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During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism

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1. Collecting Information and – or as – Experience

For decades discussions about the position of contemporary artists in society have been conducted on the basis of spatial metaphors. We talk about the border between art and life, about crossing that border or erasing it. We discuss the ability of artists to escape from the enclave of art institutions while remaining active as artists. Some critics propose that artists infiltrate or take refuge in the world outside the art world. Others, doubting the viability of that option, nevertheless maintain the spatial metaphor by stressing the importance of a haven or free zone for art. They see contemporary art as a circumscribed and autonomous domain in which the mundane limitations of everyday life are suspended. Over the years, the two parties have taken turns in dominating the debate, but the gist of the spatial imagery has remained the same. One moment the vanguard is seen to consist of artists who take up position firmly *within* society; the next moment all attention focuses on artists who consciously distance themselves from any social issue whatsoever. In recent years, the dominant idea has been that “art ... can obtain more meaning by leaving the museum”¹⁶⁶ and that “contemporary art should temporarily withdraw from the art world and go into hiding in real life”.¹⁶⁷ No doubt in due course the scales will tip the other way again.

One exhibition in the Netherlands has, more effectively than any other, etched the spatial metaphors of (crossing) borders and inside/outside into the collective consciousness. In 1971 the traditional sculpture exhibition in Sonsbeek Park in Arnhem was labelled *buiten de perken* (“off-limits” or “beyond the pale”), as it expanded into an unbounded “activity”

¹⁶⁶ A statement by artist Hans van Houwelingen, in: Bianca Stigter, “Ik wil de friettentten omdraaien. Hans van Houwelingen over zijn geëngageerde kunst”, *NRC Handelsblad*, Cultureel Supplement (22 November 1996), 6. All quotations from texts in Dutch were translated by the author, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶⁷ Cornel Bierens, “De gemakzuchtige slaapkamers. De beeldende kunst moet onderduiken”, *NRC Handelsblad*, Cultureel Supplement (19 May 2000), 1.

ranging from Schiermonnikoog to Zuid-Beveland and from Finsterwolde to Maastricht. *Sonsbeek 71* may be looked upon as a failure or a success, as a heroic experiment or a series of tragicomical misunderstandings but, be that as it may, the *buiten de perken* metaphor has remained a fixed reference ever since. Thirty years on, this imagery seems to lead a life of its own, almost like a mould in which the cyclical debate about the social significance of contemporary art tends to become frozen, often at an early stage. The desired suspension of the divide between art and life generally manifests itself as a spatial transgression. Many artists see the public space outside museums and art institutions as intrinsically more “real”; they believe that the institutional art context, with its neutralising effect, somehow does not reach beyond the confines of officially designated buildings and sites.¹⁶⁸

Sonsbeek 71 contributed to this development by taking the metaphor of transgression as literally as possible and using it to justify the choice of the most remote and unusual sites and locations. Today the exhibition is remembered mainly for a number of site-specific and emblematic works realised far away from the park in Arnhem, such as Robert Smithson’s *Broken Circle/Spiral Hill* in a sand quarry near Emmen, or Robert Morris’ *Observatorium* outside Velsen (later reconstructed in the Flevopolder). One suspects that Wim Beeren, the artistic director, and his staff seriously overestimated the willingness of visitors to travel long distances in order to see the works in the exhibition. Critics openly complained about this.

The people of Groningen can experience a little bit of “Sonsbeek” in their own city, and so can the people of Maastricht. They are not really going for it yet. The continuation of the successful series of sculpture exhibitions in the lovely park in Arnhem has indeed gone completely “off-limits”. We had to make a seven hundred kilometre trip to see part of the north-eastern section. The weather was nice, thank you. But the same effort would have brought us halfway to the Riviera, and that is also something to consider. ... At the Kunstkring in Almelo, open until five o’clock in the afternoon, we arrived too late. At the University campus in Drienerloo even the

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Paul Kempers, “Weg met de musea”, *De Groene Amsterdammer* (30 April 1997), 26-29.

editor of the university newspaper had never heard of an art project by Richard Serra. It must have been cancelled. Wim Beeren did not point this out to us when we showed him our planned itinerary. By now it was too late to see Enschede's information centre in action. ... It has already become clear that *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* is a misunderstanding, albeit an instructive one. Our country is fairly small, but the art projects have been spread out to such an extent that few people can get their share of the whole. ... The lesson to be learned is that such a drastic departure from the usual exhibition format will fail to find an audience. If one intends to present a number of projects as variations on the theme of spatial relationships, they should be concentrated within an area of at most thirty kilometres in diameter.¹⁶⁹

Against this background, the decision taken twenty-two years later by the artistic director of *Sonsbeek 93*, to restrict the "off-limits" aspect to the city of Arnhem and its immediate surroundings, would indeed seem wise and understandable.

Location/dislocation

However, there was more going on in 1971. To represent *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* as a diffuse collection of site-specific projects and environments is one-sided and therefore incorrect. The exhibition featured a discourse in which the absolute value of geography, location and distance were explicitly relativised. "Spatial relationships", the theme of the exhibition, were expressly meant to include the way communication technologies and the mass media change the common experience of distance and space.

Just as a sculpture is something "by which we can conceive of space", Wim Beeren wrote in the catalogue, so television too is a "means by which space is experienced" and one of the "elements which make us aware of the scale that is being employed, which determine how involved we are with one another, or how detached, and which influence our behaviour." As a result of modern technology, the distance between two points had become fundamentally indeterminate.

Spatial relationships also mean being involved. And the way we are involved can determine the way they are perceived. What is the

¹⁶⁹ Dolf Welling, "Sonsbeek in 't noorden: veertig mensen per dag bij foto's van Ruscha", *Haagsche Courant* (10 July 1971), 19.

distance between Amsterdam and London? The line between two abstract points on a map? The space you hurtle through in an aeroplane? The space that can be experienced somewhat more rationally when travelled in a train or a boat? The space by day or by night? Or perhaps the space that is seen through an intermediary? The space that impresses us on TV, or that hardly means anything to us any more on the telephone?

To explain why *Sonsbeek 71* was no longer a traditional sculpture exhibition in an urban park, Beeren argued that the media had radically changed our sense of space.

A considerable proportion of world events are conveyed to us by these communication media alone. Information is becoming an almost independent phenomenon. The most solitary events become fodder for the masses. These communication media have intrigued artists, too, and they are using them in their own very personal ways ...¹⁷⁰

A major part of the exhibition programme therefore consisted of events such as screenings of artist's films and videos, experiments in a well-equipped television studio, graphic interventions by artists in newspapers and weekly magazines, and public discussions via conference calls. In a way, the geographical space of the Netherlands was being projected into the immaterial space of the modern media, with Arnhem as a starting point.

Thus *Sonsbeek 71* was an attempt to connect two apparently contradictory ideas: the interdependence of artwork and location *and* the disconnection between the two caused by advanced communication technology. It presented not only melancholic site-specific works (by Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Richard Long, Lex Wechgelaar and Jean-Michel Sanejouand), but also instances of "information as independent phenomenon", such as telegrams from On Kawara ("*I am still alive. On Kawara*"), and a video project by Stanley Brouwn ("*monitor a: microbes are moving in a vast number of directions – monitor b: Sonsbeek visitors are moving in a vast number of directions*").

¹⁷⁰ Wim Beeren, "From exhibition to activity", cat. *Sonsbeek 71*, eds. Geert van Beijeren & Coosje Kapteyn (Arnhem: Stichting Sonsbeek, 1971), vol. 1, 11-12. Original translation amended.

Other participating artists took specific locations as their starting points, only to apply a measure of dislocation – creating an immaterial connection between two places without deciding which of the two was primary. In the main hall of Amsterdam’s Central Station, for example, Ger Dekkers installed a slide projection of “sculptural objects or situations in the landscape”, further described as “situations that arise in the landscape due to man-made additions or alterations which are subsequently subjected to the influences of vegetation, weather conditions, or fauna.”¹⁷¹ In the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Ger van Elk displayed a small block of wood that he had painted white on a boat on the Atlantic Ocean, somewhere between Ireland and Newfoundland. Wim Gijzen took photographs of one hundred beech trees in Sonsbeek Park and one hundred streets in Rotterdam; on each of the trees he then attached a photo of one of the streets, and in each of the streets he displayed a photo of one of the trees.

Was there, in the spirit of 1971, truly any opposition between the artistic method of dislocation and the site-specific production model? The opposition may seem less sharp when one considers that both models or methods contributed to the intended decentralisation of the exhibition. Beeren’s decision to take the whole country as a potential exhibition area may have been a response to the increasing scale of art production at the time, but an important side-effect was that *Sonsbeek 71* would have a local presence in many different regions. As crucial elements in the exhibition, five independent “information centres” were set up in Groningen, Maastricht, Enschede, Leiden and Rotterdam. The volunteers running these centres were to act as co-ordinators in setting up local projects with local artists. They were free to develop their own programmes. For example, Rotterdam engaged in projects concerning well-being and environmental issues, whereas Enschede proposed, among other things, a “tactile project – a textures itinerary”. The information centres were to report daily to the Sonsbeek headquarters in Arnhem via telephone and telex; the constant exchange of information – also involving slide projections and video screenings – would allow the public anywhere in the Netherlands to keep up to date with all the (local) projects and programme elements.

¹⁷¹ Cat. *Sonsbeek 71*, vol. 1, 100.

In hindsight, it is difficult to tell whether the central committee in Arnhem actually looked upon the local initiatives as serious and valuable contributions and treated them accordingly. Beeren and his colleagues may have been more interested in prominent artists coming over from the United States than in relatively unknown participants such as Pier van Dijk from Enschede, who was involved in “the visual realisation of idiomatic expressions relating to the word ‘brick’”, such as “to go down like a brick” and “it is raining bricks”.¹⁷² Nevertheless, the documentation suggests that *Sonsbeek 71* was genuinely open and decentralised. No traces can be found of any differentiation, let alone hierarchy, between the primary level (the works of art) and the secondary level (information about art). The integration of public sculptures and a communication network was made to seem possible since all the works of art were already conceived and considered in terms of information anyway. *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* was intended to be an open system of visual art information that could be consulted by anybody at any moment anywhere in the country.

The complaints of the newspaper critic who travelled seven hundred kilometres in vain illustrate the gulf that opened up between this ideal and the reality of the event.¹⁷³ The dispersal in time and space led to a fragmented experience; moreover, anybody wanting to “visit” the exhibition depended on those who had direct access to the relevant information. This had serious consequences. Whenever the information proved inadequate or incomplete, the would-be visitor was stymied. Cor Blok, “educational advisor” to the Sonsbeek committee, had already written in *De Groene* of 13 March 1971 that contemporary art was to be considered “a specialised field, meaning that the audience depends for its information on a small group.”¹⁷⁴ The opposition mounted by certain groups to *Sonsbeek 71* may have been triggered by their annoyance about this. Contemporary art specialists –

¹⁷² Cat. *Sonsbeek 71*, vol. 2, 73.

¹⁷³ “Neither in Sonsbeek, nor at the various locations around the Netherlands does the visitor get a clear overall picture of the event,” Carel Blotkamp wrote in *Vrij Nederland*; “the communication media and other magic machines available in Sonsbeek Park and the information centres should have made this possible.” Blotkamp, “Sonsbeek 1971, een testcase voor de presentatie van moderne kunst”, *Vrij Nederland* (31 July 1971), 17.

¹⁷⁴ Cor Blok, “Sonsbeek ’71: testcase voor de relatie tussen kunst en maatschappij?”, *De Groene Amsterdammer* (13 March 1971), 9.

among whom we should include Cor Blok himself – were suddenly seen as occupying a dominant position: the audience could not access the art directly without their mediation. The specialists gave the impression of having pushed the artists off-stage and taken their place in the limelight.

Lambert Tegenbosch, a critic who fulminated against *Sonsbeek 71* in *de Volkskrant* and in the journal *Raam*, was particularly angered by the hermetic language (“phraseological bavardage”) spouted by Beeren and his team. He also objected to the “smokescreen of publicity” put up around the organisation with the hired help of critics and journalists such as Cor Blok, Betty van Garrel and K. Schippers. Tegenbosch felt that this alienated the public from the art.

Now we only know about the events through the leaflets that *Sonsbeek* is circulating by the dozen. It has become an exhibition by leaflet. This is what’s truly new in the presentation. But it is also the sign of its failure: *Sonsbeekfreundliche* support in *De Groene*, *VN* and *HP* cannot change that.¹⁷⁵

The criticism voiced by artists’ union BBK concerning the “elitist” nature of the exhibition also seems to have been prompted by the shocking discovery that the fate of art was now in the hands of a select group of experts capable of mediating between the artist and the public. Members of the BBK interpreted Cor Blok’s statement that contemporary art had become a specialist matter as an acknowledgment of the elitist nature of *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*.¹⁷⁶

The primacy of information

Sonsbeek 71 was intended to introduce the neo-avant-garde of the time to the general public in the Netherlands. However, the exhibition had the opposite effect: it demonstrated the unbridgeable divide between contemporary art specialists and the general public. In many ways, the

¹⁷⁵ Lambert Tegenbosch, “De fraseologie van *Sonsbeek 71*”, *Raam* 75 (July 1971), 43.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Otto Hamer, “*Sonsbeek ’71*: vrijheid kanaliseren”, *De Groene Amsterdammer* (17 July 1971), 7; and Kees Vollemans, “*Sonsbeek* gericht op abstracte individuen”, *De Groene Amsterdammer* (21 August 1971), 11. For the BBK’s views on *Sonsbeek*, see: D. Desjardijn, *Voer voor miljoenen. De Aktie BBK en Sonsbeek buiten de Perken* (Amsterdam: Stachelswine Publishers, 1989).

implications of neo-avant-garde art were difficult to communicate or explain – more difficult than those of the historical avant-garde art of the 1910s and '20s. The attitude of artists like Stanley Brouwn, On Kawara and Carl Andre was much more difficult to digest than Mondrian and Malevich's project of transcending physical matter and achieving an all-encompassing synthesis of art, life and spirituality. They refused to continue compensating for the marginal position of artists in society by a priestly attitude. The work of Brouwn, Kawara and other *Sonsbeek* participants entailed nothing but a reflection on the conditions of artistic production. This explains how an external observer could have the impression that specialists had overpowered the artists. The work of art had become invisible or unrecognisable without its institutional framework. Carl Andre's contribution, entitled *Light Wire Circuit*, was one of the most radical examples. He arranged several metres of plastic electrical conduit, picked up from some building site in Arnhem, in a zigzag shape on the grass of Sonsbeek Park, interconnected with bits of rope. He had arrived empty-handed in the Netherlands, just as he would return home empty-handed.

It may very well be that art production *as we know it today* is limited in its significance by being tied exclusively to a small group with its own conventions. This means that there are dividing lines in society beyond which art can no longer be seen as credible – not even as a “school of freedom”, because the artist is free only in those areas where society can afford the luxury of allowing people to do whatever they feel like doing.¹⁷⁷

With a statement like this, published several months before the opening of the exhibition, Cor Blok had effectively undermined the transgressive potential of *Sonsbeek 71*. Readers who might still feel that Blok's scepticism was unfounded would get their wake-up call from works in the exhibition like *Light Wire Circuit*. These works demonstrated that there was a limit to artistic autonomy: although artists were completely free to formulate specific sets of rules for their work – in the case of Andre, “no materials or

¹⁷⁷ Cor Blok, “Kunst – goed voor ons?”, *Museumjournaal* 16:1 (February 1971), 5.

fabrication cost” and “no harm to any living thing”¹⁷⁸ – they had come to depend on the institutional art context to have their output presented and made visible *as art*.

One of the stated aims of *Sonsbeek 71* was “to stimulate the general public’s awareness that visual phenomena really exist, and that these phenomena often relate to space”.¹⁷⁹ This ambition was thwarted by the discovery that the public could not experience anything without first receiving all the necessary information from specialists and mediators. This painful discovery had to be suppressed at any price, which is what happened in the years that followed; this explains why the *in situ* aspect dominates the collective memory of the event. The myth of *Sonsbeek 71* that has been created suggests that the exhibition successfully showed how works of art can be more meaningful and socially effective in public space, or in natural or non-institutional environments, than inside a museum. In reality, however, the conclusion at the time was exactly the opposite: *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* demonstrated that, once the art context was transformed into an information and communication network, sites for artworks could be considered as largely interchangeable.

Spatial dualism

Over the years, the organisers of every new edition of *Sonsbeek* have been forced to legitimise their approach by, more or less explicitly, criticising their predecessors. *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* was presented as a timely correction of the tradition, started in 1949, of public sculpture exhibitions in the eponymous park. *Sonsbeek 86* in turn proposed an inversion of the “off-limits” model of 1971; Saskia Bos, the artistic director in 1986, opted for

artists whose work is not so easy to display in the open, or who consciously distance themselves from the idea of “outdoor sculpture”. For today, more than ever before, artworks are artificial products that do not adapt to, let alone blend with, nature.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Cat. *Sonsbeek 71*, vol. 2, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Beeren, “From exhibition to activity”, 11. Original translation amended.

¹⁸⁰ Saskia Bos, “Contours of Sculpture”, cat. *Sonsbeek 86*, eds. Saskia Bos & Jan Brand (Utrecht: Veen/Reflex, 1986), vol. 1, 32. Original translation amended.

To demonstrate this point, many of the sculptures and installations were exhibited in small pavilions and glasshouses scattered around the park. Valerie Smith, in charge of the next edition in 1993, distanced herself emphatically from both preceding models. She looked upon the artificiality of *Sonsbeek 86* as an outdated strategy.

The art of today has shaken off the preoccupation of the 1980s with surface beauty and the insignificance of the object. Unhappy with the individualist *art for art's sake* and *anything goes* mentality of the last decade, today's generation of artists confront everyday reality head-on.

And:

Sonsbeek 93 will not be a bastion of static, immobile works that merely reflect the hollowness of art itself.

She also dissociated herself from *Sonsbeek 71*, whose approach she deemed essentially formalist.

Whereas, in accordance with the spirit of the times, *Sonsbeek 71* ... thematised the notion of process mainly in terms of scale, size and proportion, *Sonsbeek 93* will underline subjective, time and space-related dimensions of process. ... Unlike *Sonsbeek 71*, which stressed the spatial relation between artwork and location, the artists of *Sonsbeek 93* will focus on the invisible factors that determine the meaning of a location.¹⁸¹

It may come as no surprise that the *Sonsbeek* organisers of 1971, 1986 and 1993 gave a rather limited and rhetorical account of what their respective predecessors had intended or achieved, and that these justifications have become more extensive over the years, from one edition to the next, as the first edition of the exhibition recedes ever further into the past. In each case, the retrospective demarcation served to create space for a new version of *Sonsbeek* in line with the latest developments and insights in contemporary art.

¹⁸¹ Undated press release, *Sonsbeek 93*.

However, the disagreements fail to hide the fact that, in all these years, the spatial dualism of the inside/outside metaphor – *binnen de perken/buiten de perken* – has scarcely been challenged. Both Saskia Bos and Valerie Smith considered a park as something unreal, similar to a museum: a cultivated realm or island from which “real life” is generally excluded: “The park is a constructed piece of property, isolated from the reality of where people really live.”¹⁸² In 1993, however, this shared conviction prompted the organisers to move the art out of the confines of the park, whereas in 1986 it led them to do exactly the opposite.

Saskia Bos opted for an *innere Emigration* inside Sonsbeek Park. She accepted the constructed landscape of a man-made park, with all its cultural and historical connotations, as the ideal setting for contemporary art. Given the theatrical representation of “nature”, the park was a perfect location for an exhibition that wanted to accentuate rather than hide its own artificiality. Dictated by the fashionable discourse of the art world in the mid-1980s, *Sonsbeek 86* would emphasise the skin or surface of the work of art and even favour lack of depth. Works of art were framed by a master narrative concerning the impossibility of authentic experience and the coded character of all representation. With Niek Kemps, Ettore Spalletti, Lili Dujourie, Anish Kapoor and Harald Klingelhöller as the most “typical” cases, Bos presented artists who constructed gracious yet ephemeral memorials out of the wreckage of postmodern aesthetics; artists who made the codes of representation tangible by intentionally applying them in inappropriate contexts or using them over-literally. She selected objects whose exterior constituted an elegant lie about the internal construction or the material used, or that drew the gaze of the viewer inwards only to block or reject it in the final instance.

After the disenchantment of 1971, it had taken fifteen years for local conditions in Arnhem once again to favour an edition of *Sonsbeek*. It may be tempting to connect the timing of *Sonsbeek 86* with the wave of new forms of contemporary sculpture that appeared in the early 1980s, but this

¹⁸² Valerie Smith, “Notes on Sonsbeek 1993”, in: cat. *Sonsbeek 93*, ed. Jan Brand et al. (Ghent: Snoeck Ducaju, 1993), 7.

does not explain how *Sonsbeek 86* relates to the “wash-out” of 1971.¹⁸³ Did the organisers of the exhibition have the courage to admit that contemporary art was the preserve of specialists? The decision to keep the exhibition inside the confines of the park and to emphasise the artificiality of the setting would seem to suggest as much.

An even more daring conclusion can be drawn. In the chronicle of contemporary art exhibitions in Sonsbeek Park, the 1986 edition can be seen as representing a postponed act of mourning for an authenticity of experience that was no longer possible – as *Sonsbeek 71* had so painfully demonstrated. This public display of grief was not put together *until contemporary art was finally able to provide a facade for it*. *Sonsbeek 86* revolved around the melancholic awareness that culture is a matter of signs referring to other signs, a game of illusions and ineluctable deceit. This awareness would place the contemporary art “specialists” – conservators, historians, curators, writers and critics – in an ambivalent position. They were the ones who possessed – or claimed to possess – the specialised knowledge needed to decipher the intricate web of symbols and codes. The complexity of that web was made clear by the many allusions – in both the production and the reception of works of art – to literature and philosophy. At the same time, the specialists could not use their knowledge to decipher a hidden content or secret meaning; the “message” they communicated was, precisely, that such a secret no longer existed – that there was no message left to decipher. So, rather than denying their position as mediators between artist and audience, they demonstrated that – apart from the game of seduction and representation – there was no content left to communicate. A significant phenomenon in this respect was the so-called “parallel text”, a genre that made its appearance in the European art discourse of the second half of the 1980s. In this subgenre of discursive writing, published in art magazines and catalogues, an author would not position him or herself above or below the artist but *next to* him, as an accomplice, in order to stage, in a parallel trajectory of literary and philosophical allusions, an

¹⁸³ The term “wash-out” (“afknapper”) was used by Cor Blok. See Camiel van Winkel, “Dertig jaar buiten de perken. Gesprek over Sonsbeek 71 met Cor Blok, Judith Cahen en Lambert Tegenbosch”, *De Witte Raaf* 91 (May-June 2001), 19-21.

independent game of veiled and coded language. The catalogue for *Sonsbeek 86* contains such semi-autonomous texts and essays, surrounded by excerpts from appropriate literary texts and artists' writings.

From inside to outside, from outside to inside

In 1986 the illusive and seductive aspects of the work of art were positively embraced. Seven years later, however, this tendency was reversed with equal force and emphasis. *Sonsbeek 93* was marked by an obsession with content and subject matter. Valerie Smith made a serious case for the existential significance of contemporary art, especially in relation to the lives of those *not* professionally involved. For her, the cultivated nature and artificiality of the park were a reason to force a way out: a way into the social fabric of the city of Arnhem. Rather than surrendering to a Sundayish state of exceptionality, the exhibition attempted to penetrate the mundane sphere of everyday life.

For Smith, the *in situ* model – the fusion of artwork and location – was not a goal in itself but a means to establish an interaction between art and its social context. She stated: “The work must create meaning from and for the place in which it exists.” This amounted to a barely disguised instruction to all the artists participating in the show:

Artists working within urban or rural situations must consider the history of the place, the people who frequent [it] or circulate there, and the dominant activities of that particular locality. ¹⁸⁴

Ignoring the pitfalls of arrogance and paternalism, Smith felt morally entitled to attempt to create a new place for art in society. In her eagerness to do battle for her cause she chose the *arena* as a metaphor.

For *Sonsbeek 93*, Smith has conceived of an arena in which artists will reframe identities through their confrontation with an unfamiliar place, or with the notion of place. In this arena the limits of artisthood and the work of art will be put to the test. The main focus will be on a dialogue with public areas in the city of Arnhem.

¹⁸⁴ Valerie Smith, “Proposal Sonsbeek 93”, cat. *Sonsbeek 93*, 8-9.

The identity of the city will be re-examined and redefined from outside.¹⁸⁵

Statements like these reveal the crucial difference between this breakthrough and the one attempted in 1971. Whereas *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* was about the movement away from a centre – the former “sculpture park” – towards a margin or periphery, *Sonsbeek 93* performed a shift in the opposite direction: from the margin – the specialised domain of contemporary art – to the heart of society, where the “real” lives of “real” people were assumed to be taking place. Thus the site-specific model of *Sonsbeek 93* was meant to suppress a notion or insight that had first manifested itself, with such dire consequences, on the occasion of *Sonsbeek 71*: the notion that contemporary art, in the words of Cor Blok, is “a specialised field” whose audience “depends for its information on a small group”. By instructing artists to take up the political, social and cultural issues that matter to people in their everyday lives, curators such as Valerie Smith hoped to conceal the fact that they, the contemporary art specialists, and the institutional apparatus backing them had become an indispensable link between artists and their audience. In the 1990s the notion of art as a specialised field was felt to be socially undesirable: art had to produce a deep experience of *real* content – non-art-related, unfiltered, unmediated content, here and now.

Visitors to *Sonsbeek 93* will not be able to avoid the immediacy of the experience. They will move from inside to outside, from high to low, from here to there and back again, traversing a multitude of different spaces and atmospheres. The centre will be everywhere and nowhere – at each and every exhibition site simultaneously. The structure of *Sonsbeek 93* will be revealed only in each visitor’s individual odyssey.¹⁸⁶

Of course, this was a case of wishful thinking. Nobody was actually in a position to experience the exhibition without first visiting the official information centre and starting point in Villa Sonsbeek; nobody would have been able to locate the *in situ* works without first collecting their copy of the

¹⁸⁵ Undated press release, Sonsbeek 93.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

special *Sonsbeek* map that showed the locations of all the works and contained information about bus lines, bicycle routes, car parks etcetera. Without such detailed information, the artworks were not only hard to find but – more importantly – often undetectable as such. A pile of books on a bookstore table (Allen Ruppertsberg), a red fence with peepholes (Andreas Siekmann), a series of wooden benches in the park (Pawel Althamer) Anyone who did not know that these objects were works of art would probably ignore them and walk straight past; on the other hand, anyone who *did* know would feel like an extremely privileged or cultured tourist. Even if some of the participating artists had indeed managed to “reframe identities”, very little concrete evidence was available on the spot. The subtlety of the interventions was such that the impact on everyday life remained negligible; yet the legitimization of *Sonsbeek 93* as a cultural event was based on the assumption of rich external effects.

For this edition of *Sonsbeek*, the entire city was subjected to a museological model of publicness – a model grounded on overview, documentation, co-ordination and information. Exhibition visitors were to move around Arnhem in exactly the same way as they would move around the Louvre or New York’s Museum of Modern Art, carrying a floor plan and looking for Room X or artist Y.

Didn’t the same apply to *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*? Yes, it did, but with one crucial difference: the success of the 1971 exhibition did not require the information aspect to be denied or suppressed. On the contrary, as explained above, the works of art were to a large extent integrated in the information network. Starting from the dialectics of location and dislocation, *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* proposed a model of the experience of art in which distances did not need to be covered physically. In principle, both the curators and most of the participating artists considered the experience of art and the gathering of information as equivalents.

An inconvenience made bearable

Thus the historical importance of successive *Sonsbeek* exhibitions proves to be related to the intertwining fates of the contemporary artist and the contemporary art specialist. There is concrete evidence for this. The

specialists involved in the organisation of *Sonsbeek buiten de perken* included many who would occupy key positions in the Dutch art and museum world in the years to come: Wim Beeren, Rudi Oxenaar, Cor Blok, Frans Haks, Hein van Haaren, Judith Cahen, Peter Struycken, Martin Visser, Evert van Straaten, Benno Premsele and Geert van Beijeren, to name just the best-known, plus a number of lesser-known people involved in the local information centres. Most of these specialists were in their thirties and only in the early stages of their careers. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that they lost their innocence in the process of organising *Sonsbeek 71* and that the memory of the experience may have influenced their later professional activities. There seems to have been an unconscious *Sonsbeek* trauma.

A major cause of this trauma lay in the implications of neo-avant-garde art, as mentioned previously. The problem was not just how to make the general public understand and accept these implications. The art world specialists committed to the neo-avant-garde also discovered that they had manoeuvred themselves into a rather awkward position. Suddenly the art itself no longer offered a warm blanket to cloak the institutional skeleton of art production. On the contrary, the most radical artists did nothing but reflect that skeleton (and their own dependence on it), in order to present that reflection as a work of art.

None other than than Lambert Tegenbosch, the traditionally-minded art critic who campaigned extensively against *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*, was the first to point out these consequences. In an article analysing the “misleading affair” of *Sonsbeek*, he identified the museological condition inherent in seemingly anti-institutional works of art.

We have now arrived at the point where the museum is the irrevocable destiny of all art. From the Egyptian art of the pyramids to primitive art meant to appease the gods – everything, whatever purpose it once served, will finally end up in that place where it serves no purpose at all. Where, in fact, a lack of purpose has slowly risen to be the quintessence of all art. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and even today in the artistic subculture that is officially ignored) art served as a means to present the artist himself, his individuality, his exceptionality, in the midst of a culture considered to be inhuman, and furthermore as a means to

establish the reign of Art, whatever that may be. And even these products have ended up in the museum. The artists participating in *Sonsbeek* work for nothing but this museological condition. It may be anti-art, it certainly has nothing to do with their individuality any more, it may be whatever it wants to be, as long as it has a museumish quality. That is the progress art has made. ... Whoever follows the avant-garde is always on the right track. And the track of the avant-garde can be easily found: in the avant-garde museum – the museum that no longer conserves and exhibits, but stimulates. The grave has become the engine.¹⁸⁷

Despite the bitterness of his tone, Tegenbosch put his finger on the irrevocable conditioning of art production, which made the audience depend on the information of specialists. According to Tegenbosch, this had brought art into a “fatally embarrassed” state.

The awkward position of contemporary art specialists, who no longer felt supported by the art itself, persisted until the end of the 1970s. At that point, a young generation of artists appeared on the scene who were prepared to fill the painful vacuum. The so-called *neue Wilde* from Germany and the *transanguardia* from Italy produced art that apparently spoke for itself; it came labelled as direct, uncomplicated, spontaneous, expressive and accessible. Most importantly, it was immediately recognisable as art. With their visually and pictorially lavish work, these artists – mostly painters – satisfied a general desire for sensuality in art. The Dutch art scene had its own, home-grown variety of “*nieuwe wilden*”, who produced the right work and had the right mentality to help contemporary art specialists out of their predicament. The artists presented themselves as autonomous and self-supporting; they set up and ran their own (semi-illegal yet often tolerated) studio and exhibition spaces in squats.¹⁸⁸ For the art specialists, the appearance of this young generation came just in time. The artists immediately received all the credit and institutional support they needed. In the Netherlands, young German and Italian artists were given their first museum exhibitions in Museum Boymans-van Beuningen (Rotterdam) and the Groninger Museum

¹⁸⁷ Tegenbosch, “De fraseologie van Sonsbeek 71”, 50.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Camiel van Winkel, “1980”, in: Cor Blok, ed., *Nederlandse kunst vanaf 1900* (Utrecht: Stichting Teleac, 1994), 190 ff.

(Groningen), institutions that were directed at the time by two *Sonsbeek* 71 masterminds: Wim Beeren and Frans Haks.¹⁸⁹

In the thirty years that have passed since *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*, institutional forces in the Netherlands and abroad have collectively attempted to cover up the conditions exposed by the neo-avant-garde. However, the rapid expansion and professionalisation of the contemporary art industry soon made it difficult to deny that the field of contemporary art was mainly a specialist's domain. The only way to make this tolerable was to represent the artist as a professional too.

The idea that visual art is a specific metier had nevertheless been refuted as early as the 1960s. By then it had become clear that there are no general criteria left by which to judge what constitutes a work of art. Radical examples by Carl Andre, On Kawara, Ger van Elk, Stanley Brouwn and many others signalled the end of visual art as a metier. Their work demonstrated that, in principle, *anything* – any object, any process, any event – can be a work of art, provided there is an artist who decides that it is and presents it as such to an audience. The downside of this state of indetermination is that contemporary art no longer represents any generalised expertise that artists as a group can collectively fall back upon.

Developments over recent decades show clear attempts to deny or reverse this condition. In the 1980s, artists, critics, curators, theorists and other specialists tried to re-establish the visual and pictorial expertise of contemporary art. The early years of the decade were characterised by a quasi-anthropological discourse about the mythical or magical function of images.¹⁹⁰ This was based on a supposedly existential need – a “hunger for images”¹⁹¹ – in combination with the presumed authenticity of creative individuals. This naïve discourse did not last very long. By the time of *Sonsbeek 86* it had already been explicitly repudiated. What was left of it in the sphere of artistic production was mostly an empty shell. The notion of

¹⁸⁹ Group exhibitions by young Italian artists took place in the Groninger Museum in 1980 and in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1980-81. Group exhibitions by their German counterparts were held in the Groninger Museum in 1981 and in Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in 1982.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. the exhibition “Verdeelde beelden” (Divided Images) that took place in 1982 simultaneously in Rotterdam (Kunststichting), Amsterdam (Fodor) and Den Bosch (Kruithuis).

¹⁹¹ G.M. Faust, G. de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern* (Cologne: Dumont, 1982).

visual expertise survived – even if this only resulted in an increasingly refined decoration of the empty shell.

The next decade was characterised by an institutionally supported campaign for the re-acknowledgment of the *social* expertise of contemporary art. *Sonsbeek 93* counts among the exhibitions and projects that marked the beginning of that campaign, which climaxed in the activities of artists' collectives such as Superflex from Denmark and WochenKlausur from Vienna. While using the infrastructure of the art world, these collectives endeavour to develop solutions to concrete social problems, ranging from environmentally friendly energy systems for a village in Tanzania to language courses for refugees from Kosovo.¹⁹² Such well-intended projects barely hide the schizophrenia at their root: on the one hand, these artists profit from the recognition achieved by the avant-garde that anything can be a work of art; on the other, they pretend that the significance and value of their work does not depend on the art context. Today, the fact that these assumptions contradict each other may not be evident to more than a handful of the people involved. In that respect, the state of collective denial that has developed over the last thirty years is now remarkably complete.

¹⁹² Will Bradley, "De Superflex methode. Een biogastank voor Afrika", *Metropolis M*, 20:2 (April-May 1999), 42-44; and WochenKlausur, "Working principles/Educational opportunities for Kosovo refugees", *Archis* 8 (August 1999), 20-21.