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Whatsits and Thingamabobs

By Marjorie Welish 8/19/09



Why forgo fine art? Why do things that degrade and disappear? Why write? These are some of the questions provoked by “In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976,” a show of ephemera, selected from the archives of the experimental space Art & Project, now installed at the Museum of Modern Art through Oct. 5. Imagine trying to make sense of an attic full of papers and whatsits. Well, Christophe Cherix, curator of Prints and Illustrated Books, has made a decisive selection from the accumulated stuff that is pleasing to look at—if you know what it represents.

Art & Project, rather than any one artist, is the protagonist here. A permissive gallery program in Amsterdam that ran from 1969 to 2001, Art & Project offered possibilities for realizing proposals of all sorts yet favoring the post-Abstract Expressionist understatement that came and went in fugitive gestures. So rather than offering an arena in which to act (as art critic Harold Rosenberg would have put it), Art & Project created an area tolerant of activities and practices that barely impinge on one’s notice. Think of John Cage’s and Allan Kaprow’s sounds and activities sampled from the world as it is (for Cage and Kaprow remain tutelary spirits here). Down-home and unprepossessing graphics, snapshots, diagrams, albums and journals are the traces of work that appear only to disappear: to enter our field of vision but not to force themselves upon our attention. To change our way of thinking, perhaps, but not to mess with the environment.

Willfully noncommercial, the post-Minimal and conceptual reactions to heroics in art, at their best, were positive, redefining art as idea and purposeful activity. In a gesture of populist solidarity, doing graphics, taking snapshots, building installations utilizing cheap, readily available materials were ways of arguing that art resides not in craft but in creative schemes for a free society. Art & Project in Amsterdam was the permissive institutional framework for such an enterprise, and did indeed inspire some interesting works, but not always by artists best known to us.

THAT FAME is one thing but significance is something else again is one of the enduring lessons we take away from this world of ephemeral gestures. Fortunately for us, Mr. Cherix’s curatorial decision to level the playing field has given a few of these lesser-known artists the chance to prove the point that singular gestures may ultimately have more value than entire flashy careers.

As it happens, some of the better works are by Dutch-born artists Bas Jan Ader, Stanley Brouwn and the moving force behind Art & Project, Jan Dibbets. In a post-Abstract Expressionist climate, Ader performed himself falling—falling off a roof, bicycling and then falling into a canal—actions comic rather than existentially desperate. The filmed footage of his tumbles in 1970 records this gesture as mere actual occurrence. Stanley Brouwn’s *Steps of Pedestrians on Paper* (1960) shows that Brouwn may have been aware of *Tire Print*, the brilliant piece of Americana contrived by Robert Rauschenberg with Cage in 1951: At that time, with Rauschenberg guiding him, Cage redid “action painting” as he drove a car along a

scroll of paper laid on the ground, leaving tracks, and so making a print. At least as significant, *This Way Brouwn* (1962) initiates an ongoing project of requesting drawn street directions from passersby, diagrams that remain definitive of conceptual art's pragmatic and urban ethics and practice.

Along with diagrams, photography of a documentary nature marks the shift to objective conditions and purpose: and so it has with photographer Jan Dibbets, as a moving force behind the Art & Project gallery. Working in series had already become a trademark of Minimal Art's will to objectivity by the time Dibbets came to it; but even so, his *The Shortest Day at My House in Amsterdam* (1970), an array of 80 color prints, encapsulates diurnal time as eloquently as one would wish, and meanwhile pointedly defeats any representation of picturesque scenery sought by eager tourists. A self-conscious use of the camera marks Dibbets' art. Hyper-aware of the cultural cliché that the history of optics created of 17th-century Netherlandish painting, Dibbets became a specialist in using the camera against itself: showing the artifice in focal points, perspective corrections and other conventions we mistakenly call natural.

Sharing the spotlight with these native-born Netherlanders, however, is the German artist Charlotte Posenenske. The first to exhibit at Art & Project in 1968, she proposed that her modular sculpture made of industrial ducts be composed by the collector who might acquire it. In a way that Duchamp would have appreciated, Posenenske scripted an aesthetic indifference to composition and to her own taste, and Art & Project loved the idea.

What these artists endorsed by Art & Project share is an understated detachment from the international culture of Abstract Expressionism, engaged, as it were, from the sidelines. Another point in common: They are peripatetic, or, at least, accustomed to leaving home to seek their fortunes abroad, and perhaps returning again. And indeed, the point Mr. Cherix tries to make with this show is that travel is inherent in the generation of artists who do projects rather than make things. They are on the go: in and out of Amsterdam.

"In & Out of Amsterdam" also includes better-known artists in their early years: Hanna Darboven, Gilbert & George, Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner.

Is this the best exhibition of conceptual art since sliced bread? No. The crucial show "Op Losse Schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren" ["When attitude Becomes Form"], organized by Wim Beeren in 1970 for the Stedelijk Museum, remains a hallmark on the international scene. Close to home, a significant show was the tough, smart and prescient "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects," organized in 1970 by Donald Karshan, then director of—believe it or not—the New York Cultural Center (a.k.a., Huntington Hartford Museum). In the United States, the best museum show to date may well be "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s," at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999, where co-curators Jane Farver and Luis Camnitzer also delegated authority to more than a dozen specialists from around the world to give focused regional accounts of this international phenomenon. This is the way shows of major cultural ambition ought to be done.

"In & Out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976" remains on view at the Museum of Modern Art through Oct. 5.

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