Joseph Kosuth: Glass (one and three), 1965

Stigter, S.

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In this work the matter ‘glass’ is depicted by the material itself in the form of a sheet of glass, by language in the form the definition of glass taken from an English–Dutch dictionary and by image in the form of a photograph of the very glass plate in the installation. When the work was realized for the first owner in 1977 the photograph of the glass showed the same background as the actual scene where the whole work was installed, generating a visual connection to the site. This site-related characteristic was lost when the work was acquired by the Kröller-Müller Museum where the original photograph continued to be used. The work is one of a series the artist calls ‘object definitions’, all dated 1965. Kosuth explores the nature of art while he seeks to ‘de-objectify’ the object in art. The artwork is created by instructions on a certificate provided by the artist. The question is how to interpret and follow these guidelines.

Interviews with the artist and the artist’s writings that clarify the need for replacement of the photograph all date from after 1965 but before the first document on Glass (one and three) from 1973. When it was first realized, Kosuth obviously had begun to use glass for a reason. Glass served as an object as transparent as possible, similar to how a site-related photograph renders an image as transparent as possible. This makes the photograph less of an object by itself and more of an image – the only function the photograph needs to fulfil in an ‘object definition’. Although Kosuth might have refined his ideas over time, from the results of the research it could be concluded that it would indeed be best practice to replace the photograph with a new one that matches the surroundings of the site where the work would be installed. This new practice of managing the artwork challenges the practice of the museums’ documentation system because one of the three constituents of Glass (one and three), the photograph, is thus not really part of the work when it is not installed, whereas it is a tangible part that needs storage space. This ‘inactive part’ can be kept as a record of the history of the work and will serve as a document. It can become an active part again when the same site is used that is depicted in the photograph. Considering the fact that the aspect of the work is determined by its surroundings, could the site be considered a (temporary) part of the work as well?

A conceptual work based on a certificate makes the conservator reflect upon his own practice, especially with regard to conservation ethics based on the idea of originality and authenticity. The aim of renewing the photograph in an ‘object definition’ by Joseph Kosuth however is the creation of an image of the object as transparent to its surroundings as possible, so that it can de-objectify itself as a photograph in favour of the depiction of the object through this medium. The resulting ‘site-related’ character could be regarded as a by-product of the visual properties of the photograph. Site-specificity is not the objective of the artwork but the result of good practice managing Glass (one and three).
Editors Tatja Scholte (ICN), Paulien 't Hoen (SBMK)
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Phil Collins, they shoot horses, 2004
© Phil Collins, Courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin | Tate Collection (T12030)

Tacita Dean, Disappearance at Sea, 1996
© Tacita Dean, Courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London | Tate Collection (T07455)

Olafur Eliasson, Notion Motion, 2005 | Photo: Hans Wilschut

Carlos Garaicoa, Letter to the Censors (Carta a los censores). 2003
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Pierre Huyghe, Two Minutes Out of Time, 2000 | Photo: Peter Cox

Greg Lynn & Fabian Marcaccio, The Predator, 1999 | Photo: Gregg Lynn Studio

Gustav Metzger, Liquid Crystal Environment, 1965–66 (Remake 2005)
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Bruce Nauman, Mapping the Studio II with color shift, flip, flip/flop, flip/flop (Fat Chance John Cage), 2001
@ ARS, NY and DACS, London 2005 | Photo: Tate Photography | Co-owned by Tate (T11893), Pompidou Centre Paris, Kunstmuseum Basel

Nam June Paik, One Candle, 1988 | Photo: Axel Schneider

Tino Sehgal, This is Propaganda, 2002
No photograph available as the artist does not allow any documentation of his installations.


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