Insite | Outsite
The perpetuation of site-specific installation artworks in museums
Scholte, T.I.

Publication date
2020

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

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.
Chapter 5: Jason Rhoades’s *SLOTO*: reactivating site-specificity and the social space of perpetuation and care

“If you know my work, you know that it is unfinished.” Jason Rhoades.

Jason Rhoades’s *SLOTO. The Secret Life of the Onion* (2003) is a complex, multi-layered, site-specific installation artwork in the collection of Van Abbemuseum. Components of the installation are, among other things, elements relating to agriculture and natural growth, a moving train for children and other references to popular culture, such as videogames. This case study takes two problems as a starting point. The first one relates to the space for which *SLOTO* was created, a ‘project space’ located in the basement of the museum. Since this space is no longer available as an exhibition gallery, the installation was relocated to a different gallery space during its second staging in 2011. Therefore, the spatial design and content of the installation were adjusted. Secondly, Jason Rhoades created open-ended, processual installations and usually he was closely involved when his artworks were reinstalled. Unfortunately, Rhoades passed away in 2006, making it impossible to consult the artist for reinstallation. In a sense this is comparable to the problem discussed in the previous case study of Ernesto Neto’s *Célula Nave*, although the reason for the artist’s absence is different, since Neto is not responding to requests for consultation by Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. We shall see that in the current case study a different trajectory has been followed in order to overcome the problem that the artist cannot be involved.

Looking at the ontology of *The Secret Life of the Onion*, a key question is whether the second iteration can be recognized as a ‘performance’ of the artwork, despite the radical adjustments made in the spatial design. Jason Rhoades could not authorize the reinstallation and we will never know his opinion on the curatorial intervention. Hence, the chapter aims at understanding the staging process and the reasoning of the custodians in their attempt to accommodate the installation to the specifics of the new gallery space. This brings about the following sub-questions: How was the installation’s site-specificity reactivated in a different gallery space? What was the underlying ‘script’ for the curatorial decisions?

---

The main topic of this chapter, however, is to examine the shifts occurring in the spatial network, taking into account the fact that the meaning of a site-specific installation is produced through a network of spatial functions. This means the analysis of changes in the spatial design is interrelated with a reflection on the institutional context and the production spaces and processes of The Secret Life of the Onion.

In the previous chapter, the initial spatial production of Ernesto Neto’s Célula Nave was located in the artist’s studio, and the nearby industry produced the polyamide fabric; bringing to the fore the question whether the production process for a remake can be moved to other fabricators and production spaces. The production of The Secret Life of the Onion, on the other hand, was distributed to various production spaces from the start: for this work Jason Rhoades made use of consumer goods, such as agriculture tools and other prefabricated constituents, like the train; besides, the artist himself added elements to the installation and museum staff members were closely involved in the production process as well. One of the most remarkable examples of this practice was the artist requesting the museum staff to cook onions in the museum’s staff canteen and to later on add these products of natural growth to the installation. In several ways, the staff acted as coproducers of the work and thus shared the social space of production with the artist and other fabricators. Vice versa, the installation represented a special value for the institution at the moment of its production and acquisition. Against the background of this interrelatedness between the artwork and the site, I argue that, although the spatial design radically changed, the perpetuation of The Secret Life of the Onion can be understood from the institutional context (representational space) and as a conversion of the initial function of the production space into the function of social space of perpetuation and care.

In order to place SLOTO into a broader context of the perpetuation of processual artworks in a museum context, first a few words will be dedicated to a comparative example, Dieter Roth’s Garden Sculpture.

**Comparative example**

Apart from Jason Rhoades, other artists too have followed similar artistic strategies of incorporating natural processes into their work. For example, Dieter Roth developed his Garden Sculpture (Gartenskulptur, 1968-1996) over a long period of time. The installation includes elements that result from natural processes, like a substance produced out of compost and rainwater and plants (Fig. 5.1). Originally conceived as a site-specific, processual installation, located in the backyard of his assistant’s studio, the installation developed into an increasingly complex artwork which was moved around and frequently adjusted in the course of 30 years. Dieter Roth included a heterogenous collection of re-used artefacts as well as organic materials into his installation, such as a workbench, cart, ladders, window frames, chairs, water
hoses, pipes, televisions, tubes, rabbit hutch, books and art objects, and also organic materials like plants, bird seeds and the compost substance. He reworked and reshaped Garden Sculpture over and over again. After the artist passed away, his work was continued by his son and collaborator Björn Roth, the legal and artistic inheritor of Dieter Roth's oeuvre. New elements were added to it, including artworks created by Björn Roth himself, and with each new iteration the presentation was adjusted to the conditions of the gallery space.

In 2008, Garden Sculpture was acquired by the Flick Collection and is since then hosted by the museum Hamburger Bahnhof, in Berlin. In 2016, an expert meeting was organized by the museum, dedicated to the conservation and future staging of the installation. Similar questions as with The Secret Life of the Onion were raised by the museum’s conservator in view of the acquisition of the installation for the collection. Regarding the site-specificity of Garden Sculpture, one constituent is of particular relevance for the current case study, namely a ‘juice machine’ which produced the compost substance. Originally, the juice machine was employed by the artist and his assistant in the courtyard, in order to produce the compost, which was put in jars and subsequently became part of the installation (Fig. 5.2). With the acquisition and relocation to the museum collection, the question whether this production process could be continued became crucial. For some time, it had been possible to place the juice machine in an outdoor space connected to the exhibition space of Garden Sculpture in Hamburger Bahnhof. The museum’s conservator, Carolin Bohlmann, repeated the process of juice production on a regular basis. However, due to a revision of the museum building it is unlikely that the juice machine will again be placed in an outdoor space. Should the machine still be incorporated into the installation, even if it then would turn into a relic? Should the installation enter a biographical stage of ‘freeze’ after the artist passed away, or should it remain to exist as an open-ended artwork, in ‘flux’? And who has the authority to act and decide in this matter: the current representative Björn Roth or the museum staff, or both?

The case example of Garden Sculpture highlights a number of key issues regarding the perpetuation of processual, site-specific installations in general. Site-specific installations often include a processual element, which – ideally –

281 For example, the chocolate sculptures made by Dieter Roth are often re-casted by his son Björn.
282 In 2003, Friedrich Christian Flick agreed with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin that part of his collection of contemporary art would be hosted by the Hamburger Bahnhof.
283 An extensive research project into the history of Garden Sculpture was carried out by Carolin Bohlmann, conservator at Hamburger Bahnhof, and art historian Angela Matyssek. I attended the expert meeting on 20 February 2016 and was kindly allowed to use the information for this case study. In addition to the expert meeting, Bohlmann and Matyssek organized the symposium ‘Prozesskunst und das Museum’, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart Berlin, 19 February 2016. https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/hamburger-bahnhof/collection-research/restoration-and-conservation/symposium-on-process-art-and-the-museum.html (accessed 18 August, 2019)
should be repeated in order to keep the artwork alive as intended. However, within a museum context a repetition of processes in which the artist plays a pivotal role is a complex matter, especially if the artist is no longer around. In turn, it often happens that after acquisition the installation enters a stage of ‘freeze’, losing the site-specific function of a production practice ‘on the spot’. In the case of Garden Sculpture, I was fortunate to be a participant in the discussions, which did not lead to a definite answer regarding further evolvement of the installation or the position of the juice machine. However, this meeting sharpened my thoughts regarding both the curatorial process of Van Abbemuseum in the case of SLOTO and the question of what is presented where and why in the case of a processual, site-specific installation artwork in a museum collection.

The chapter starts with a brief introduction on the biography of Jason Rhoades and a characterisation of his work, followed by a description of the various functions of site-specificity attributed to SLOTO. The process of the first staging is followed by a discussion of sketches and notes from Jason Rhoades, which can be considered an underlying ‘script’ for the realization of the first iteration. The chapter continues with the second staging and an analysis of the accompanying shifts occurring in the network of site-specific functions. Furthermore, I will argue that the curators followed a different ‘script’ for the second iteration, partly based on the drawings and statements provided by the artist, and partly on a curatorial interpretation of the site-specificity of the installation. In addition to the main case study, a comparison is made with another processual, site-specific installation artwork created by Jason Rhoades: P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent) (1994, Coll. S.M.A.K.). The comparison sheds light on two different approaches to the conservation and curation of an open-ended, site-specific installation in a museum context.

**Jason Rhoades and his processual works of art**

Jason Rhoades (1965-2006) grew up in the rural area of Newcastle, California. He spent his youth on a farm, a biographical detail to which he often refers as a source of inspiration. Mixing references to nature and farming with the history of popular culture is typical for his artistic approach, which is often interpreted as the a comment on mass consumerism and societal conventions.284

Rhoades’ teacher at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in the early 1990s, was Paul McCarthy. Alongside his contemporaries Matthew Barney and Mike Kelly, his international fame was established soon after he graduated from the academy with the production of complex installation artworks which are packed with objects and layers of meaning. Usually, wide

---

spaces were covered with heterogenous materials: consumer goods and ready-mades from popular culture, construction material and tools, images, texts, neon signs, and so forth. Art critics sometimes typify his work as “non-consensual” and “unafraid of awkwardness” or as referencing capitalist society and globalisation. Not seldom are his installations are provocative as, for example, in the case of The Black Pussy (2005-2006) where 185 synonyms for female genitalia were depicted in neon light. An art critic described this installation, that furthermore consisted of ...

... myriad objects, including hundreds of Egyptian Hookah pipes from a seized shipping container, over 350 unique Dream Catchers (...), 89 beaver-felt cowboy hats, 72 Chinese Scholar stones, Venetian glass vegetables (...), colorful cloth rugs, a homemade aluminium replica of Jeff Koons’ famous stainless steel Rabbit (1986), and more.

Rhoades installed The Black Pussy in his Los Angeles studio and organized soirées for groups of carefully selected guests, who participated in performances and contributed with their personal ‘pussy word’. At other occasions, Rhoades had already involved friends and colleague artists in the creation process too. According to gallerist David Zwirner, Rhoades was utterly intrigued by certain themes, which he investigated time and again: “The conditions under which art is possible, the role of the artist, the sources for creativity, the notion of abstraction.” And finally, an equally important characteristic is Rhoades’ great sense of control and ordering, concealed by an apparent arbitrariness, as Zwirner observes:

For Rhoades, the creative process demanded ultimate freedom. His work could be dangerous, overwhelming, politically incorrect, obnoxious, or utterly sublime. ... On a formal level, the work reveals great precision and beauty, and attests to the artist’s singular aesthetic. ... He not only tried to control the actual space of the work, but also the imaginary space in his installations.

Installations of Jason Rhoades are processual in the sense that parts of previous works were often reused. He continued working on them after the initial installation, like with the above mentioned The Black Pussy or with his installation P.I.G. (Piece for Ghent), discussed further on in this chapter. When

---


287 Idem.

288 Idem.
galleries and museums invited Rhoades to create a site-specific installations, he usually worked ‘on site’ for a period of time, incorporating the conditions of the exhibition space and bringing ‘cartloads’ of materials into the gallery.

**Rhoades’s collaboration with Van Abbemuseum**

Jason Rhoades first collaborated with Van Abbemuseum in 1999, when – due to a renovation of the building – exhibitions were temporally relocated to a venue called Entr’acte. With *The Purple Penis and the Venus* (1999), the artist covered almost the entire exhibition space with (primarily) consumer goods and construction material.\(^{289}\) “He juggles with colour, form and words”, an art critic observed, “as in a swirling theatre featuring the paraphernalia of consumer culture.”\(^ {290}\) The success of this show encouraged Jan Debbaut, then director of Van Abbemuseum, to invite Jason Rhoades for the opening exhibition of the new building in 2003, ‘Over wij / About we’.\(^ {291}\) According to a staff member, it could just as well have resulted in a modified version of the earlier installation, but negotiations between the director and the artist resulted in a commission to Rhoades to create a new site-specific installation for the annex of the old museum building.\(^ {292}\) It was the first monumental installation Van Abbemuseum commissioned and subsequently acquired.\(^ {293}\)

### 5.1 The spatial design of *The Secret Life of the Onion*

With *The Secret Life of the Onion*, Jason Rhoades was the first artist who used the so-called project space in the basement of the Van Abbemuseum (Fig. 5.3). Artists were invited to employ this large gallery as a ‘laboratory’ or studio, where they could experiment with an artwork before it reached its final form.

---

\(^{289}\) The full title is *The Purple Penis and the Venus (and Sutter’s mill) for Eindhoven: a spiral with flaps and two useless appendages after the seven stomachs of Nuremberg as part of the creation myth*, Van Abbemuseum Entr’acte, 24 October, 1998 – 17 January, 1999.


\(^{291}\) ‘Over wij / About we’ run from 19 January to 31 August, 2003. The exhibition was curated by then director Jan Debbaut and Head of Collections, Christiane Berndes, with the assistance of Monique Verhulst. Eva Meyer-Hermann and Phillip van den Bossche prepared special projects for the opening exhibition, including SLOTO. *The Secret Life of the Onion* by Jason Rhoades.

\(^{292}\) Interview conducted with Margo van de Wiel on 13 July, 2016.

\(^{293}\) Another installation for the opening exhibition, which has been accessioned for the museum collection afterwards, was the project *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999-2002), by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe. This acquisition raised profound questions about conservation and presentation strategies, discussed by Vivian Saaze in the chapter “From Object to Collective, from Artists to Actants: Ownership Reframed,” in *Van Saaze, Installation Art*, 144-180.
This is implied artists could themselves decide when to open or close the studio’s door to the public. General themes Rhoades investigated with *The Secret Life of the Onion* were processes of growth and cultivation, both in agriculture and culture. The location matched perfectly with this theme. Various modes of site-specificity – in content, form and creation process – can be associated with the underground ‘laboratory’ of the museum’s basement. The artist provided the museum with a set of drawings and additional comments laying the foundation for the spatial arrangement of the actual installation. Following Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality, coded messages such as these are representations of space that give direction to the spatial arrangement when the installation takes shape. In this case, the drawings indeed gave an indication of what the artist intended, but they were not very precise and could not be used as an actual floor plan for the installation process.

The first iteration of *The Secret Life of the Onion* consisted of three different compartments. One part comprises shelves and tables carrying objects and substances that are associated with a ‘laboratory’ for food processing, placed along the walls of the project space. Onion-shaped Dame-Jeanne jars and other vessels are filled with onion rings and a ‘mysterious’ mixture of substances, described below (Fig. 5.4). To some of the jars green tubes are attached as if they are dehydration bottles, but the tubes are cut off. In the corners of the room, heaps of onion rings are spread out on the tables and two large oil barrels seem to supply the laboratory with fuel. The installation conveys an imaginary purpose of food production, but no real action is taken, as if time is arrested in the middle of a process.

In the second and the third part of the installation, there is plenty of movement and action. Halfway the room, an oval shaped track carries four piggy-snouted train wagons (Fig. 5.5). This so-called Porky’s Train, running around the inner part of the installation, is specified by the artist as an autobiographical reference to the ‘kiddie rides’ he had enjoyed in similar trains when living in Texas. Rhoades suggests in his sketches and comments that visitors could be seated in the train and so perceive the installation in “one round look” (Fig. 5.6), but this was not allowed in the actual installation. Instead, one of the vessels is carried around in one of the wagons of the running train. This vessel is filled with a mix of ingredients just like the other jars: sliced onion rings, worn socks (which Rhoades

---

294 See a factsheet for the new building of Van Abbemuseum in the Press Folder for ‘Over wij / About we’ (archive Van Abbemuseum).

295 The drawings and additional notes by Jason Rhoades are in the archive of Van Abbemuseum.

296 A Dame-Jeanne jar is an over-sized glass bottle, originally used for wine-making.

297 Rhoades includes this note in his drawings. The Porky’s Train was bought in Sweden and transported to Eindhoven. Another reference for the train are so called Porky’s, a genre of comical sex movies Rhoades used to watch them in the early 1980s (notes from an interview conducted by Eva Meyer-Hermann in November, 2002). A transcription of the interview is in the archive of Van Abbemuseum.

298 This note is part of the series of drawings Jason Rhoades delivered to the museum.
considers “artistic material”, meant to collect museum dust), water, oil and a construction material he created himself, called PeaRoaf (Fig. 5.6). Rhoades introduced this material in 2002 and used it for a number of installations. The mixture is composed of dried green peas, white Styrofoam beads and salmon eggs, mixed together with glue. The artist put the PeaRoaf inside the vessel and jars himself, and spread it over the wagons in large quantities, and randomly over the rest of the installation. In contrast to the objects placed along the walls as ‘silent witnesses’, the train wagons and their content are actual agents for a ‘performance’ that visitors can watch without participating. In a sense, they take a similar position as silent witness, just like the onion jars placed at the shelves.

The third, inner compartment of the installation is full of action. Twenty-five monitors are placed on a workbench in the middle of the room. The monitors show videogames collected by the artist on eBay. They are piled up amidst a seemingly random mass of electric parts, construction material, tools and ‘undefinable’ objects. To the workbench a steel fence is connected, holding neon tubes, laminated inkjet prints showing plants, power cables, garden hoses and rolls of plastic foil. In the center of this part, a large 3D-printed tree trunk rises up from a platform to the room’s ceiling. Its spatial position matches with the ground level of the adjacent river where normally trees would grow (Fig. 5.7) These references to processes of agriculture and farming are in juxtaposition with the videogames and other tokens of popular culture of the 1980s (like the Porky’s Train). The curator of the exhibition, Eva Meyer-Hermann, observes that the cultivation of onions symbolizes Rhoades’ own process of becoming an artist:

Ever since his childhood the artist has always been close to life in the countryside. As a young boy he used to grow his own onions and sold them to people door-to-door; an activity which he later called his first artistic entrepreneurship. Here and there in his later work vegetables and other elements of natural life still turn up. Accordings to Rhoades himself, the inner compartment formed an ‘ideal world’ of the combination of natural processes and the history of popular culture. Visitors could not enter the inner part, but they could hear the sound and get a glimpse of the videogames through open spaces in the fence. From my own visit in 2003, I remember the overwhelming impression of the installation and the associations provoked by the electric train and the action in the center, in contrast to the stillness at the sides. Somewhere in the middle, I thought, is the ‘the secret life of the onion’ to be found.

299 In his drawings the artist states: “This is a material I have wanted to work with for some time.”
300 The video games include the oldest game ‘Pong’, and other games developed for Nintendo and Playstation,
301 Room text by Eva Meyer-Hermann for the exhibition ‘Over ons / About we’, 2003.
302 See note 19.
5.2 Representational site-specificity of *The Secret Life of the Onion*

As said above, the location in the museum’s basement is a significant parameter for the site-specificity of the installation. The location is literally ‘underground’ symbolizing the meaningful concepts of growth and cultivation. There is yet another reference made by Jason Rhoades, as Eva Meyer-Hermann states in a text accompanying the exhibition:

Rhoades has deliberately placed his piece in a space below ground. In many museums the basement normally serves as storage space for artworks. Thus *SLOTO* is situated on a level which alludes to the archive of the museum. A museum archive can be interpreted as the semi-conscious part of the collection, and in Rhoades’ piece, images of every single work in the Van Abbemuseum’s collection are inserted subliminally into the various video games. These barely noticeable images refer to the idea of the completeness of the archive as well as to the never-ending challenge of the visitor’s experience in any museum.303

As noted in Chapter 3, Lefebvre attributes a dual concept to the function of representational space, which I have earlier specified as a combination of the symbolic, imaginary space of the museum as an institutional and ‘lived’ space, fluctuating with the museum’s policies and expressed in the actual employment of the space (in exhibitions and otherwise). The latter function can be recognized in the underground location of the project space, whereas the images of the collection, included in the installation by Rhoades, can be read as a symbolic reference to the representational function of *The Secret Life of the Onion*. The images were added to some of the vessels or inserted into the videogames by the artist himself (Fig. 5.8). This way, the installation becomes an ‘imaginary space’ for the hosting institution and its history of collection building.

The 3D-printed tree trunk, placed in the middle of the installation, is another indication of the representational space of the installation. The trunk is brightly illuminated by the room’s skylights and spots, accentuating its spatial position – matching with the ground level of the Dommel rivulet (Fig. 5.7). Rhoades mentions in his comments to the sketches that the tree refers to a legend of a tree in his home country. The story tells of a nineteenth-century shepherd who was looking for onions at the bottom of a tree; finding gold instead, the shepherd started the Gold Rush in California. There is still a landmark for the *Oak of the Golden Dream*. The 3D-print of this very same trunk added a marker to the installation of what Rhoades calls the “ideal

---

303 See note 23 of this chapter.
world ... just a bit underground.” Hence, the physical location of the trunk is a meaningful element of the spatial design of the installation and a signifier for the representational function of SLOTO.

5.3 Social production spaces of The Secret Life of the Onion

Jason Rhoades developed his installations ‘organically’ by reusing parts of previous works. In conversation with Heimir Björgúlfsson he states:

I’m uncomfortable with actually finishing something. This feeds into that and that feeds into this – I am trying to keep it in flux somehow. But that flux can be stopped in time by an institution or a collector, and then the relationship changes.305

A workbench placed in the inner part of SLOTO, had previously featured in the Costner Complex (Perfect Process) (2001), another site-specific installation artwork by Jason Rhoades, created for the Kunsthalle Portikus in Frankfurt.306 Rhoades had used the workbench for cutting vegetables, after which the sliced parts were put into jars, just like the onions were added to the jars in SLOTO. In the Costner Complex, Rhoades ‘exposed’ organic material to images of the film actor Kevin Costner, like he would later add thumbnails of Van Abbemuseum’s collection to the vessel placed inside the train, ‘exposing’ them to the inner part of the installation, the place where videogames were screened. In brief, the workbench had served as a starting point for SLOTO which, as the artist states, had asked “to be filled” again like “an empty space.”307 Once more vegetables (in this case onions) fulfilled a role in the juxtaposition of natural and cultural processes.

---

304 See notes by Jason Rhoades added to the study drawings (archival material).
306 It is worth quoting here David Zwirner’s description of the Costner Complex, because it shows a striking parallel with SLOTO: “Rhoades had been experimenting with cooking during his [visiting professorship] at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, and for his installation, The Costner Complex (Perfect Process), he created a factory setting to produce a pickled potpourri of vegetables that he exposed to the oeuvre of Kevin Costner, whose movies he had been watching on his transcontinental flights from Los Angeles to Frankfurt. Rhoades and his students exposed them to the films, then placed the cans on a large rack.” David Zwirner, “PeaRoaFoam. The impetuous process & from the Costner Complex,” in Julien Bismuth and David Zwirner, Jason Rhoades: PeaRoaFoam (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2015), 65.
The production process

The Costner workbench, fence and videogames came straight from the artist’s studio. Other parts, such as the 3D-printed tree trunk, the Porky’s Train, the vessels and jars, tables, shelves, oil barrels and substances for the PeaRoaFoam were obtained from a variety of suppliers. The archive contains a list of supplies and the set of drawings and comments provided by the artist indicate how certain elements could be obtained (like the Porky’s train). Apart from that, several documents in the museum archive refer to the production process, and I will use those for my reconstruction of the first staging. An interview conducted for this case study with Margo van de Wiel, a museum staff member who was closely involved with the preparatory process at Van Abbemuseum, provided me with additional information.

The process started with huge quantities of ingredients which were collected by museum staff members in the project space. Since there is no elevator, heavy substances such as the Costner workbench and oil jars had to be transported to the basement with manpower. Rhoades asked staff members to be closely involved in the preparatory process, in all kinds of ways. Not only did they purchase and transport the materials to the basement, they also prepared the mixtures that would fill the jars and vessels, printed the thumbnails of the museum collection of artworks and the images Jason Rhoades had sent in advance on CD ROM, both from his own art and taken out of magazines. Furthermore, the staff was asked to wear white socks, which would later be added to the mixture in the jars, and to collect ingredients for the PeaRoaFoam: salmon eggs, peas, and Styrofoam balls.

The most ‘unusual’ part, however, was the preparation of the onions. A staff canteen located behind the project space was used for this purpose. The onions were peeled and cooked by several staff members and, as Margo van de Wiel recalls, “it were a lot of onions that had to be cut into rings and their scent spread throughout the museum.” In order to avoid mold and rot, the drying time for the onions took at least four days, a long period for the museum to endure the smell and to supervise the process.

After these preparations and provisional mounting of the installation (by the staff and Rhoades’s assistants), the artist joined the team and moved into the project space as an ‘inhabitant’, just as the Van Abbemuseum had intended when they decided to employ this space. Rhoades fitted the spatial arrangement to a definite spatial design; mixed the ingredients of the PeaRoaFoam, filled the Dame-Jeanne jars and the liver-shaped vessel with it, and spread it out over the entire installation. Last but not least, the electricity and screening of the videogames in the inner part of the installation were checked, together with the technical staff, and necessary safety measures were taken.

In addition to the above description of the first staging, it should be noted that Jason Rhoades expected an ongoing engagement of the staff.

---

308 Interview with Margo Van de Wiel conducted on 13 July, 2016.
members throughout the exhibition period. A wall poster in the exhibition room conveyed an instruction, by Rhoades, to the curators and technicians, that new jars should be filled frequently with sliced onions. Furthermore, a curator should make regular rides in the Porky’s Train in order to gather more “experience” in the jars by moving them around. After the ride, the jars should be put on the shelves as a memory to the experience. In several ways, SLOTO can be considered a performative artwork, given the actions required for the experience, such as making sure the train runs and the videogames for the public to watch, function well. At a deeper level, however, the involvement of the staff members can also be interpreted as a performative dimension of the artwork, since these actions contributed to the production, manifestation and meaning of the artwork, rooted in the physical location and the actual museum practice.

5.4 Summarizing the spatial network of the first staging

As the examination of the network of spatial functions of SLOTO shows, the location in the museum’s basement was significant to the site-specificity of the installation in several ways: the project space determined the spatial design of the installation (spatial dimensions, position of the tree trunk); the underground location had a representational function (references to cultivation and ‘semi-consciousness’, laboratory, museum archive); and a social production space was activated (actions by the museum staff and the artist needed for the realization of the installation, riding the Porky’s train). (Diagram 11 shows how those respective functions are interrelated).

Apart from the project space, the museum’s staff canteen and the registrar’s office were incorporated in the production (the registrar selected the collection of artworks and prepared them for printing as thumbnails). Since the staff members where involved in the production to such a large extent, they can be seen as ‘co-producers’ of the first staging of The Secret Life of the Onion. This is not unusual in the production of contemporary art installations, but what is especially remarkable in this case is the forceful drive behind it. Jason Rhoades insisted on making the staff members his accomplices, as also Van de Wiel suggests: “Jason tried to create chaos to some degree, but the museum loved the work and engaged with it”.  

309 Interview with Margo van de Wiel, conducted on 13 July, 2016.
The site-specificity in the museum's basement is of primary significance for the content and form of the installation. The first staging was a result of a co-production between Jason Rhoades (and his assistants) and museum staff of Van Abbemuseum. Various social production spaces were involved. Representational space was incorporated in the thumbnails of the collection of Van Abbemuseum and the site-specificity of the installation matched perfectly with the museum's enthusiasm for ground-breaking installation artworks. The social space of the visitors' experience was emphasized by the artist, but in the realization the visitors were 'replaced' by the liver-shaped vessel. During the second staging the values shift toward the social space of perpetuation and care, adding the conceptual mode of the curatorial intervention. The radical solution of putting Donald Judd's Untitled in the centre of the installation deviates from the original, but activates a new site-specificity.
Following Lefebvre’s Triad of Spatiality, the function of social production space refers to patterns of daily practice and the competences of producers, which can be interpreted as ‘routines’ in museum practices. But Lefebvre’s triadic model implies a relationship between the social production space and other spatial functions, such as, in this case, the representational function of a contemporary art museum where ‘unconventional’ practices are not uncommon. As Nick Kaye observes, site-specific installation artworks have the inherent capacity to challenge professional routines (see Chapter 3) and Jason Rhoades succeeded in ‘troubling’ the opposition of the artwork and the site by demanding unconventional actions of the museum staff and by ‘inhabiting’ several museum spaces. However, the representational space of the museum also limits this spatial practice and the staff members complied with the artist’s requirements only to a certain degree. They did not wear the white socks before these were added to the installation, nor did they continue the practice of cooking onions or ‘perform’ the curator’s task of riding around with the onions in the Porky’s train.310

In terms of its representational function, SLOTO fulfilled the aspiration of both the director and the curators, to commission and collect a ground-breaking installation artwork for the opening show. As said, it was the first grand-scale installation commissioned by Van Abbemuseum at the turn of the century. In order to introduce the experimental function of the project space and to make the public aware of the deeper layers of meaning of SLOTO, a seminar was organized for which the artist was invited as a speaker. Apart from an introduction by curator Eva Meyer-Hermann, a public conversation was held with Jason Rhoades, and professor Chris Kik of Wageningen University presented a lecture about the species of alliums and the beneficial effects of onions on human health.311 It was another attempt by the curators to communicate the installation to a larger public and to convey the connection between the ‘secrets’ of both natural and cultural processes, as expressed by Jason Rhoades by means of his site-specific installation artwork.

In conclusion of the above, I would argue that during the first staging of The Secret Life of the Onion a strong bond was established between the physical site-specificity of the project space and the various social spaces of production, strengthened even more by a dual bond with the representational space: firstly, by the direct link established with the Van Abbemuseum collection by means of the inserted thumbnails and secondly, through its representational value as ground-breaking installation artwork.

In the analysis of the first staging, little has been said about the social space of the visitors’ experience. Jason Rhoades suggested in his drawings that visitors could observe the installation “in one round look,” but in the

310 Personal information obtained from the Head of Collections, Christiane Berndes, kindly shared when I visited the exhibition in 2003.
311 The event was organized by Eva Meyer-Hermann on 26 June, 2003, in the auditorium of Van Abbemuseum.
actual manifestation the real visitor was replaced by the liver-shaped vessel in the Porky's Train. Moreover, visitors got a ‘limited’ presentation of what happened in the inner part of the installation, because they could not properly watch the videogames nor decipher the collection of thumbnails of Van Abbemuseum’s collection (inserted into the videogames and added to the substance of the vessels and jars). For those reasons, the visitors’ experience got lesser attention than the social spaces of production in my analysis of the first staging (see Diagram 11); in contrast to the previous chapter, where the visitor’s physical interaction with Célula Nave played a pivotal role.

The challenges facing the perpetuation of The Secret Life of the Onion, could partly be grouped under the umbrella of general issues concerning Jason Rhoades’s processual, open-ended artworks, since the registration, storage and reinstallation of most of his works is a highly complex matter. In the case of SLOTO, the artwork’s perpetuation includes actions relating to the perpetuation of its site-specific functions, as we have seen above. 2011 was a turning point in the biography of the installation, causing major shifts in the network of site-specific functions. For the second staging, the original space in the basement was no longer available. According to Christiane Berndes, Jason Rhoades and Van Abbemuseum had, at the moment of the acquisition, agreed that separate parts of the installation could be shown independently and that variation in their display was allowed. The set of drawings and comments provided by the artist, as well as conversations between the artist and then curator Eva Meyer-Herman, were considered sufficient information to develop an alternative ‘script’ or ‘scenario’ for a new manifestation of SLOTO. In the following paragraphs, I will scrutinize this iteration and analyse the changes of site-specific functions and underlying motives for this curatorial intervention.

5.5 A curatorial intervention with SLOTO’s second staging

The sketches and comments Jason Rhoades provided to Van Abbemuseum can be considered a ‘script’ for the intended design of the spatial arrangement and for the meaning of individual constituents, such as the Porky’s Train, the onions, the videogames and the liver-shaped vessel. For example, the floor plan in which Rhoades included a sketch of the oval shaped train track, is accompanied by the comment that SLOTO is

... a work to be seen as “one round look”. ... To look at an action, a history, art historical reference, a place, to see something and have an experience. Then to remember it by putting it on a shelf for the future (Fig. 5.6).

---

312 Information from the interview with Christiane Berndes, conducted on 13 July, 2016.
The train wagons are “probably filled with PeaRoaFoam for comfort” and the fence is a “perfect world fence.” In almost every drawing, the physical location is connotated with a metaphorical reference, often a pointer to the representational site-specificity in the basement: the imaginary “ideal space” of the experience (the fence), the track for the visitors’ experience in “one round look”, the adding of “the oak of the Golden Dream on top” (a reference to the tree trunk and the story of natural growth and gold digging). This all underscores the physical location, considered by the artist to be an important marker for the content and appearance of the artwork.

Apart from the sketches and comments, no other indicators were available for a future reinstallation, except for the documents recording the first staging (consisting of a collection of photographs, notes on production processes, and budget calculations). Besides those, the interviews with the artist preceding the production and during the initial staging process formed the basis for the curatorial decisions, although at the time it was not discussed what approach should be taken if the project space would no longer be available or if the artist would no longer be around. In the absence of the artist, the curators of Van Abbemuseum took the initiative to develop their own scenario for exhibiting the artwork in a different gallery space.

The second staging of SLOTO took place in 2011, at the occasion of Van Abbemuseum’s 75-year anniversary exhibition, titled ‘For Eindhoven – The City as Muse’. The curatorial team consisted of museum staff members Christiane Berndes and Annie Fletcher. In a press release the curators stated that the focus of the exhibition was on the museum’s collection and “important moments or quotations in the history of art, the story of the city and the museum itself. Some of these works are built up in a new form or context.”

Because it was the first acquisition of a complex, grand-scale installation artwork, SLOTO had been significant for the history of the museum collection. In addition, its experimental character had raised interesting questions about the role of the contemporary art museum in society. Berndes explains the incentive for the acquisition as follows:

SLOTO inspired the question of how the museum could respond to such an open-ended work of art. What is art today? Exhibition and acquisition policies are always a reflection of the spirit of the time. At that time there was still a relative high level of prosperity and we figured that we would stay in contact with the artist, who would guide us through the process of reinstallation. There was an agreement between Jan Debbaut and Jason Rhoades that the museum could put the installation on display in separate

313 The exhibition ‘For Eindhoven - The City as Muse’ was curated by Christiane Berndes, Charles Esche, and Annie Fletcher, and run from 3 September, 2011 to 9 January, 2012.
314 Press release of the exhibition ‘For Eindhoven - The City as Muse’.
parts, since we have only few large exhibition spaces in the museum. We could even just show the shelves together with the jars.\(^\text{315}\)

This agreement provided a fertile soil to investigate possible scenarios and posed considerable challenges. First of all because the project space – being the main parameter of the initial site-specificity of the installation – was no longer available. Being aware of the site-specificity of SLOTO in both content and form, the curators came up with an alternative solution (Fig. 5.9).

Christiane Berndes:

The basement room was out of the question, as it had been rejected as an exposition space since there is no lift or emergency exit. The site-specificity of the installation was, among other things, connected to the position of the tree trunk, just below the level of the Dommel. This was a vital element of the inner part of the installation, because the tree was connected to the workbench and the videogames. So we realized we could never repeat a similar set-up in another space of the building and therefore we decided to leave out this whole part from the installation.\(^\text{316}\)

The newly appointed gallery was a space in the historical part of the building, a smaller room supplied with artificial light (instead of the combination of artificial light and daylight in the initial project space). The workbench had disappeared, just as the computers and videogames, the fence and agricultural tools, the neon lamps, the electricity cables and the inkjet prints. Nor did the iconic tree trunk – rising up to the ceiling – reappear. And last but not least, another sweeping decision was to replace the inner part of the installation with an artwork from the Van Abbemuseum’s collection: Donald Judd’s *Untitled* (1974-1976). Being one of the few examples of Minimal Art by a famous artist, *Untitled* is considered one of the collection’s most precious works. It consists of a cubical shaped box (1,5 meters for each side) made of multiplex and open at the top. In combination with the glossy surfaces of both the Porky’s Train and the shelves, the materiality of the ‘box’ is an eye-catching element, adding an industrial ‘look and feel’ to the installation. Moreover, its static appearance is quite different from the dynamic centre part of the originally installed artwork. The curator explains:

It had to be a contrast. The visitor is now guided, as it were, around Judd’s minimalist sculpture. If the work had been closer to SLOTO, there would have been no contrast, it would not work properly.\(^\text{317}\)

At least, one core element of the installation was kept intact: the Porky’s Train – although the tracks were slightly shortened in order to fit the dimensions of

\(^{315}\) Interview with Christiane Berndes conducted on 13 July, 2016.

\(^{316}\) Idem. There is a written document in the museum’s archive about this agreement.

\(^{317}\) Idem.
the room. In this new version, the train made its circular movements around Donald Judd’s *Untitled*. Visitors were allowed more space to move around, as they could step over the rails and have a look inside the open ‘box’ (in contrast to the distance visitors had to keep from the inner compartment of the initial manifestation, emphasizing their role as ‘silent witnesses’).

The parts placed along the walls of the gallery space were still quite similar: onion-shaped glass jars were placed on the shelves again; buckets and one of the oil barrels reappeared along the edges of the installation and in a corner of the room. In that sense, the impression of a ‘laboratory’ was kept intact, although the floor plan had been modified to fit the dimensions of the new space.

The above citation from the interview with Christiane Berndes shows that the curators were aware of the impact of the relocation and of the replacement of the inner compartment with Donald Judd’s minimalist artwork.\(^{318}\) Looking at this matter from a different angle, namely Jason Rhoades’s fascination with frameworks, boxes and construction materials, it may be not such a ‘strange’ element, Judd’s construction included in the installation. In the initial manifestation, the fence was put around the workbench by Rhoades himself and served as a ‘box’. Moreover, several of Rhoades’ installation artworks had objects stacked inside a three-dimensional frame, and in his first installation in Van Abbemuseum, *The Purple Penis and the Venus*, for instance, industrially manufactured boxes had featured.\(^{319}\)

In this respect, Rhoades’s gallerist David Zwirner made an interesting statement when recalling a large number of boxes which arrived in his gallery, prior to the first show of Rhoades’s PeaRoaFoam project in 2002. The boxes were filled with the substances from which the PeaRoaFoam would be composed. Zwirner writes:

> The back room included a few of these pallets waiting for “activation,” the performance that would turn them into the material, while the front room had more finished sculptures. Interestingly, the simplicity of the pallets and the uniformity of their material and shape made them look and seem like minimalist works of art, and I felt as I was walking through them like I was looking at Sol LeWitt or a Donald Judd.\(^{320}\)

---

\(^{318}\) In the press, the challenges and accompanying decisions were not taken into considerations. One critic observed that *The Secret Life of the Onion* was shown in a “peeled off form.” Hans den Hartog Jager, “Van Abbemuseum viert zijn 75\(^{\text{ste}}\) verjaardag met drie tentoonstellingen die helaas niet feestelijk zijn. Niet in Eindhoven blijven, lijkt de boodschap,” *NRC, Beeldende Kunst*, 9 September, 2011.

\(^{319}\) See footnote 10 of this chapter.

Summarizing the above in terms of the network of site-specific functions, the change of location and therewith the loss of the original site-specificity affected the spatial design of the installation, the content of the work as a representation of natural growth, and the ‘underground’ world of videogames and Porky movies. But then again, the function of representational space was reinvigorated by placing Donald Judd’s *Untitled* in the centre part of the installation. The initial ‘performative’ presence of the screens showing the videogames and flickering neon lights, both on and around the workbench, had been replaced by a reference to a different – industrial – production process: the fabrication of Donald Judd’s open ‘box’. Which in turn could be interpreted as an echo of the industrial production process and the shiny surfaces of the Porky’s Train and the ‘laboratory’ shelves.

Looking upon this curatorial intervention as a scenario for reactivating the installation’s site-specificity, I would also argue that exchanging the collection’s thumbnails for Donald Judd’s *Untitled* emphasized the representational space of the installation. Apart from the argument that Rhoades had agreed to put individual parts on display, the notion that Judd’s artwork contributed to the representational space of the installation can be considered a performative dimension, which is not unfamiliar to Jason Rhoades’s working practice.

According to Christiane Berndes, the commission and subsequent acquisition of a processual, site-specific installation reflects the museum’s policies of the early 2000s. Its realization had been a challenge from the start and the acquisition had prolonged the ‘experiment’, unfortunately without the presence of the artist after 2006. Taking Jason Rhoades’ sketches and comments as a primary source of information, the curators reasoned that the Porky’s Train was ‘the heart’ of the installation, since the artist more than once mentioned the kiddie rides and porky movies as biographical and essential elements.\(^{321}\) Besides, more than with the reinstallation of the outer part of the installation and the train, the reinstallation of the inner part would have required the presence of the artist. Last but not least, as the experimental space of the laboratory in the basement had been exchanged for a White Cube gallery, the Minimalist artwork ‘performed’ in accordance with the conditions and connotations of the space.

In conclusion of the above, the second iteration of *The Secret Life of the Onion* demonstrates a curatorial approach which is in concord with the view that processual installation artworks need reactivation – or else they may easily be maintained in a frozen state. In this example, the installation’s site-specific network was reactivated by means of a radical adaptation of the spatial design. Whereas this may count as a feasible approach to perpetuating the site-specificity of a processual, site-specific installation, other scenarios are conceivable as well. My examination will continue with a comparative case example – Jason Rhoades’s *P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent)* in the collection of Stedelijk.

\(^{321}\) Interview with Christiane Berndes, conducted on 13 July, 2016.
Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.), Ghent – in which a different approach prevails.

5.6 Comparison with Jason Rhoades’s P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent)

Site-specificity is also at the heart of Jason Rhoades’s installation P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent), created for the exhibition ‘This is the show and the show is many things’ at S.M.A.K. in 1994 (Fig. 5.10). While the show was still running, many participating artists created their artworks on the spot and modified them several times, with the purpose of presenting a series of ongoing ‘conversations’ between them. This was also the case with Jason Rhoades’s installation.

P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent) was intended as a ‘dialogue’ between the American life of the artist (living in Los Angeles) and the cultural context of Ghent, symbolized by the Ghent Altarpiece, a masterpiece painted by Hubert and Jan Van Eyck in the early 15th Century. The iconology of the painting was juxtaposed to the consumer goods Jason Rhoades incorporated into the installation and the performances he carried out during the production phase of the installation. The reference to Van Eyck’s painting technique was a means to tie the installation to the city of Ghent in a symbolic way, while the production of French fries in one of his performances was another reference to the socio-cultural context of the installation.

P.I.G. was created for one of the museum’s largest exhibition spaces – large enough for the artist to ride a motorcycle and to relax in a Jacuzzi, placed in the middle of the gallery. The French fries performance is described in detail by conservator Julie Gilman in a publication on the preservation of the fries. Jason Rhoades started the performance by shooting French fries with a self-made ‘potato gun’. He loaded the gun with potatoes and used a special type of hairspray as a combustible. After the ‘shooting’ (reminiscent of Nikki de Saint Phalle’s ‘shooting paintings’), the fries were collected by the artist and baked in an aluminium cooker, placed outside of the museum. According to Rhoades himself, the production of the fries was not only a...

---

322 The exhibition ‘This is the show and the show is many things’ was curated by Bart de Baere and ran from 17 September to 27 November, 1994.
323 See for an explanation of ‘This is the show and the show is many things’, “Exhibitions History Talks: Bart de Baere,” (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 16 March 2017), published at Afterall /Online: https://www.afterall.org/online/exhibition-histories-talks-bart-de-baere-video-online#XG7TQuTsbb0 (visited on 16 October, 2019).
325 Rhoades composed so called A.B.S guns from parts he collected from DIY stores, to which he added Aqua Net hairspray as a propellent to shoot the potatoes through the mesh. Besides the five guns provided for P.I.G., Rhoades also produced and signed a series of multiples of the so called A.B.S. Gun with Pom Fritz Choke and Aqua Net. These are now in several museums and private collections. Gilman et al, “Piece in Ghent,” 5-8.
national symbol, but also referred to the “sophisticated oil painting technique used by fifteenth century painting techniques,” as Gilman states.  

After the respective performances were carried out (both inside and outside the gallery space), their remainders – such as the motorcycle, the Jacuzzi and the fries – were stacked inside a frame (or open ‘box’), together with other consumer objects and utensils, construction material, and a printed reproduction of the Altarpiece. Some objects were displayed outside the frame, in the otherwise empty space of the gallery.

After the initial period of display, Piece in Ghent has been reinstalled at least twice, in 2001 and 2010. In the following paragraphs, the discussion will revolve around the question what strategies were followed regarding the site-specificity and conservation of the installation.

Conservation or re-performance of shooting and baking the French fries?

Rhoades declared that, since the fries were comparable to “religious relics,” their fading colour and distortion should not be considered a problem, as long as they would be presented according to museum standards. If their degradation had advanced to an unacceptable degree, an alternative option was to re-perform the shooting and to bake the fries again. For that purpose, Rhoades provided an extensive manual to the museum, including precise instructions for the production process. In addition, S.M.A.K. received a toolkit with no less than five, differently sized, ‘guns’ for shooting the potatoes; the guns could be put together by the conservator or collection manager in case a reperformance of the fries was required.

Ethical considerations and safety reasons kept the staff members from undertaking this action, notwithstanding the gradual degradation of the fries. Instead, the original fries were preserved, by applying similar packing techniques as in the food industry. The underlying motive for this approach was to ‘freeze’ the original installation artwork in the best possible way. As the conservator suggests, an alternative option would be to repeat the performance in a different way, by recreating a series of French fries like a ‘mock-up’ of the originals. When the fries would be reconstructed, their form would resemble the fries of the original piece, whereas in the act of shooting the fries of the original performance would be repeated – this being two different ways of perpetuation.

326 Idem, 4.
327 Idem, 8.
328 Idem, 9-10. Gilman describes the options of several food preservation techniques applied, such as Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP), reducing the oxygen content, and storing the fries in packages constructed from a suitable barrier-film. An additional treatment could consist of a technique of controlled freeze drying.
329 Idem, 9. Gilman’s research has shown that the fries are in a “microbiologically stable condition” and that further decay would be prevented by using Modified Atmosphere Packaging (MAP), frequently applied in the food industry as well as in the preservation of artworks. For recreation of the French fries see Gilman et al, “Piece in Ghent,” 10.
Strategies of flux or freeze?

During the first months when P.I.G. was on display, visitors were allowed to move parts of the installation around and Rhoades himself adjusted the installation several times. Transformation of the artwork was intended by Rhoades, although at a certain point, he drafted guidelines for how the work should be reinstalled in the future. At the front page of the manual he wrote:

Jason Rhoades reserves the right to change, alter or otherwise improve the product at any time without prior notice.330

In other words, the artist himself was allowed to make adjustments to the installation when he deemed this appropriate. In 2001, this situation changed when S.M.A.K. invited Rhoades to reinstall the work and renew the guidelines for reinstallation. At that moment, a more definitive spatial design was determined and a “a strict scenography” was designed, as conservator Gilman observes.331 The openness to alteration had given way to a freeze-strategy, with respect to the arrangement of the objects inside the frame as well as to the site-specific relation to the surrounding gallery space.

When P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent) was reinstalled again in 2010, S.M.A.K. continued with a ‘freeze-framing strategy’, following the meticulous registration of the 2001-version.332 On this occasion, the museum’s website stated that in-depth research and elaborate documentation methods had been applied, so that the “single arrangement” devised by Jason Rhoades in 2001 could “be rigidly adhered to.”333 It can therefore be concluded that although Piece in Ghent started as a processual, open-ended site-specific installation artwork, Jason Rhoades and the museum eventually established a ‘frozen’ state; individual elements of the installation are well-preserved or, if needed, can be recreated. As long as the initial exhibition space remains available for staging P.I.G., its physical site-specificity is guaranteed. I would add to this that the ‘social space of perpetuation and care’ is considered in this case an appropriate substitute for the dynamics of the ‘production space’ of the initial iteration.

5.7 The spatial network ‘in flux’

Based on the above examination of Jason Rhoades’s SLOTO. The Secret Life of the Onion and P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent), the analysis of shifts in the spatial

330 Idem, 6.
331 Idem, 5-6.
332 The display of P.I.G (Piece in Ghent) was part of the European project ‘Inside Installations’ in S.M.A.K. running from 5 June to 3 December 2010.
network continues by looking into the curatorial decisions regarding the
reinstallation and further elaboration of the social spaces of production.

With the relocation to a smaller gallery space in the museum’s old
wing, the original spatial design of SLOTO was affected by exchanging the
central part with Donald Judd’s Untitled. On the other hand, the other two
parts – the Porky’s Train and the ‘laboratory’ placed along the walls –
reappeared in the installation in much the same way. In terms of the Triad of
Spatiality, the relocation of SLOTO to a White Cube gallery interfered with the
spatial design as intended by the artist and deviated to a large extent from
the representational space of underground processes of growth and
cultivation (although the onions and references to cultivation were still
present in the onions and jars included in the installation). Even so, the
Porky’s Train was appointed the ‘heart’ of the spatial arrangement and Judd’s
Untitled replaced the representational function of Van Abbemuseum’s
collection (originally represented by the thumbnails inserted into the
videogames). This is not to say that other functions of the spatial network
were affected in an equal manner.

One of the questions of this chapter is if and how the initial spaces of
production (engaging the museum spaces and its staff members) played a
role in the second staging of SLOTO. The way in which Jason Rhoades
encouraged the staff to take part in assembling the installation’s constituents
and engaged them in other preparatory acts, is somewhat similar to what the
artist expected from participatory audiences and custodians in the case of
P.I.G. (Piece in Ghent) or The Black Pussy (mentioned in the introduction to
this chapter). Such involvement of various types of participants in the
production of the installation was common practice for Jason Rhoades during
the preparatory stage. However, as we have seen above with P.I.G., soon after
the preliminary phase his installations are often ‘fixated’ in a definite form.
Either on the initiative of the artist or on that of the custodians, especially
after the artist had passed away. Based on Lefebvre’s notion of the social
space of production, I recognize this ‘freeze’ strategy as an attempt to extend
the initial spatial production practice, which is thus defined as the most
‘authentic’ stage of the artwork. Such an extension of the original production
practice is, for example, pursued by S.M.A.K. in the preservation of physical
constituents, such as the French fries, and in a freeze strategy regarding the
spatial design of the installation.

A different approach was followed by Van Abbemuseum. Here, I
observe a conversion of the initial social space of production into the social
space of perpetuation and care as an active space of meaning production.
Although, Van Abbemuseum took similar measures for the conservation of
the content of the jars, vessel and other physical constituents, the ‘production
space’ was continued with a curatorial scenario for the performance of the
artwork in a different gallery space. In the absence of the artist, this conversion took shape on the basis of available information and a professional assessment of the situation. I would argue that communication and negotiation with the artist – which in other circumstances might have been part of the reinstallation process – still contributed to this conversion, because a reconstruction was made of the artist’s intentions (derived from the set of drawings and comments). For the other part, an extensive decision-making process was carried out by the curators themselves. In this dissertation, I have frequently argued that site-specific installation artworks problematize the opposition of the artwork and the site, and in this respect the second staging of SLOTO may serve as an example of how the connection between the artwork and the site of its manifestation (the White Cube gallery space) is redefined by means of a curatorial scenario, in this case interpreted as an activation of the space of perpetuation and care.

In view of the above, there is an interesting statement by Jason Rhoades regarding the ‘real time’ of his installations. Julien Bismuth describes how the artist envisioned the interference of time with his installations:

In the videotaped interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist cited above, Rhoades explains that he is primarily interested in having things function in real time and in the real world, open to all the concomitant contingencies, and made vulnerable by their exposure. “I believe in making things lie in a precarious state ... because they have to function in real time, they have to function in reality”, he explains.

This precarious state, entangled with the here-and-now of the exhibition site, is at odds with ‘freeze-framing’ strategies of musealization and preservation, as Bismuth’s statement continues:

Whereas the way we handle objects in exhibitions is predicated on the idea of an immutable work that is always exhibited in the same preserved or archival condition, Rhoades goes on to explain that he is interested in working with rather than against the inevitable alterations of material objects: “So many things don’t have the

---

334 For example, conservation research was carried out by conservator Lydia Beerkens, in order to preserve the oil and contents of the Dame-Jean jars. See the conservation report by Lydia Beerkens, 2002 (archive of Van Abbemuseum).

335 One additional comment could be made concerning the inner compartment of the original. The ‘disappearance’ of this part during the second staging might cause a ‘side-effect’ that certain conservation actions are circumvented (like upgrading the functionalities to current display formats). This would potentially limit a reinstallation at the original site, if ever possible again in the future.

capacity not to work ... they should have the capacity not to work ...
and that should be okay, but most art is made in a way that can’t
accommodate that, because there’s no life in it, no reality”.

Applying this statement to *The Secret Life of the Onion*, one could argue that
Rhoades would not regret it when technical devises (such as the videogames
or flickering neon lights) were not functioning in the exact same way as
during the initial manifestation. In other respects too, he might have
applauded the installation becoming part of a new ‘reality’. The curators’
decision to replace the inner compartment was partly incited by the actuality
of the exhibition context of ‘For Eindhoven – The City as Muse’, dedicated to
the museum’s strategies of collecting and presenting contemporary art. The
press release states that some of the artworks were shown in a new form and
context, which clearly applies to the second display of *SLOTO*. Interestingly, in
terms of the physical components of the installation, this iteration could be
repeated relatively easily in the future, following a similar scenario. However,
the flipside of this option would be that a strategy of freeze-framing would
once again prevail, which in terms of the site-specific network implies that
*SLOTO* would no longer represent an activated space of perpetuation and
care, nor would it ‘bring back to life’ the function of the installation’s
representational site-specificity.

This relationship with representational space is the third function of
the spatial network I would like to discuss. At this point, once more a
reference can be made to the site-specific installations created during the
1960s and 70s, in particular regarding the ongoing dialogue between artists
and custodians. Jason Rhoades engaged the museum’s staff members perhaps
even to a greater extent than, for example, Robert Morris in the 1960s (with
the *Amsterdam Project*, see Chapter 2), with his intent to ‘root’ the installation
in the specific context of the Van Abbemuseum (by engaging the staff in the
production, by incorporating thumbnails of the museum collection, and by
means of the site-specificity of the basement). What the example of *P.I.G.* has
shown, and what might happen with *SLOTO*, is that most of those site-specific
strategies do not survive in the longer term. It seems unavoidable that site-
specific installations become ‘site-generic’ at some point of their career, due
to their extended lives in the White Cube gallery – described by Brian
O’Doherty as “a place deprived of location.”

The question arises if *SLOTO* has transformed into a site-generic installation,
given its replacement to a White Cube gallery and the fact that the dialogue
with the artist could not be continued. I believe that Lefebvre’s notion of
representational space can shed a different light, because it emphasizes the
dynamics of meaning production as a function of the “lived space, the locus of

337 Idem.
ideas and aspirations.”

According to Christiane Berndes, the significance of *SLOTO* for the collection of Van Abbemuseum is that the work resonates with an “open-minded policy,” a continuous interrogation of the museum’s own curatorial practices:

> For us the philosophy of the museum is central. That determines the room we leave to the actors, how you want the artwork to survive, how open you are to reinterpretation. In the past, institutional criticism took place in the gallery space. Today we are looking for an open dialogue with the artists, and vice versa. Curation develops into the direction of developing a scenography. How you position the museum and how you organize the scenography.

By analogy with Berndes’ statement, a distinction can be made between the strategy followed by Jason Rhoades and the stance taken by site-specific working artists from the previous generation. Instead of criticising the institution ‘from within’, Rhoades made use of dialogue and he engaged staff members in the production of his installations, rooting his work in museum institutions from the start. The Van Abbemuseum’s response was a reversed strategy – reactivating the work’s representational space – by ‘employing’ the installation, both for their exhibition programme and for the underlying philosophy. In this respect it is worth mentioning that the representational function of the initial project space in the museum’s basement was transformed in 2018; currently, it serves as a public space for dialogue.

Before completing this case study, I would like to note that Van Abbemuseum is passionate to give insight into their thoughts and curatorial considerations, and the above analyses could only be made because I was allowed access to the archives, as well as to the curators’ argumentation for the decision-making. The general public, however, is usually not informed about those strategies and underlying thoughts and there was no clarifying text accompanying the second staging of *SLOTO*. It might have been an added value to the visitors’ experience if the reasons for the intervention had been explained, in a similar fashion to the information text explaining the meaning of the ‘laboratory space’ during the initial staging of the work.

---

339 Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 42.
340 Interview with Christiane Berndes conducted on 13 July, 2016.
341 The curatorial strategy of ‘open dialogue’ and co-production was followed with an exhibition programme of Van Abbemuseum dedicated to the ‘politics of collecting, the collecting of politics’, starting in 2010 and lasting for several years.
342 The design of ‘The Parliament’ is inspired by the Kurdish People’s Parliament of Rojava in Northern Syria and has a representational function for stimulating dialogue. This space is a co-creation between the museum, the artist Jonas Staal and a production team.
5.8 Conclusion of the case study

A large part of this case study was dedicated to a reflection on the process-based content and production of SLOTO. *The Secret Life of the Onion* in relation to its site-specificity. Because Jason Rhoades deliberately involved the staff members in the production process and incorporated the museum site and its collection in his installation, the functions of social space and representational space played an important role in the discussion on the shifts in spatial functions that occurred between the first and second staging. A radical deviation was caused by the loss of the initial site (the project space in the basement) and the absence of Jason Rhoades during the second iteration. In addition, I identified other functions of the spatial network as important parameters for the perpetuation of the artwork: the social space of perpetuation and care. I analysed several factors of influence on the modification of the artwork during the second staging: the curators’ interpretation of the set of drawings and comments provided by the artist and earlier communications, as well as their views regarding the function of representational space. Envisioning the museum as place for dialogue, and striving for interaction between different works from the collection in their exhibition philosophy, Van Abbemuseum took a freedom of interpretation regarding the second iteration, which reaches beyond the usual strategies applied to reinstallations of contemporary art. And yet, from the perspective that site-specific working artists strive for integration of their installations with the ‘lived’ environment and current context of display, this approach might open up the vista of custodians becoming more actively involved in the reinterpretation of the work, adjusting it to the coordinates of place and time. I designated this as an activated social space of perpetuation and care. The sudden death of Jason Rhoades and, as a consequence, the absence of instructions for future iterations, has given the custodians a prominent role, probably more than would otherwise have been the case.

The comparison with *P.I.G.* made clear that different museums may follow different strategies. The strategy followed in this particular case – the artist drawing up an instruction guideline and the museum’s effort to preserve all ingredients (including the fries) – was interpreted as the museum’s desire for ‘freezing’ the installation in the ‘authentic’ spatial production stage. It remains to be seen how the Van Abbemuseum will approach a future staging of SLOTO; whether a different relationship between the artwork and the site will be obtained, or whether the scenario of the second staging will be repeated (which just as well will freeze the artwork in a particular biographical stage).

At the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question whether we could evaluate the second staging of SLOTO still to be the same artwork as during the initial manifestation. Based on the arguments examined in this chapter, I would answer this question positively. Although the reactivation of the site-
specificity of the installation in a White Cube resulted in a different spatial arrangement, the function of representational space remained (although with a different outcome) and the social space of production was converted into an activated space of perpetuation and care.

Having said that, there is still a follow-up question that concerns me: is it conceivable that the authority of the artist is transposed to conservators and curators, and if so, should there be preconditions, and how would those be defined? The artist’s legacy is often in the hands of legal and artistic inheritors, as we have seen in the introductory example of Dieter Roth’s Garden Sculpture. In the case of SLOTO, the curators acted, in a sense, like the legacy keepers of the installation. A similar approach could be followed by establishing ‘knowledgeable networks’, as suggested in the case study on Ernesto Neto’s Célula Nave.

During my research for the current chapter, I touched upon an example that illuminates the active involvement of such a network in staging Jason Rhoades in a contemporary context. Admitting that I have no definite answer to the above question (it would deserve an entire research project), I would like to end this chapter by reciting it.

In 2015, a retrospective exhibition, ‘Jason Rhoades, Four Roads’, was organised by the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania.343 The curator of the exhibition, Ingrid Schaffner, recalls how the team proceeded during the preparation of the show:

We worked closely with the artist’s estate and studio manager (whose involvement was essential), with the two galleries that represented Rhoades throughout his career, and with artists, scholars, curators, dealers, and collectors who were close to Rhoades and his art. It was a collective and discursive effort on every level, as well as a generative one.344

Assistants and technicians, who had worked with Jason Rhoades in the past, were involved in the project “to have his work work” and contributed to the interpretation that was needed after so many years of relative curatorial silence.345 It was a collective effort which replaced the presence of the artist, and the group decided in what ways the artist’s intentions would best be represented at the exhibition. I see this as an activation of the function of the social space, denoted by Lefebvre as a guaranteed level of competence in production practices, because the members of the group ‘know what to do’ when they inhabit the same space (see Chapter 3). Transposed to the

344 Schaffner, “Jason Rhoades,” unpagedinated. See footnote 1 of this chapter.
345 Idem.
reinstallation of site-specific installation artworks, I would argue that the collective can be large (like in the case of ‘Jason Rhoades, Four Roads’) or small (like with the second iteration of *SLOTO*, but in all cases the social space is defined by the occasion of a particular exhibition. In other words, the reactivation of the network of spatial functions is temporary and specific for a given occasion. Universal solutions can hardly be provided for artworks that are inherently depending on the coordinates of time and space, but the more knowledge is collected on previous iterations and the more expertise is available on the possibilities of reinvigorating the artwork’s site-specific dimensions, the bigger the chances of being able to perpetuate the ‘life’ of a site-specific installation.