



THE PERPETUATION OF SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION ARTWORKS IN MUSEUMS

Staging Contemporary Art

Tatja Scholte

Amsterdam
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1 The Problem of the Perpetuation of Site-Specific Installation Art

Introduction

Keywords: site-specific, installation art, cultural biography, relational network, Allan Kaprow, Olafur Eliasson

“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 Eliasson¹

Introduction

In the summer of 1961, Allan Kaprow (1927–2006) installed dozens of used car tyres in the courtyard of the Martha Jackson Townhouse Gallery in New York City. The artist had collected these tyres from a nearby garage and invited his friends and fellow artists to participate in the Happening called *Yard*.² There was no audience except for 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 was officially the sculpture garden of the gallery. 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. The work has been acquired for many museum collections and was re-executed on

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.

2 *Yard* was part of the exhibition *Environments, Situations, Spaces*, which took 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.

Figure 1 *Yard (1961)* by Allan Kaprow. Installation view *Environments, Situations, Spaces*, Sculpture Garden at Martha Jackson, Gallery, New York. Photo: Ken Heyman-Woodfin Camp. Courtesy photographer and Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. © Gallery Hauser & Wirth.



numerous occasions, both by Kaprow and others, at different places and with other participants.

A few years earlier, Kaprow coined the term Happening to describe the events he organized as an integration of “all the elements – people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time.”³ In accordance with the 1960s dictum to merge art and life, he preferred the use of everyday materials and orchestrated his Happenings in the here and now, employing the specifics of the space.⁴ Or, as curator Paul Schimmel states, with the invention of the Happening, a new art form

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. For an elaborate description of Kaprow’s working method, see: 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: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 61 ff.

emerged that resembled many things at once: object art, installation art, and performance art.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 by modernist artists and, at the time of the Happening, sculptures by Barbara Hepworth and Alberto Giacometti were on display in the courtyard. As Buskirk points out, photographs of the Happening reveal that Kaprow had wrapped those sculptures in tarpaper and tied them up like packages. [Figure 1] The artist had “blocked” them from the audience’s perception as a statement, and he “temporarily 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 to more sculptural site-specific installations, reveal something else. [Figure 2] 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 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,

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 with his use of everyday materials and nonprofessional participants. The citation comes from Paul Schimmel, “Only memory can carry it into the future,” in *Allan Kaprow, Art as Life*, ed. E. Meyer-Hermann, A. Perchuk, and S. Rosenthal (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), 8–19.

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 Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise*, 129.

8 In 1991, at the occasion of the overview exhibition *7 Environment* at the Fondazione Mudima in Milan, Kaprow expressed his preference for the term “reinvention” over “reconstruction,” because each new manifestation should differ from the original. Allan Kaprow, *7 Environments* (Naples: Studio Morra, 1992), 23. For an overview of *Yard*’s reinventions, see http://allankaprow.com/about_reinvention.html (last accessed 20 April 2021). The artists invited by Hauser & Wirth in the 2009 show were William Pope.L, Josiah McElheny, and Sharon Hayes. Exhibitions — Allan Kaprow YARD – Allan Kaprow | Hauser & Wirth (hauserwirth.com) (visited 20 April 2021).

Figure 2 *Yard* (1961/2007) by Allan Kaprow. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (VAM). Installation view in *Allan Kaprow. Art as Life* in 2007. Photo: Peter Cox. Courtesy photographer and VAM.



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)*. Because the courtyard had been roofed over in the meantime, the artist decided to relocate the installation to the first floor of the gallery. In fact, *Yard (to Harrow)* covered more or less the same geographical co-ordinates as the original Happening, although this location had now turned into an indoor gallery.

Like in 1961, but with a wider audience, participants were invited to crawl and jump around. In William Pope.L's reinvention, sound and bright gallery spots were added as cinematographic elements. "Body bags" – like the ones wrapping the sculptures from Hepworth and Giacometti in the 1961 event – 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 in Martha Jackson's Townhouse but also reactivated a meaningful constituent of Kaprow's Happening in a different sociocultural environment.

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

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 artwork 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 with reiterations of site-specific installation artworks after the initial moment of creation.

Yard raises a number of questions that are central to my research project. 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 to a temporary event or a “performance.” In view of the spatiotemporal determinacy of performances and site-specific installations, a sincere problem arises with the acquisition of the work by a gallery or a museum. In the attempt to give these artworks an afterlife, an ontological gap is created between the initial “performance” of the artwork and its manifestations at later instances. Indeed, as outlined above with the history of *Yard*, site-specific artworks have been collected by museums ever since their emergence in the 1960s. To this day, they have been presented in different contexts, just like they will be in the future. How can we understand this inherent paradox of the perpetuation of these artworks? What happens to the identity of site-specific installations once

10 For this comparison between Happenings and performance art, see: Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), 39–40.

they have been acquired for a museum collection and are 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 engaged with contemporary art is deeply concerned with matters of change and variability, due to the use of evanescent materials and transitory nature of, for example, installation artworks. The connectivity of site-specific installations to their surroundings poses an extra problem, because change, in this case, reaches beyond the configuration of the work itself. 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 sociocultural context may all have a major effect on the form and meaning of the work of art. Seen from the perspective of their perpetuation, could we assume that site-specific installations have a transformative identity, including the ability to accommodate their site specificity to new circumstances? And from a strategic and decision-making point of view, what are factors of influence that determine the reinvigoration of the artwork’s site specificity and which approaches would apply in actual museum practices?

The above leads to two main questions that will be discussed in this book. 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? What happens to the identity of a site-specific installation when the sociocultural context in which it is presented changes, especially when this context is intertwined with the artwork’s meaning?

The second question focuses on the strategies artists and custodians have at their disposal in regard to the activation of a *network* of site-specific functions, which foregrounds the issue of the artwork’s presentation in diverse contexts. In this part of my study, I will engage with the position of the museum’s caretakers, conservators, and curators, and I will explore their motives during decision-making processes. What strategies are employed to give a site-specific installation a meaningful afterlife? What are the parameters steering these decisions? What is gained and what can be considered as lost in the artwork’s site-specific functions?

To answer these questions, my research offers a conceptual model for the analysis of site-specific installation artworks and their presentation in various contexts and times, enabling a systematic comparison of successive iterations and the factors that influence their presentation as a *site-specific* installation. The building blocks of the study are derived from various academic disciplines – art history, conservation, and sociogeography – which will shape the conceptual model step by step. For each step, I will discuss a number of case studies; the exploration of concrete examples elucidates the considerations from the professional field. The aim of this study is to contribute to decision-making processes in museums by offering a framework that aligns with a current development in conservation to make a shift from an object-centred approach to a more relational approach. In the case of site-specific installations, this includes the relationships between places, objects, and people.

Defining Site-Specific Installation Artworks and Their Perpetuation

The generation of artists to which Allan 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 be easily moved. Simultaneously, with their refusal to participate in the official art circuit, artists looked for alternative exhibition places where they could experiment with new forms and production methods for their art *in situ*. As a consequence, site-specific art was preferably created in factories, empty office buildings, or public space – places that offered the artists ample opportunity for experiment. From the 1960s onwards, artists engaging with 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 used to explore the site’s conditions and incorporate them into the production of site-specific works of art.

Ideologies have changed over the past fifty years, and an ever-increasing number of site-specific installations is being produced by contemporary artists, often in co-operation 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 artistic practice, a broader notion of site specificity has come 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 In agreement with this wider view on site-specific art, my study contributes to the discussion by examining the problem of the *extended lives* of 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 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 gratefully make 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. Furthermore, given the focus on decision-making processes, the model offers a means to analyse different manifestations of one and the same site-specific artwork. To this end, a toolbox is proposed that enables the analysis of the network of factors that influence its successive iterations, by which means the impact of the artwork’s musealization and perpetuation can be scrutinized over time.

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 to the reinvigoration of site-specific artworks.¹³ The alternative term, “continuation” (which, in fact, 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.

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> (last accessed 20 April 2021)

13 See English Grammar <https://www.englishgrammar.org/perpetrate-vs-perpetuate/> (last accessed 20 April 2021).

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 partially overlap. Art historians and scholars usually call spatial constructions that 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 to describe artworks “that used the whole space” of the gallery; in photo captions, it indicated the overall 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 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 interrelatedness with the site. This interconnectivity between the configuration of the installation itself and the surrounding context is by definition both spatially

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.

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

16 Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6.

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

18 Rosenthal, *Installation Art*, 27.



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 made 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 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 a trajectory of consistencies and transformations, as demonstrated in the introductory example of Allan Kaprow's *Yard*. With more recent site-specific installations, the approaches and strategies for their perpetuation are often not yet crystallized, which enables researchers to experience the decision-making process from up-close and to analyse the problems and solutions applied in current practice. In my research, I followed both directions by interlacing historic and contemporary examples 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, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam asked the Berlin-based Danish Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson to create a site-specific installation for the first floor of the Bodon Gallery: *Notion Motion*. [Figure 3] A few years earlier, Eliasson had stunned museum visitors with *The Weather Project*, in which he created the illusion of a sunset inside Tate Modern's

Figure 3 *Notion Motion* (2005) by Olafur Eliasson. Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (MBVB). Donation: Han Nefkens H+F Mecenaat. Photo: Hans Wilschut. Courtesy photographer and MBVB. © Studio Olafur Eliasson.



Turbine Hall. Natural phenomena and site specificity are key concepts in all of his works, reaching new heights in 2021, with the installation *Life* in Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland. Together with landscape architect Günther Vogt, Eliasson literally blurred the line between the museum's interior space and the adjacent water lily pond by removing sections of the glass façade and flooding the interior with green-dyed water and water plants. Visitors could navigate the space through a network of walkways. Some of these elements are already present in *Notion Motion*, in which large water basins and wooden duckboards cover three adjacent compartments of the Bodon Gallery (measuring 1200 square metres in total).

Taking advantage of the large dimensions of the exhibition space, Eliasson created three adjacent compartments, covering 1200 square metres in total. The installation largely consists of water containers covered with raised, wooden duckboards on which visitors can walk. 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, ripples are amplified by wave activators, and as a result, light waves are projected on the walls. *Notion Motion* is

Figure 4 *Notion Motion* (2005) by Olafur Eliasson. Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (MBVB). Donation: Han Nefkens H+F Mecenaat. Installation view 2016. Photo: Hans Wilschut. Courtesy photographer and MBVB. © Studio Olafur Eliasson.



both spectacular and intimate, as it makes visitors aware of their own interactions and intensifies their perception when ripples in the water transform into patterns of light.¹⁹

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

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 Publishing, 2005), 76–80.

20 Olafur Eliasson made this statement in the documentary video "Take your Time," published on the website of MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2008/olafureliasson/#/video4/> (last accessed 20 April 2021).

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 the cheerful way people behaved when touching the duckboards, sometimes even dancing in front of the projection. [Figure 4] The installation was appreciated by the public and art critics. The commission is exemplary for the curatorial agenda of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen: offering its publics 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 to subdivide the Bodon Gallery into the necessary separate compartments; huge water basins need to be covered with foil to carry no less than 20,562 litres of water; and each time the installation is exhibited, 800 duckboards have to be 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 most prestigious acquisitions of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, which raises profound issues for the perpetuation of the artwork. 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 may also bring risks, as we shall see in a number of case studies in this book—risks for the building, the collection, and the public.

At the heart of the current research is *Notion Motion's* site specificity. Could the artwork lent to a different location? This problem was discussed during a European project, *Inside Installations*, in which I was directly involved as the main co-ordinator.²³ The international conservation com-

21 A description of the work is provided at <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/exhibitions/olafur-eliasson-notion-motion-2016> (last accessed 20 April 2021).

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

23 The European project *Inside Installations* ran from 2004 to 2007. On behalf of the Cultural Heritage Agency of The Netherlands, I was main co-ordinator of the project in which twenty-five European museums and institutions researched the problems of preservation and reinstallation, and carried out an equal number of case studies on installation art. See for the results of the project Tatja Scholte and Glenn Wharton, eds., *Inside Installations: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011). Part of the project consisted of a recording of the reinstallation process of *Notion Motion* in 2010, included in the film "Installation Art: Who

munity 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 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. When Eliasson was asked for his opinion on the matter of lending *Notion Motion* to other institutions, his answer was positive – on the condition that the spatial dimensions would differ no more than 10 per cent from the original. The interview conducted during the project 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 to relocate the artwork to a different venue, which in fact has not happened to the date of this writing.

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 become manifest; each new iteration 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 started in 2021, with the building of a public art depot next to the still to be 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 co-ordinates, these contextual changes will have a considerable effect on a new iteration of the work.

Cares?,” published by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, the Netherlands, <https://www.sbm.nl/en/publications/filmInstallationArtWhoCares> (last accessed 20 April 2021).

24 Examples of international collaboration projects in the conservation of contemporary are the symposium *Modern Art: Who Cares?* (1996) and the eponymous publication (1999) and the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) (1999–present). See IJsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé, eds., *Modern Art: Who Cares?* (London: Archetype Publications, 2006 [1999]); IJsbrand Hummelen and Tatja Scholte, “Sharing Knowledge for the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Changing Roles in a Museum without Walls?” in *Modern Art, New Museums*, ed. 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 Guldemon, archive Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

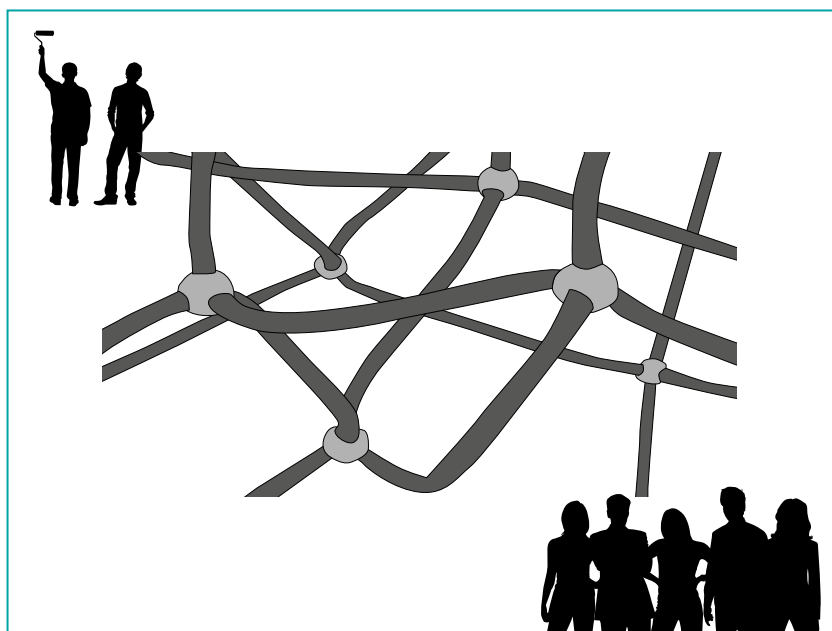
The examples of *Yard* and *Notion Motion* indicate that site-specific installation artworks continue to give rise to new questions regarding the reinvigoration of their site-specific functions. As we shall see with quite a number of examples presented in the following chapters, it is no exception that site-specific installations end up in a deadlock at some point in their career. This is not to say that site-specific installations cannot survive changing circumstances. Especially if they are considered of significant value for the collection, custodians continue to search for solutions to the challenging questions those artworks pose, in order to keep the artworks alive.

Methodology

The aim of the study that follows is to contribute to the decision-making processes from an academic point of view, without losing sight of the issues at stake in 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 two main parts. First, to develop a conceptual framework, I carried out profound literature research of relevant academic writings in art history, sociogeography, and conservation studies, which, each in their own way, contribute to the successive chapters and the various steps in which I develop my argument. Second, and of equal importance, are case study analyses carried out by means of archival research, literature reviews, interviews with a range of stakeholders, and personal observation. During my professional life, I have been fortunate to participate in many projects, such as *Modern Art: Who Cares*, *International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA)*, and *Inside Installations*; in these projects, I could closely follow the research carried out by conservators and curators. They taught me how to understand the complex problems of conserving transient works of art and the ethics involved in dealing with continuation and change. My background as co-ordinator of conservation projects also paved the way to gain access to the archives and staff of renowned contemporary art museums when carrying out my main case studies, in particular the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Tate in London, and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

26 See, for example, the innovative European training network *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, co-ordinated by Maastricht University, 2017–2019, <http://nacca.eu/about/>.

Diagram 1 The installation artwork as network. © The author. Image editing: Arienne Boelens/Maxim Hoekmeijer.



Two general concepts are at the heart of my methodological approach, briefly introduced below. The first is the proposition to study site-specific installation artworks from a biographical perspective. The second rests on the assumption that site-specific installations can be conceived as dynamic relational networks, which will be a guiding principle for structuring the conceptual model. [See Diagram 1]

1.3 Biographical Approach

The notion of the cultural biography of objects was introduced by anthropologists Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai, and has gained currency in heritage studies, archaeology, 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,

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. Also: Igor Kopytoff, “The

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 explains:

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

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 analysing “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; 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

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 Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography,” 67.

30 For in-depth discussion of the biographical approach applied to the conservation of contemporary art, see: 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.

I will look for patterns of similarity and change in the lives of site-specific installation artworks by describing and analysing 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, bring a certain degree of subjectivity with them. Like a biographer 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, the biographies will have a focus on the meaning production of the site-specific artwork in diverse circumstances and on 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, the first step is to scrutinize art historical writings and to 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 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 the wider sociopolitical context in which the gallery system operates.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, according to Kwon, and site-specific art was rendered harmless. Noteworthy for the discussion is that, simultaneously with the rise of the museums' interest in collecting site-specific artworks, artists started a second site-specific "trend" 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

32 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational identity* (Cambridge, MA: 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.

and the viewer – the new tendency was to use the conditions of a given place in site-specific art projects of which the “products” were subsequently distributed around the globe – creating a distance in time and space between the production and reception of the work.³⁴

This brief summary does not do justice to Kwon’s conceptual framework regarding the genealogy of site-specific art, and I will return to her view in more detail in chapter 2. Her argument draws attention to an important shift – roughly speaking, between the 1960s–1970s and the 1980s–1990s – that represents two different viewpoints regarding the notion of site specificity. This distinction between two art historical periods will be a recurring theme. It elucidates shifts in the artists’ approaches towards site specificity and marks the turning point of the 1990s when museums started to collect, conserve, and re-exhibit site-specific installation artworks.

Under the influence of globalization, the 1990s introduced broader notions of site specificity in artistic practice and discourse. In this respect, art historian James Meyer signals a trend of “nomadic working” artists, who seek inspiration in the historical or sociopolitical meaning of a given site and start working with local communities in site-specific projects.³⁵ Both Kwon and 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 various contexts.³⁶ In the same vein, 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 focusing on the chain of actions that produce site specificity at specific moments in time and crystallize 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

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.

36 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 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.

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 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 became more and more part of institutional policies. Increasingly, artists were invited to create site-specific installations for museum galleries, which still happens today.

The starting point for the conceptual framework I propose is that site-specific installation artworks can best be understood as dynamic relational networks. Therewith, I follow the notion of “networked site specificity” from the art historical discourse. First of all, this notion is beneficial to a conceptual framework that applies to a wide range of site-specific installation artworks, as I will argue. Furthermore, the “network” is a familiar concept within various cultural discourses 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. Moreover, the institution itself can be regarded as a dynamic part of this system, because the cultural meaning production of the artwork takes place in the interaction between the work and the museum site.

Following insights gained from Fernando Domínguez Rubio, a cultural sociologist and science-and-technologies scholar, I suggest to consider site-specific installations as the kind of transformative artworks that withdraw from the boundaries and “control mechanisms” usually applied to more traditional art.³⁹ Domínguez Rubio makes a distinction between museum objects that behave as “docile” or “unruly” objects; installation artworks can be related to the latter category. Unruly objects are typified by their capacity to incite new practices for museum institutions and to establish new forms, meanings, and experiences while “producing different degrees of continuity and change.” Domínguez Rubio advocates a relational approach when studying the ways in which unruly objects operate as “vectors of transformation

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

39 Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable: Docile and Unruly Objects at MoMA,” *Springer Science+Business Media/UC San Diego* (2014), unpaginated.

and change” within the museum and the way in which competences and expertise, mainly of conservators and curators, are redistributed by them.⁴⁰ Likewise, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of site-specific installations artworks on the museum’s organizational structure and how they are influenced by the networks of care in which they circulate.⁴¹

1.5 Outline

After this introductory chapter, I will continue in chapter 2 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 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 studies and statements made by the artists themselves, I will make a first step towards developing a vocabulary for site-specific installations and the proposed model regarding their perpetuation.

In chapter 3, 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 embedded in a more general interest in space and spatiality of the generation city planners and sociologists active in 1968, and has been highly influential on the thinking about space in architecture, design, and contemporary art to this day. Following Lefebvre’s theory, the network of site specificity is proposed in the current study 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

40 Domínguez Rubio, unpaginated.

41 I gratefully borrow the term “networks of care” from Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze, who elaborate this notion in Pip Laurenson, Vivian van Saaze, and Renée van de Vall (2022), “Bridging the Gaps between Theory and Practice through Cross-Institutional Collaboration in the Conservation of Contemporary Art” In *Engaged Humanities: Rethinking Art, Culture, and Public Life*, ed. Aagje Swinnen, Amanda Kluvel, and Renée van de Vall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 298–329. See also Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze, “Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives” in *Performativity in the Gallery. Staging Interactive Encounters*, ed. Outi Remes, Laura MacCulloch, and Marika Leino (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 28–41.

artwork is produced and experienced, and the symbolic (representational) context in which the artwork is presented.

In the second part of chapter 3, 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 artwork’s meaning is only produced when it 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. Together, they constitute my proposition of a conceptual framework for the perpetuation of site-specific installation artworks within a museum context.

In chapters 1, 2, and 3, several historical examples are included to develop the argument and the conceptual framework. In the case study chapters (4–6), most examples are more recent. The main artworks under discussion were created in the first decade of this century, and due to their relative youth, they pose dilemmas and challenges to museums that have not all been solved. The examples were selected on the basis of specific questions the artworks raise for custodians in view of their care and presentation.

Throughout the study that follows, I switch between theories, conceptual ideas, and case studies that allow me to undertake a detailed examination of the artworks and related documentation. Methods of collecting source material for the case studies consisted of archival research (consultation of floor plans, condition reports, artists’ statements, conservation and curatorial reports, guidelines for reinstallation, etc.) and the examination of relevant literature (published statements, exhibition reviews, published interviews, etc.). Furthermore, I engaged with the network of caretakers by conducting interviews with conservators, curators of collections, exhibition designers, and other stakeholders. Sometimes, I was able to consult the artist directly, or I was a participant in the research carried out by the museum, such as in the case studies 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 by a comparative example that has a longer history of musealization, conservation, and reinstallation. This way, a fresh light could be shed on the dilemmas and options of repeatedly preserving and staging the artwork in various contexts.

The Three Main Case Studies

The case study in 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 in 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 harmful to the physical condition of the work.

After two periods of display, *Célula Nave* can no longer be installed and is considered a total loss. Although the installation was not initially 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, 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, because they are significant parameters for the meaning of the work. With an eye to the current state of total loss, the model is employed for an exploration of possible scenarios for future iterations, taking into account the intended site-specific experience and the production sites, which are meaningful aspects of the work (these scenarios imply restoration, remake under supervision of the artist, remake by another fabricator).

Chapter 5 examines Jason Rhoades's *SLOTO. The Secret Life of the Onion* (2002), a room-filling installation in the collection of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The installation was created for the opening exhibition of the new museum building (2003), and its site specificity was connected to the museum's “project space” in the basement. The chapter focuses on

the perpetuation of a site-specific installation, which is the outcome of a coproduction by the artist and the museum. Rhoades involved museum staff members in the preparations, for example, by collecting numerous objects of which the installation is composed (most of which refer to cultivation processes in agriculture) and engaging them in “uncommon” activities for a museum context – such as slicing onions into 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 the symbolic references to the museum as institution, for example, by means of thumbnails of the entire collection of artworks which are interlaced with other visual material. 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 space and accommodated its site-specific functions to this new location. The 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. To what extent does the artwork behave as an unruly object and intervene with the standard procedures and museum protocols?

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the installation artwork *Drifting Producers* (2003) by the South Korean artists’ group Flying City, in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum. This installation is one of the outcomes of a sociogeographical 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 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 ongoing project conducted at a different sociogeographical 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? What is gained and lost in the relocation and transition of *Drifting Producers* to a musealized art object?

Chapter 7 presents the main outcomes of the research and reflects on the applicability of the proposed conceptual framework 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 spatiotemporally defined installations in different circumstances may lead to radical interventions and transformation of the artwork. Still, if such a reinvigoration does not take place there is a chance that site-specific installations will completely lose their site-specific meaning and turn into site-generic works of art.