information for the identification of other mediators. In the conclusion of the chapter, I point out that it is only after twenty years that the artwork has finally reached a stable presentation format that does justice to the concept that John Massey had intended to put forth in 1982.

I conclude my study by reflecting on the scripting process of editioned video and film installations and by explaining how this theoretical tool serves the purpose of better

understanding these artworks' socialization. I discuss how the method of *de-description* enabled me to reconstruct the life cycles of *Play Dead; Real Time, Day Is Done* and *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and allowed me to identify all relevant mediators in the scripting process. Studying the exhibition history of these artworks shed light on how they have been framed in different exhibitions, how they have been displayed in each exhibition, and also how they have been interpreted in the context of specific exhibitions. Studying the distribution history of editioned works made visible how they circulated in the art world and how the different editions and offspring continued to relate to one another. Finally, studying the preservation history of these works brought to the fore that their preservation was based on a conceptual, rather than a material approach. The method of *de-description* also helped identify their different versions, and I was able to assert if each new version was the result of an alteration made by the artist and/or other parties, or if they were the result of a preservation process. In the end, it turns out that rather than the fact that they are editioned, it is the existence of multiple versions that most radically influences the identity of editioned video and film installations.