



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

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

van Winkel, C.H.

Publication date
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Winkel, C. H. (2012). *During the exhibition the gallery will be closed: contemporary art and the paradoxes of conceptualism*. Valiz uitgeverij.

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.

5. Living with Art

In the twentieth century, avant-garde artists attempted to break through the barriers of the aesthetic and gain access to the social domain. Since this required the employment of every imaginable means, they frequently had to involve themselves with design – sometimes to their own surprise.

Designers and stylists – pragmatists as they are – appeared to occupy a more natural place in the everyday life of ordinary people. This fact led artists to admire, envy and imitate them. Under certain circumstances, it seemed acceptable or even logical for artists to move on from designing a better world to designing a better home or a better chair.

Particularly in the 1910s and 1920s, with De Stijl and Bauhaus, the revolutionary spirit of the avant-garde managed to penetrate deeply into the domain of furniture and interior design without having to compromise itself to any degree. Holding on to their revolutionary ideals, artists accepted the fact that they would quasi-automatically and quasi-permanently end up in the role of designers. This trend persisted in the calmer political climate of the 1950s, when – due to the growth in prosperity and industrial rationalisation – products of “good design” became available to growing segments of the population. While some artists and theorists continued to cling to a hierarchical and substantial distinction between fine and applied art, the Flemish critic K.-N. Elnó, for example, saw the refashioning of artists into furniture and interior designers as the only way to ensure the “social salvation” of modern art. Earlier, Elnó had come to the conclusion that collaborations between artists and architects tended to result in disaster. In the words of historian Fredie Floré:

Things will go awry as long as artists attempt to involve themselves in architecture from a position of autonomy; whereas as designers they automatically obtain access to homes and interiors, and their work becomes part of a lived-in, everyday environment. Objects designed by artists may function as mass-produced works of art,

which, since they can actually be used, become part of life and transform that life.³⁶³

Has the involvement of artists as designers proved counterproductive, or, on the contrary, has it never been pushed far enough? Whatever the case, while the development of modern art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was driven by the desire of artists to free themselves from the chains of bourgeois decorum, works of art continue to be associated in the popular mind with notions of luxury, affluence, wealth, status and property. The greatest scandal of modern art may well be that, even today, the works of most artists continue to end up in bourgeois interiors as more or less intellectual lifestyle ornaments. Thus these works of art still fulfil a representative or even decorative function. Notwithstanding the belief that the mission of modern art, rooted in the Enlightenment, is connected to the emancipation of the individual and the battle against stifling tradition, one has to admit that its use to decorate bourgeois interiors – once disdainfully termed the “Bonnard option” by Thierry De Duve³⁶⁴ – is the rule rather than the exception.

The obstinate refusal to discuss this overwhelmingly decorative use of contemporary art is an indication that the subject is one of the last great taboos. The critical art discourse tends to focus on works and oeuvres on show in public or semi-public exhibition spaces or acquired by museums. Even in current discussions concerning the social relevance of contemporary art, a function such as decorating private interiors is seldom mentioned, suggesting that this is not considered a truly *social* function.

This taboo may be the result of an unresolved legacy of the 1960s. If minimal art has degenerated into a stylised design language in the hands of interior designers and furniture makers, we comfort ourselves with the thought that, within the artistic domain, this degeneration has been compensated for and overcome by the critical procedures of conceptual art. Conceptual artists are supposed to have put an end to the primacy of the visual in art, instead placing the immaterial at centre stage. Through their

³⁶³ Fredie Floré, “Sociaal modernisme. De designkritiek van K.-N. Elno (1920–1993)”, *De Witte Raaf* 89 (January-February 2001), 7-8.

³⁶⁴ Thierry De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1996), 432 ff.

cerebral, concept-based approach, art has been liberated once and for all from the snare of representative and decorative applications. The generally accepted notion that the visual appearance of a work of art is subordinate to the underlying ideas also suggests – wrongly – that the world of the artist has been transformed into a universe in which bourgeois decorum and superficiality, by definition, no longer have any role to play. It is from this post-conceptual perspective and with this self-assured attitude that, every so often, thematic exhibitions are devoted to “The Decorative in Twentieth-Century Art” or “Ornament and Abstraction”.³⁶⁵ By looking exclusively at formal links between certain modern or post-modern works of art on the one hand and traditional ornamental and decorative patterns on the other, the curators of these exhibitions imply that art as a whole has transcended the dimensions of decoration and ornament; these dimensions will only be noted when an artist introduces them purposely in the construction of an individual, autonomous oeuvre.

Anyone who ignores the decorative use of contemporary art fails to recognise a significant post-war development in the artistic discourse: the revision of the absolute distinction between the decorative and the non-decorative. One finds this even in the writings of Clement Greenberg, the spiritual father of modernist painting. Greenberg believed that certain pictorial means are inherently decorative, notably “tenuous flatness; pure, valueless contrasts of hue; large, ‘empty’ tracts of uniform color; rudimentary simplicity of design; absence of accents – sheer, raw visual substance”.³⁶⁶ However, he also stated that, in principle, artists were able to make “decorative means” subordinate to “non-decorative ends”. “Decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting”, he wrote in 1957, “and part of the latter’s formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ *L’Envers du décor. Dimensions décoratives dans l’art du XX^e siècle* was an exhibition at the Institut d’Art Contemporain in Villeurbanne in 1998. *Ornament und Abstraktion. Kunst der Kulturen, der Moderne und Gegenwart im Dialog* took place in 2001 at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel-Riehen.

³⁶⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Milton Avery” [1957], in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 43.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

If this critical mission was not – or not entirely – accomplished by Greenberg’s “own” generation of artists, conceptual artists of the 1960s did manage to achieve it – albeit in a contrary fashion. By considering art primarily as a medium for the transfer of information, they dismantled the hard contrast between image and text, between visual and linguistic registers. Artists such as Mel Bochner, John Baldessari and Art & Language turned the decorative against itself by, for example, combining samples of modernist or quasi-modernist painting, or their photographic reproductions, with redundant captions or legends and, in so doing, explicitly turning the transfer of meaning between artist and audience into the crux of the work. All things being equal, this did not mean that progressive practices had now been released from the “spectre” of decoration, even if that may have seemed to be the case at the time. On the contrary, from the 1960s onwards it came to be understood that even a painting composed entirely of text could very well serve as a decorative object above the sofa in a bourgeois interior. After all, if decorative elements can be used in a non-decorative manner, the opposite must also be possible.



When trying to get a clear picture of what it means “to live with art”, we might stumble upon a conservative aspect that, in contrast to the emancipating and enlightened background of the modern notion of art, should be categorised as purely regressive. Works of art not only appeal to the human capacity for empathy, introspection and responsiveness to the “other”, but, potentially, to less lofty psychological traits as well; they can provoke avarice and envy. Confronted for the first time with a particular work of art, one sometimes has the sensation of all of the information supplied with regard to the artist’s intention, the underlying ideas and the cultural or historical context suddenly evaporating to leave only one message behind, which lodges in the brain either briefly or more lastingly, but always profoundly and unequivocally: *“I WANT TO HAVE THIS”*. Without wishing to shed doubt on the claim made by sociologists that an interest in art is an instrument allowing certain strata of the population to

distinguish themselves from others, it should be noted that, within the subjective framework of the aesthetic experience, both this desire to possess and the moment and frequency of its occurrence are completely unreasoned and irrational.

It is obvious that a connection exists between the conservative aspect of “living with art” and one’s own home. After all, “*I WANT TO HAVE THIS*” means “I want to take this home”. Moreover, a home is the foremost symbol of private wealth and ownership. The desire to possess causes a whole series of boundaries to become blurred – not just the primary distinction between what is mine and what is yours, but also the distinctions between art and furniture, between decorative effect and artistic content, and between old and modern art. These boundaries only regain their significance for those who translate the desire to possess into an actual decision to begin collecting art, and who then need to determine, if only intuitively, a particular set of collecting criteria.

The art discourse of the 1990s was coloured in part by the political commitment of certain curators and theoreticians, who, in a sweeping rhetorical operation, attempted to re-establish faith in the social skills of artists. This entailed a return to the modernist view of art as a constituent project of the Enlightenment, a project aimed at the advancement of civilisation and man’s transformation into a better and more rational being. It goes without saying that this view leaves little or no room for the more conservative or even regressive aspects of the art experience. It is directed – somewhat paradoxically – at an intelligent, well-educated public that is sufficiently enlightened to understand that artists are more enlightened than themselves and therefore worth paying attention to.

The fact that even the most progressive, conceptual, theory-based art practices are not immune to issues of bourgeois representation and decorum is demonstrated by the undiminished status and popularity of *site-specificity*. This idea, which in certain situations has even evolved into a prescription, means that the artist creates a specific work for a specific location, using thematic or physical material that presents itself on site or that, used there, discloses a special meaning that would not become apparent elsewhere. Originally developed in alternative circles during the

1960s and 1970s, site-specificity grew out of a resistance to the relentless flow of artworks channelled to the public through galleries, museum and art institutions. Artists created one-off – and often temporary – works that could not be relocated or removed without being destroyed; works in which the local context permeated and determined the artistic process. In so doing, they intended to oppose certain social conventions and routines and throw them off balance, if only for a limited time. As gradually and paradoxically became clear in the 1990s, however, this notion of site-specific art touches upon the essence of bourgeois decorum: after all, at its heart is the idea that artists must do nothing “inappropriate”. They must respect and uphold the spatial or social order that applies at the given location. The respect shown to the *genius loci* is comparable to bourgeois etiquette and conformism. Even in the most paternalistic and condescending examples of site-specificity, where an international group of artists comes to confront a local community with its suppressed anxieties, obsessions and blind spots, artists are keen to do “the right thing”. After all, it is considered inappropriate to do or make something that might also have been appropriate elsewhere. “The work must create meaning from and for the place in which it exists”, noted Valerie Smith, artistic director of *Sonsbeek 93* in Arnhem.

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.³⁶⁸

Whether intentionally or not, it was partly due to the efforts of curators such as Smith that site-specificity degenerated into an affirmative and often complacent ritual.

Not all artists participated in this ritual, of course, however talked-about it was at one time. Neither have the artists that did participate always subscribed to the same schematic principles. Artists from the generation of Jan Vereruyse, Niek Kemps, Jean-Marc Bustamante, Reinhardt Mucha and Harald Klingelhöller emphatically rejected all attempts to link art to

³⁶⁸ Valerie Smith, “Proposal Sonsbeek 93”, in: cat. *Sonsbeek 93*, ed. Jan Brand et al. (Ghent: Snoeck Ducaju, 1993), 8-9.

sociological objectives of well-being and community-building. Instead of stressing the unique nature of a particular location, and implying that it can be known, they committed themselves to defining the placeless, unplaceable and “inappropriate” character of contemporary art – even with projects *in situ*. Moreover, the work of these artists is distinguished by a systematic use of irony. As shown by the countless pieces of “furniture” and cabinet-shaped objects, it involves a fascination with domestic space – a fascination which, in a certain sense, constitutes the ironic reversal of site-specificity. This quasi-domesticity fitted in neatly with the functional neutrality of the contemporary exhibition space – the “white cube”. Although the mentality of these artists is miles away from the slightly hysterical discourse of curators like Valerie Smith, who are always calling for “local significance”, both positions are based on a trauma of uprooting and loss, and both problematise the place of the artwork in late-capitalist society. The two sides only disagree about the necessity (or possibility) of reconstructing the social and cultural setting of the work as an organic entity.



Since then, the stage has been taken by a younger generation of artists for whom the issue of appropriateness has lost all significance. To create pseudo-domestic objects or take on a role of designer or architect is no longer the tough ideological decision it used to be. The bourgeois need for decorum is now met without the artists in question feeling the need for detachment and irony. The work of Joep van Lieshout, Jorge Pardo, Richard Venlet, Tobias Rehberger, Ceal Floyer or Heimo Zobernig, to name but a few, lacks the revolutionary background of the historical avant-garde, and also the edifying, democratising ambition of certain tendencies in the 1950s. These artists do not feel the need to demonstrate the socio-therapeutic value of their artistic practice, in the spirit of *Sonsbeek 93*, nor do they allow their work to be dictated by the conceptual nostalgia and ironical artificiality of artists like Vercruyse and Kemps in the 1980s and 1990s. In looking for ways to bring their work into the social domain, today’s artists are sober and pragmatic compared to the majority of their

twentieth-century predecessors, although it is this very pragmatism that sometimes leads to absurd and grotesque results. In many cases, the ideology of the work is that it appears not to aspire to any ideology at all. These artists do not want to be pinned down to a fixed position. Critics variously see the elusive character of their work either as its strength or as its weakness. The work bears an ambiguous relation to the idea, developed in the 1990s, that the distinctions between art and design have disappeared or become blurred. Indeed, one might say that it bears *no* explicit relation to this idea – even when it clearly seems to have this blurring as its subject.

In an essay on Jorge Pardo and Tobias Rehberger, Sven Lütticken wrote:

The romantic hope that a socially integrated art form would replace “abstract”, autonomous modern art has reached a sort of parodic fulfilment in the omnipresent web of signs, comprised of former high art as much as by former kitsch. Homes and interiors are subjected to fashion as much as paintings are. The oppositional logic that formed the basis for Art Nouveau and Bauhaus has become prehistoric ... Both (autonomous) art and (heteronomous) design are mere shadows of what they were in the past. Greenberg devalued the spectre of heteronomy in the most autonomous of art, the abstract; now, art and design are like zombies, specimens of “the living dead” who have long forgotten their identity and who imitate each other’s behaviour. Today the former combatants are partners in the trading of images. And why should we bemoan this? Some art is slick, while some designers, such as the Dutch collective DEPT, refuse to accept a servile role. Artists like Pardo and Rehberger, too, generate strange obstructions and stumbling blocks in the globalised flow of signs. Those who see them as compromised artists, running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, should ask first whether the hare and the hounds still exist.³⁶⁹

Lütticken’s approach does not answer the question of whether the work of these artists is a mere *symptom* of the blurred distinction between art and design, or rather a *factor* contributing to it. In all probability, such indeterminacy is illustrative of the present state of criticism. Critics lack a consistent theoretical framework within which to draw a sharp distinction between passive reflection and active intervention. The critical perspective

³⁶⁹ Sven Lütticken, “Het schilderij en de afvalbak”, *De Witte Raaf* 89 (January-February 2001), 11-13.

is almost always too narrow, if it is not so wide that all the issues and opportunities specific to art disappear from view.

Artists are the puppets of general cultural and social conditions but, in our admiration, we attribute the richness of the puppet show to them alone. Perhaps this is not entirely unjustified. All positions adopted by artists in the entire course of the twentieth century reappear simultaneously in the work of the present generation, in a shape both grotesque and detached: the functionality of Bauhaus, the anti-metaphysical agenda of minimalism, the artificiality of the Verduytsse generation, the engagement of the Russian constructivists, the capitalist affluence of pop art... Artists today play with positions that have become untenable in isolation but that, when combined, at least produce an *interesting* position. On top of this, they casually accept the fact that, for artists, the most important way to access the social domain is a wholly passive way: through a private collector who sees a work of art and feels the irresistible urge to become its owner.