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The perpetuation of site-specific installation artworks in museums

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Chapter 1: The problem of the perpetuation of site-specific installation art

“If I feel that the space is tangible, if I feel there is time, a kind of dimension I could call time, I also feel that I can change the space.” Olafur Eliasson.¹

Introduction

In the Summer of 1961, Alan Kaprow (1927-2006) installed dozens of used car tyres in the courtyard of the Martha Jackson Townhouse Gallery (New York). The artist had collected them from a nearby garage and invited his friends and colleague artists for the Happening called *Yard*.² There was no other audience but the participants who jumped over the heaps of tyres and moved them around. Photographs of *Yard* show Kaprow arranging the tyres within the small space of the courtyard, which officially was the sculpture garden of the gallery (Fig. 1.1). Apart from the photographs, accounts of the event are scarce and the press hardly paid any attention to it. And yet, *Yard* became one of Kaprow’s seminal Happenings which has been acquired for museum collections and has been re-executed at numerous occasions, by Kaprow himself and others, at different places and with different participants.

A few years earlier, Kaprow had coined the term Happening, which he described as an integration of “all the elements - people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time”.³ In accord with the 1960s dictum to merge art and life, he preferred the use of everyday materials and orchestrated the event in the here-and-now, employing the specifics of the space.⁴ Or, as curator Paul Schimmel stated, with the invention of the Happening a new artform emerged that resembled many things at once -

¹ This quote comes from the TED Talk ‘Olafur Eliasson: Playing with space and light’, presented by Eliasson at an official TED conference, 7 August 2009.

https://www.ted.com/talks/olafur_eliasson_playing_with_space_and_light?language=en (visited on 2 September, 2019)

² *Yard* was part of the exhibition ‘Environments, Situations, Spaces’, taking place at the Martha Jackson Gallery from 25 May to 23 June, 1961. After his experiments with collages and environments, Kaprow coined the term Happening in 1959.

³ In Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader (2nd edition)* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 264.

⁴ In fact, Kaprow orchestrated Happenings in detail and provided the participants with a set of instructions beforehand. See for an elaborate description of Kaprow’s working method: Paul Schimmel. “Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object.” In *Out of Actions: between performance and the object, 1949–1979, exhibition catalogue* (New York/London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 61 f.

object art, installation art and performance.⁵

In the case of *Yard*, Kaprow responded to the situation in yet another way, as art historian Martha Buskirk observes. The Martha Jackson Gallery usually presented artworks that were created by modernist artists in the courtyard and, at the time, sculptures by Barbara Hepworth and Alberto Giacometti were on show. As Buskirk points out the photographs of the Happening reveal that Kaprow had wrapped those sculptures in tarpaper and tied them up like packages (Fig. 1.2). The artist had 'blocked' them from the audience's perception as a statement and he "temporally swallowed up the more traditional modernist sculptures already on the site", literally concealing the art of his predecessors.⁶ This contextual element was unique for the first iteration and tied the installation to the site of the performance.

In theory, Happenings have brief lives, because they are bound to specific sites and times. However, the many reiterations of *Yard*, varying from reinterpretations of the Happening (Fig. 1.3) to more sculptural site-specific installations (Fig. 1.4), show something else. Martha Buskirk concludes: "Indeed, *Yard* is not simply a 1961 work, but an environment with a surprisingly extended history".⁷ In the course of time, *Yard* was not only reiterated by the artist himself or by curators who used documentation of earlier versions, but also by contemporary artists who were invited by his gallerist Hauser & Wirth in 2009, three years after the artist had passed away. Several 'reinventions' were created at different places, for instance by William Pope L.⁸ The artist, who is best known for his performance artworks, created a new version at the original location in the Martha Jackson Gallery, bearing the title *Yard (to Harrow)* (Fig. 1.5). Since the courtyard had been roofed over in the meantime, the installation was relocated to the first floor of the gallery (covering more or less the same geographical coordinates).

Like with the 1961 Happening, the audience could crawl and jump

⁵ Paul Schimmel mentions the influence of John Cage and a New York-based group of artists (Jim Dine, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Whitman) as pioneers of the Happening. The influence of Jackson Pollock's Action Paintings and John Cage's affinity with random sound can also be traced in Kaprow's preference for the use of everyday materials and non-professional participants. The citation comes from Paul Schimmel, *Only memory can carry it into the future* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 14.

⁶ Martha Buskirk. *Creative Enterprise. Contemporary Art Between Museum And Marketplace (International Texts in Critical Media Aesthetics. Volume 3)* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 123.

⁷ Idem, 129.

⁸ In 1991, at the occasion of the overview exhibition '7 Environments' at the Fondazione Mudima (Milan) Kaprow expressed his preference for the term 'reinvention' over 'reconstruction', because each new manifestation should differ from the original. Allan Kaprow, *7 Environments* (Napels: Studio Morra, 1992), 23. The artists invited by Hauser & Wirth were William Pope L. Josiah McElheny and Sharon Hayes. <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/3277-allan-kaprow-yard?modal=media-player&mediaType=artwork> (accessed 4 October, 2019).

around, while sound and bright gallery spots were added as cinematographic elements. Several 'body bags' – like the ones wrapping the sculptures by Hepworth and Giacometti – were also added to the installation, honouring Kaprow's statement of the original Happening.⁹ In the words of William Pope. L.: "Kaprow wanted to hide something – I wanted to show something." With this gesture, the artist not only returned *Yard* to its place of origin but also reactivated a meaningful constituent of the first manifestation in a different socio-cultural environment.

Over the years, *Yard* turned into an iconic example of site-specificity, performativity and audience interaction. Although the original Happening was rooted in the art practice of the 1960s, its afterlife demonstrates a richness in approaches for reinvigorating site-specific installation artworks in different contexts and times.

1.1 Research question

At first glance, relocating site-specific installations and extending their lives within a museum context seems to be contradictory to the principles of site-specificity. As the term 'site-specific' indicates, this kind of artworks is designed for a specific place and/or the surrounding context. Furthermore, the artworks are often intentionally temporary and performative, connecting the manifestation of the work not only to space but also to time. Hence, these artworks are spatiotemporally defined and would, theoretically, only exist as a singular manifestation for the duration of an exhibition. On the other hand, as the example of *Yard* has shown, artists, gallerists and curators have frequently engaged themselves with reiterations of site-specific installation artworks after the initial moment of creation.

Yard raises a number of questions that are central to this dissertation. First of all, Happenings are often seen as forerunners of 'performance art', a term coined in the 1970s as an umbrella term for avant-gardist artworks with a focus on process and action in the present moment.¹⁰ Likewise, site-specific installations engage the visitor in the here-and-now and could be compared with a temporary event or a 'performance'. Furthermore, relevant to the current study is the problem of the acquisition of performative artworks by a gallery or a museum, because in their perpetuation an ontological gap is created between the initial 'performance' of the artwork and its manifestations at later instances. As outlined above with the history of *Yard*, site-specific artworks have been collected by museums ever since their emergence in the 1960s and are

⁹ William Pope. L calls them 'body bags' in an interview with Mary Barone, *Art in America*, 6 October, 2009.

¹⁰ See for this comparison between Happenings and performance art: Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 39-40.

being presented in different contexts. How can we understand this inherent paradox of the perpetuation of these artworks? What happens to the identity of site-specific installations once they have been acquired for a museum collection and are being reinstalled time and again?

Another key question is *how* site-specific installations survive in a museum context. Whereas Allan Kaprow preferred *Yard* to be 'reinvented' by himself or others, this is not a standard approach in the production and conservation of contemporary art. The conservation discipline is deeply concerned with matters of change and variability in contemporary art, which are no less applicable to site-specific installations than to other works of contemporary art. Within this paradigm, the connectivity to the surrounding context poses a problem, since site-specific installations are susceptible to changes beyond the configuration of the work itself, due to, for example, relocation of the installation to a different place, renovation of the exhibition space for which the work was intended, or changes in museum policies and the socio-cultural environment in which the museum operates. Seen from the perspective of their continuation, could we assume that site-specific installations have a transformative identity, including the ability to accommodate their site-specificity to new circumstances? Which approaches apply in museum practices and what are factors of influence that determine the reinvigoration of the artwork's site-specificity?

The above leads to the two kernel questions of this dissertation. The first question addresses the connectivity between the artwork and the 'site' of its presentation: How can we describe this connection and what set of parameters can support a comparison between one iteration and another? How does this systematic comparison contribute to answering the ontological question whether a manifestation of a site-specific installation is still recognizable as the same artwork, despite modifications of the spatial design of the work and/or of the surrounding exhibition space, or changes in the socio-cultural context in which the artwork is presented?

The second question focuses on the strategies artists and custodians apply in respect of the activation of the network of site-specific functions and foregrounds the factors of influence regarding the presentation of site-specific installations. In particular in this respect, ample attention is paid to museum practices and the underlying motives of the decision-makers. By including an analysis of the processes and practices applying to staging site-specific installation artworks, insight can be gained into the underlying motives of decision-makers and, by extension, into the problem of the perpetuation of site-specific artworks in museums.

In answer to these questions, my research offers a conceptual model for the analysis of site-specific installation artworks over time, enabling a systematic comparison of successive iterations and the factors that influence their presentation as a *site-specific* installation. The building blocks of this

conceptual model are derived from various academic disciplines – art history, conservation and socio-geography – that will be shaping the model step by step. When developing the conceptual model, I will discuss a variety of case studies and, conversely, the model will be tried out on a number of site-specific installation artworks in museum collections in three ‘case study’ chapters.

Defining site specific installation artworks and their perpetuation

The generation of artists to which Kaprow belonged opposed the mechanisms of the art market and criticized the emerging consumer society of the 1960s. Life events, performances and site-specific installations were strategies to oppose the idea of ‘art as commodity’ and the circulation of art objects - not least because these artworks were supposed to be untradeable and could not easily be moved. Simultaneously with a refusal of participating in the official art circuit, artists looked for alternative exhibition places where they could experiment with new forms and production methods ‘in situ’. As a consequence, site-specific art was preferably created in factories, empty office buildings, or public space – places offering the artists ample opportunity for experiment. From the 1960s onward, Land Art projects showed an interest in exploring the connectivity between art and the physical properties of a given ‘site’. Apart from that, a wide array of materials, media, techniques and strategies were employed to explore the site’s conditions and incorporate them into the production of site-specific works of art.

Ideologies changed over the past 50 years and an ever-increasing number of site-specific installations is being produced by contemporary artists, often in cooperation with gallerists and museum curators. Today, artists are often invited to create ‘spectacular’ installations for specific locations in a commercial gallery or museum building. Indeed, it is now part of the art practice to work with the conditions of a particular site or “a style of working”, as the curator Christian L. Frock observes.¹¹ In concordance with these developments in the art practice, a broader notion of site-specificity came into vogue. As stated by Mary Tinti in the Oxford Dictionary of Art, site-specificity “has evolved to encompass a broad range of philosophical and conceptual nuances. It continues to be the subject of much scholarly scrutiny, discussion and debate in the new millennium.”¹² The current study aims to contribute to this discussion by examining the problem of the *extended lives* of

¹¹ Christian L. Frock, “Site-specific installation: some historic context,” in *Unexpected Art. Serendipitous Installations, Site-Specific Works and Surprising Interventions*, ed. Jenny Moussa Spring (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2015), 8.

¹² Mary M. Tinti, “Site-specific”, *Oxford Dictionary of Art*, <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/search?q=site-specific&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true> (visited on 3 September, 2019)

artworks that were created for a specific place and were subsequently acquired for a collection.

Arguably, the subject has a large scope and it is important to provide a structure in order to get a grip on the kind of artworks under discussion and the problem of their perpetuation. Art historians and theorists have developed typologies for site-specific installations, mostly following the chronology of their creation process. Although I will make ample use of existing categorizations, for the current purpose it seemed more productive to develop a model that applies to the phenomenon of site-specificity independently from the historical context in which the artwork is created. A second element of the model focuses on the analysis of different manifestations of one and the same site-specific artwork. To enable an analysis of the factors of influence on successive iterations of the artwork, an analytical toolbox is proposed, by which means the impact of musealization, preservation and reinstallation can be scrutinized.

In view of the above, a few words are needed regarding the terminology used. I have designated the term 'perpetuation' to the processes and practices of safeguarding site-specific installation artworks, because its meaning "to preserve something valued from oblivion or extinction" suggests an active approach that applies very well to the reinvigoration of site-specific artworks.¹³ The alternative term, 'continuation' (which is a more common term in conservation studies) would suggest that the artwork continues to exist in more or less the same format, which would be in contrast to the radical changes these artworks may undergo when exhibited in new contexts and/or times.

Furthermore, I will use the umbrella term 'conservation' for several activities in the conservation field that are usually subdivided into: 'preventive conservation' (handling, transport, storage and display measurements), 'conservation' (action carried out with the aim of stabilizing condition and retarding further deterioration) and 'restoration' (action carried out on damaged or deteriorated objects).¹⁴

In addition, the terms 'installation art' and 'site-specific installation art' need clarification, because they are partly overlapping. Art historians and scholars usually call spatial constructions which are composed of heterogeneous elements, 'installation art'. This term emerged in the 1960s and has been ambiguous from the start. According to Claire Bishop, the term 'installation' was used in art magazines in order to describe artworks "that used the whole space" of the gallery; in photo captions it indicated the overall

¹³ See English Grammar <https://www.englishgrammar.org/perpetrate-vs-perpetuate/> (visited on 6 October 2019).

¹⁴ After *E.C.C.O. Professional Guidelines*, Promoted by the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organization, 2002. http://www.ecco-eu.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ECCO_professional_guidelines_II.pdf (visited on 3 September, 2019)

arrangement of an exhibition: the “installation shot”.¹⁵ Soon after, installation art became a general indicator of a wide array of artworks, varying “in appearance, content and scope”.¹⁶ In the same vein, art critic and curator Mark Rosenthal refers to installations as an “integrated, cohesive, carefully contrived whole”.¹⁷ He stresses the presence of the viewer, who often needs to enter the installation space physically in order to experience the artwork, as a precondition for rendering the meaning of the installation. Rosenthal calls this the “lifelike qualities” of installation art, grouping the works together around the parameters of space and time:

The time and space of the viewer coincide with the art, with no separation or dichotomy between the perceiver and the object. In other words, life pervades this form of art.¹⁸

‘Spatial configuration’ and ‘temporality’ are concepts that apply to installation art at large. However, in *site-specific* installations an extra layer of meaning is added to the configuration, namely: the artwork’s relationship to the site. This interconnectivity between the configuration of the installation itself and the surrounding context is by definition both spatially and temporally defined. Hence, strictly speaking, a site-specific installation would only exist as a singular manifestation, because the work cannot exist in the same form in another space and/or time. In reality, however, many artworks continue their existence in a museum context, which means that inevitably change or loss of site-specificity occurs, a crucial aspect that sets these artworks apart from the larger group of installations.

The aspect of singularity is at the heart of the current research, especially in regard to the question whether, and if so, how site-specificity can be repeated, reactivated or re-established. Many artists, gallerists and museum practitioners have been involved in the relocation of site-specific installations to a museum and on a regular basis decisions are taken regarding the site-specificity of the artwork: some elements may survive, while others have been adjusted or omitted from the installation, depending on the situation. In the current research I will closely examine such decisions and the underlying motives in concrete case examples, in order to develop the conceptual model in tandem with actual museum practices and the attempts to communicate site-specific art from the past to contemporary audiences.

In view of the above, I would like to make the additional remark that historical works have the advantage of a sequence of reiterations that can be studied, as demonstrated in the introductory example of Allan Kaprow’s *Yard*.

¹⁵ Claire Bishop, *Installation art. A Critical History*, (London: Tate Publisher, 2005), 6.

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art. From Duchamp to Holzer* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003), 26.

¹⁸ Rosenthal, *Installation Art*, 27.

With site-specific installations from a more recent date, the approaches and strategies for their perpetuation are often not yet crystalized, which enables a researcher to experience the decision-making process from close by and to analyse the problems and solutions applied in current practice. In my research, I followed both directions by interlacing historic and contemporary examples, in order to get a better grip on the full range of site-specific installations in museums. In fact, a contemporary example, which I will briefly introduce below, triggered my interest in this research topic. The kind of questions arising from its acquisition are illustrative of the issues encountered with many other site-specific installation artworks as well.

1.2 Olafur Eliasson's *Notion Motion*

In 2005, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam) commissioned the world-famous artist Olafur Eliasson to create a site-specific installation for the first floor of the Bodon Gallery. Taking advantage of the large dimensions of the exhibition space, Eliasson created three adjacent compartments, covering 1200 m² in total. The installation largely consists of water containers that are covered with raised, wooden duckboards for visitors to walk on. The rooms are darkened, with the exception of a few spotlights illuminating particular sections, like on a film set. Visitors literally breathe life into the artwork by walking over the duckboards and causing ripples when the boards touch the water; with each movement the ripples are amplified by wave activators and, as a result, light waves are projected on the walls. *Notion Motion* is both spectacular and intimate, as it makes visitors aware of their own interaction and intensifies their perception when ripples in the water transform into patterns of light (Fig. 1.6).¹⁹

According to Eliasson, museums offer a unique platform for presenting artworks that raise people's awareness of natural phenomena, of time and space:

So here I am with a museum exhibition and I want the time to take the museum out of its stigma, of being timeless, and add the time to it as a dimension which is productive to the quality of the work. So it is not, again, about the museum but about the spectator ... and the principle question about taking your time.²⁰

Notion Motion was created and acquired in 2005 and was rebuilt in the Bodon Gallery in 2010 and 2016. I visited *Notion Motion* twice and was touched by

¹⁹ Claire Bishop describes the visitor's encounter in the museum space with Eliasson's *Notion Motion* as an experience of "returning to the subjective moment of perception". Claire Bishop, *Installation art. A Critical History* (London: Tate Publisher, 2005), 76-80.

²⁰ Olafur Eliasson made this statement in the documentary video 'Take your Time', published at the website of MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/olafureliasson/#/video4/> (visited on 4 September, 2019).

the cheerful way people behaved when touching the duckboards, sometimes even dancing (Fig. 1.7). The installation was appreciated by both the public and the media. The commission is exemplary for the curatorial agenda of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen: offering the public immersive experiences with contemporary art. On the reverse side are the high demands posed to the museum and its staff members in terms of reinstallation. Each time the installation is presented, interior walls have to be rebuilt in order to subdivide the Bodon Gallery into the necessary separate compartments; huge water basins are covered with foil in order to carry no less than 20,562 liters of water and each time the installation is exhibited 800 duckboards are being assembled and reinstalled.²¹ Apart from the spotlights and a few technical devices, no material substances are kept and for each new period of display the entire construction has to be reassembled.

Notion Motion is one of the prestigious acquisitions of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and raises profound issues for its perpetuation. The work could only be purchased with external financial support of a patron and the agreement indicates that the artwork should be on show every five years.²² Apart from the huge efforts to rebuild the construction, there is the issue of safety relating to the management of the water basins and the visitors walking over the duckboards in darkened spaces. Site-specific installations often entice the public to interact with them because of their exciting, spatial and sometimes interactive constructions, but they also may bring risks, as we shall see in a number of case studies in this dissertation – risk for the building, the collection and the public.

At the heart of this dissertation is *Notion Motion's* site-specificity. Could the artwork be sent on loan to a different location? This problem was discussed during a European project, called 'Inside Installations', in which I was directly involved as the main coordinator.²³ The international conservation community has a history of collaborative projects, in which conservators, curators and scholars participate in individual case studies and in which the artist is involved wherever possible and desired.²⁴ Against this

²¹ A description of the work is provided at <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/exhibitions/olafur-eliasson-notion-motion-2016> (visited on 4 September, 2019).

²² *Notion Motion* was acquired with financial support of the H + F Patronage (Han Nefkens).

²³ The European project 'Inside Installations' ran from 2004-2007. On behalf of the Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands, I was main coordinator of the project in which 25 European museums and institutions researched the problems of preservation and reinstallation and carried out an equal number of case studies on installation art. See: Scholte and Wharton 2011 for the results of the project. Part of the project consisted of a recording of the reinstallation process of *Notion Motion* in 2010, included in the film 'Installation Art: Who Cares?', published by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, The Netherlands.

<https://www.sbm.nl/en/publications/filmInstallationArtWhoCares> (visited on 26 June, 2019).

²⁴ Examples of international collaboration projects in the conservation of contemporary art are the symposium and publication 'Modern Art: Who Cares?' (1996/1999) and the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) (1999-today). See IJsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé eds. *Modern Art: Who Cares?* (London: Archetype Publications, 2006 [1999]); and

background, 'Inside Installations' focused on an interdisciplinary approach during the investigation, conservation and presentation of a large number of case studies on installation artworks in museums. *Notion Motion* was one of the more complex cases, because of the few physical remains and the scarce documentation that was available. When Eliasson was asked for his opinion on the matter of sending *Notion Motion* on loan, his answer was positive - on the condition that the spatial dimensions would differ no more than 10% from the original. The interview clarified that "[it] should be attempted to show the work with all parts if possible. A partial showing should mention that the work is only partially represented." Only Olafur Eliasson or a representative of his estate could decide to do otherwise.²⁵ This very precise specification would give the museum relative freedom for relocating the artwork to a different venue, which in fact never happened until the date of writing this dissertation.

Most of the issues discussed above were not foreseen at the moment of *Notion Motion*'s first display. Only with the passage of time, the problems of the artwork's perpetuation became manifest and each new reiteration is challenging, especially with regard to a current development. In May 2019, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen closed its doors for a major renovation of the entire museum. A new episode will start in 2021, with the building of public art depot next to the renovated museum building, which will serve as an additional exhibition space. It is not unthinkable that *Notion Motion* will be reinstalled at this new site and, even when executed at (almost) the same geographical coordinates, these contextual changes will have a considerable effect on the artwork's manifestation.

The examples of *Yard* and *Notion Motion* indicate that site-specific installation artworks continue to give rise to new questions regarding the reinvigoration of their site-specific functions. As we shall see with quite a number of examples presented in this dissertation, it is no exception that site-specific installations end up in a deadlock at some point of their career. This is not to say that site-specific installations cannot survive under changing circumstances and, due to their significance for the collection, custodians keep searching for solutions to the challenging questions those artworks pose, in order to keep them alive.

Methodology

The aim of my dissertation is to contribute to the decision-making processes from an academic point of view, without losing sight of the issues at stake in

Usbrand Hummelen and Tatja Scholte, "Sharing Knowledge for the conservation of contemporary art: changing roles in a museum without walls?" In *Modern Art, New Museums*, eds Roy Ashok and Perry Smith (Bilbao: The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2004), 208-210.

²⁵ This citation is taken from an interview with Olafur Eliasson by Elbrig de Groot and Jaap Guldmond, archive Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

museum practices. The cross-fertilization between practice and theory is a trademark of current research in the field of musealization, conservation and presentation of contemporary art.²⁶ In accord with this trend, the core of my method consists of case study analyses, based on personal observation, documentation, literature reviews and interviews with a range of stakeholders. In addition, I will make use of my own ethnographic field work during previous projects, such as 'Inside Installations'. A profound literature review of relevant academic writings in art history, socio-geography and conservation studies will be employed for developing the argument and the proposed conceptual model. Furthermore, two concepts are at the heart of my methodology, which are briefly introduced below. The first one is the proposition to study site-specific installation artworks from a 'biographical' perspective. The second one rests on the assumption that site-specific installations can be conceived as 'dynamic relational networks', which will be a guiding principle for structuring my model.

1.3 Biographical approach

The concept of the cultural biography of objects was introduced by the anthropologists Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai, and has gained currency in heritage studies, archeology and, more recently, in reflective writing on contemporary art conservation.²⁷ Key to this notion is the idea that cultural objects have 'social lives' and that the relevance of the object – its material, symbolic, social, utilitarian and/or economic value – can be assessed at moments of transition, when the object moves from one cultural sphere to another.²⁸ The authors state that the life of a cultural object can be studied by looking into the history of its making and by studying the shifts in meaning and changing 'status' of the object during its journey through different value systems. Igor Kopytoff:

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined.²⁹

²⁶ See, for example, the innovative European training network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art (NACCA), coordinated by Maastricht University, 2017-2019. <http://nacca.eu/about/> (visited on 5 September, 2019).

²⁷ The concept of the biography of cultural objects was introduced in Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-63. And in Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64-91.

²⁸ Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography," 66-67.

²⁹ Idem, 67.

Within conservation of contemporary art research, the biographical approach has been embraced in order to study and compare various manifestations in the lives of works of art, considered as successive stages in which meaning is redefined.³⁰ In the often complex trajectories of contemporary artworks, variation, change and transformation frequently occur and not always in concordance with the artwork's linear chronology. The assumption is that, by means of distinguishing, describing and analyzing 'biographical stages', we might understand what elements of the artwork have changed or remained the same, and why this happened at 'moments of transition'. Moreover, the approach brings into focus the processual character of contemporary art and the possibility that artworks can move into or out of a biographical stage: at some stages significant differences may occur, whereas other stages are more consistent with each other, and even similarities in biographical stages of different artworks may come to light. In this sense, conservation scholar Renée van de Vall suggests that the cultural biography enables us to follow individual trajectories that nevertheless may show similar phases and patterns of change.³¹

In this dissertation I will look for patterns of similarity and change in the lives of site-specific installation artworks by describing and analyzing their biographical stages, especially with regard to elements that constitute the works' site-specificity. That said, it should also be stressed that researchers who follow a biographical approach take part in the construction of the artwork's biography and, inevitably, involve a certain degree of subjectivity. Like a biographer who is portraying a person, my accounts will be constructions of the artworks' biographies made in hindsight and from a certain perspective; in the case of this research, with a focus on the meaning production of the site-specific artwork in diverse circumstances and the museum's strategies of perpetuation, display and care.

1.4 Typologies and site-specific installations as dynamic networks

The range of site-specific installations seems endless. To get a hold on this diversity, my first step is to turn to art history and make use of the typologies developed in this field. The best-known typology was offered by the art historian Miwon Kwon at the turn of this century, in two seminal publications

³⁰ See for in-depth discussion of the biographical approach applied to the conservation of contemporary art Renée van de Vall, Hanna Hölling, Tatja Scholte, and Sanneke Stigter, "Reflections on a biographical approach," *Preprints ICOM Conservation Community 16th Triennial Conference*, (Lisbon, 19-23 September, 2011): 1-8. See also Deborah Cherry, "Altered States: the social biographies of works of art. She Loved to Breathe - Pure Silence (1987-2012) by Zarina Bhimji," in *Tra memoria e oblio: percorsi nella conservazione dell'arte contemporanea*, ed. Paolo Martore (Rome: Castelvechi, 2014), 210-228.

³¹ Van de Vall et al, "Biographical approach," 6.

on site-specific art.³² Kwon takes artworks from the late 1960s and early 1970s as a main point of reference and explains how the inextricable bond between the artwork and the site was interconnected with a critical stance taken by the artists towards the institutions and a wider socio-political context.³³ When art galleries and museums started to collect site-specific artworks from the avant-garde two decades later, the meaning of this crucial relationship was lost and site-specific art was rendered harmless, according to the author. Noteworthy for this discussion is that simultaneously with rise of the museums' interest in collecting site-specific artworks, artists started a second wave of site-specificity at the end of the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of globalization and communication technology. Kwon explains that, whereas in the previous decades site-specificity was understood as an integrated whole – physically tied to a particular location for both the artist and the viewer – the new tendency was to use the conditions of a given place in site-specific art projects and subsequently distribute the artworks around the globe – creating a distance in time and space between the production and reception of the work.³⁴

This very brief summary does not do justice to Miwon Kwon's conceptual framework regarding the genealogy of site-specific art and I will return to her view in more detail in Chapter 2. The reason to include it here is that her argument draws attention to an important shift – roughly speaking occurring between the 1960s/70s and the 1980s/90s – which represents two different viewpoints regarding the notion of site-specificity. Throughout my dissertation this distinction between two art historical periods is a recurring theme, because it elucidates shifts in the artists' approaches towards site-specificity, and marks the turning point of the 1990s when museums started to collect and re-exhibit site-specific installations.

Under the influence of globalization, the 1990s introduced broader notions of site-specificity in the art practice and discourse. In this respect, art historian James Meyer signals a trend of “nomadic working” artists who seek inspiration in the historical or socio-political meaning of a given site and start working with local communities in site-specific projects.³⁵ Both Miwon Kwon and James Meyer specify this new form of connectivity as the capacity to establish a dynamic movement between sites. In this new paradigm, site-specificity is conceived of as a *function of the site* that could be translated to

³² Kwon, Miwon, *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational identity* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002, 1-31 and 33-55. And Miwon Kwon, “One place after another: Notes on site-specificity,” in *Space, Site, Intervention. Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 38-63.

³³ Kwon, “Notes on site-specificity”, 38-43.

³⁴ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 1-4.

³⁵ James Meyer, “The Functional Site or The Transformation of Site Specificity,” in *Space, Site, Intervention. Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 32.

various contexts.³⁶ In the same vein, the art historian Anne Ring Petersen introduces the notion of *networked* site-specificity, understood as a metaphor “to describe the complex processes, relationships, materialities and intersection points”.³⁷ Petersen brings a processual approach into the discussion by focussing on the chain of actions that produce site-specificity at specific moments in time and crystalize into a (temporary) meaning. Her view echoes what Doreen Massey stated in the early 1990s in *A global sense of place*, namely that “specificity” of a place is

... constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus... Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings.³⁸

In the slipstream of the new art practices and global trends, contemporary art museums reconsidered their institutional role: on the one hand, this new interest in the ‘site’ made the institutions receptive to site-specific installation artworks from previous periods and, on the other hand, collaboration with artists more and more became part of institutional policies. Increasingly, artists were invited to create site-specific installations for museum galleries, as still happens today.

The starting point for the conceptual framework I am proposing is that site-specific installation artworks can best be understood as dynamic relational networks. Therewith, I am following the notion of ‘networked site-specificity’ from the art historical discourse. First of all, this notion is beneficial to a conceptual model that applies to a wide range of site-specific installation artworks, as I will argue in this dissertation. Furthermore, the ‘network’ is a familiar concept within various cultural discourses in order to describe art as a dynamic system, consisting of functions that operate in mutual relationship with one another. The idea that site-specificity is produced as a network of functions – which are activated at specific sites and moments in time – enables an analysis of the constitutive elements of the network and their changes over time. The museum site is regarded as a dynamic part of this system, or, to quote James Meyer: “The functional work explores an ‘expanded’ site. The ‘art world’, in this activity has become a site within a network of sites, an institution among institutions”.³⁹

³⁶ James Meyer was the first art historian who described this new form of site-specificity as the “functional site” in: Meyer, “Functional Site,” 23-27; followed by Miwon Kwon in her explanation of the “de-materialization” of site in: Kwon, “Notes on site-specificity”, 45-46.

³⁷ Anne Ring Petersen, *Installation Art. Between Image and Stage* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2015), 359.

³⁸ Doreen Massey, “A global sense of place,” in *Situation (Documents of Contemporary Art)*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 167.

³⁹ Meyer, “Functional Site,” 27.

1.5 Outline of the research project

After this introduction, I will continue in Chapter Two with an art historical overview of the main concepts art historians and critics have attributed to site-specific art. Various typologies and terminologies developed in the discourse will be presented in order to gain a deeper insight into the phenomenon of site-specificity in the art practice and into the relationship between artists and museums. Complemented with case examples and statements made by the artists themselves, I will make a first step to developing a vocabulary for site-specific installations and the proposed conceptual model regarding their perpetuation.

In Chapter Three, this model is developed further by introducing the notion of site-specificity as a triadic network of spatial functions. This view forms the backbone of my argument and is derived from a theory on space developed by social-geographer Henri Lefebvre. His publication *The Production of Space* (first published in 1974) was deeply embedded in a more general interest in space and spatiality of the 1968-generation city planners and sociologists. His views have been highly influential on the thinking about space in planning, architecture, design and contemporary art to this very day. Following Lefebvre's theory, the network of site-specificity is proposed as a conglomerate of three basic functions: the physical relationship between the artwork and its surrounding (in concept and realization), the social spaces in which the artwork is produced and experienced, and the symbolic (representational) context in which the artwork is presented.

In the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts towards a current strand in the conservation discourse in which installation artworks are compared with a 'performance' or 'live event'. The rationale for understanding site-specific installations in terms of their performative quality is that the meaning of these artworks is only produced when the work is installed – or 'staged' – at a particular place and moment in time. It also brings into focus that the staging of a site-specific installation is the result of a decision-making process, which can be analysed with a similar set of terms as applied in the performance arts: 'script' and 'actor'. I incorporate this view into my conceptual model by developing a 'toolbox' – based on the notions of 'script' and 'actor' – which enables the analysis of decision-making and of the factors of influence on successive iterations. Lefebvre's theory of the triadic network of spatial functions and the performance analogy are complementary to one another, like two segments of a walnut. Together they constitute my proposition of a conceptual model for the perpetuation of site-specific installation artworks in museum context.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3, several historical examples are included in order to develop the argument and the conceptual model. In the case study chapters (4-6), most examples are from a more recent date. The main case studies in these chapters were created in the first decade of this century and, due to

their relatively young existence, they pose challenges and dilemma's to museums which have not always been solved as yet. The examples were selected on the basis of specific questions the artworks raise in view of their perpetuation.

Throughout this dissertation, I switch between theories, conceptual ideas and case studies that allow me to undertake detailed examination of the artworks and related documentation. Methods of collecting source material for the case studies consist of archival research (consultation of floor plans, condition reports, artists' statements, conservation and curatorial reports, guidelines for reinstallation etc.); the examination of relevant literature (e.g. published statements, exhibition reviews, published interviews etc.). Furthermore, I conducted ethnographic research, primarily in the form of interviews with artists, conservators, curators of collections, exhibition makers and other stakeholders. Sometimes I was a participant in the research, as in the case study of *Notion Motion* and Ernesto Neto's *Célula Nave* (Chapter 4). The approach of working with, as well as in, museums, was decisive for the selection of the main case examples, which are all hosted by museums in The Netherlands.

Museum practices take a central role in this research. Testing the model against 'real life' examples in museums proved crucial and brought about some refinements of the proposed model (see, for example, Chapter 4). Furthermore, each of the main case studies is accompanied with at least one comparative case, which has a longer history of musealization. This comparison sheds a fresh light on the dilemmas and options for the artwork's perpetuation. The ultimate goal of proposing the conceptual model and the analysis of examples is not only to contribute to the academic field, but also to contribute to the work of museum professionals when facing challenging situations in the perpetuation of site-specific installation artworks in their collections.

Three main case studies

The case study of Chapter 4 – Ernesto Neto's *Célula Nave. It happens in the body where truth dances* (2004) – is a room-filling installation designed for and realized within the Bodon Gallery of Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. *Célula Nave* is a huge structure, resembling a 'tent', for which the artist used different kinds of knitted polyamide in various shades of turquoise. The stretchable material gives in when visitors entering the 'nave' press the fabric to the floor and touch the membrane with their hands. It is an example of Neto's hallmark to reconsider architectural spaces through the tactility of sensual materials, a haptic sensation that is crucial in experiencing his art. However, in the case under consideration, the interaction proved to be extremely harmful to the physical condition of the work.

After two terms of display, *Célula Nave* can no longer be installed and is considered a 'total loss'. Initially the installation was not intended to survive after its first display period, *Célula Nave* was acquired nonetheless. Hence, the

main issue in this case is the dilemma of extending the lifespan of a temporary, site-specific installation and, in addition, the question how the work's physical integrity relates to the interactive use and intended site-specificity. Furthermore, the places of production play an important role in this case study, since they are significant parameters for the meaning of the work. With an eye on the current state of 'total loss', the conceptual model is employed for an exploration of possible scenarios for future iterations, taking into account the intended site-specific experience and the production sites (restoration, remake under supervision of the artist, remake by another fabricator).

Chapter 5 Jason Rhoades' *SLOTO. The Secret Life of the Onion* (2002), examines a room-filling installation by Jason Rhoades in the collection of Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven). The installation was created for the opening exhibition of the new museum (2003), as a site-specific installation for the museum's 'project space' in the basement. The chapter focuses on the perpetuation of a site-specific installation that results from a co-production between the artist and the museum. Jason Rhoades involved museum staff members in the preparations, e.g. by collecting numerous objects of which the installation is composed (most of which refer to cultivation processes in agriculture) and engaged them in 'uncommon' activities for a museum context – such as slicing onion rings and cooking them in the museum canteen before adding them to the installation. The case study looks into various modes of site-specificity: the physical location, the production process in the museum, and symbolic references to the museum space, for example in thumbnails of the museum's collection added by Rhoades to the installation. When *SLOTO* was reinstalled in 2011, two major challenges had to be faced: in 2006, the artist had suddenly passed away and the original location was no longer available as a gallery space. With this second iteration, the curators decided to relocate *SLOTO* to another gallery and accommodated its site-specific functions this new location. The conceptual model is employed for the analysis of the shifts in the artwork's site-specificity and for understanding the underlying motives of the curatorial decision-making process during the second iteration.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the installation artwork *Drifting Producers* (2003) by the South-Korean artists' group Flying City, in the collection of Van Abbemuseum. This installation is intertwined with a socio-geographical art project carried out by Flying City over a period of several years (2001-2009). Apart from being artists, the collective took on the role of urban researchers in Seoul and integrated this research into their installation. The case study examines the transition from a socio-geographical, site-specific project into an installation artwork and analyses its perpetuation in a museum context with the following questions in mind: To what extent and how does the on-going project conducted at a different socio-geographical location still resonate in the materialized installation artwork? What happened to the site-specific functions of the installation after the work entered the museum

collection? What is the impact of conservation and curatorial adjustments of the artwork to fit the museum context?

Chapter 7 presents the main outcomes of the research and reflects on the applicability of the proposed conceptual model to museum practices. The analyses of the case studies show that the functions of the site-specific network are continuously redefined, often with the help of the artist, but certainly not always. Sometimes custodians need to reinvigorate the functions of 'site-specificity' in a way that could not be foreseen at the moment of creation. Hence, one of the main conclusions is that a curatorial strategy for staging site-specific installations is often based on an interpretation of the functions of the spatial network, informed by the artist's intentions and, just as well, based on current museum policies and curatorial strategies. The inherent paradox of extending the lives of spatiotemporal installations implies a reactivation of site-specificity under different circumstances, which may lead to radical changes in the artwork's manifestation. Yet, if such a reinvigoration does not take place there is a chance that site-specific installations would lose their site-specific meaning all together and turn into site-generic works of art.