

KITCHEN – SHOWER – BOOKSHOP, Bik and Van der Pol
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(translated by Annabel Howland)

Although the spaces have the appearance of regular style rooms, Liesbeth Bik's and Jos van der Pol's reconstructions are about something else. They focus on discussion rather than the atmosphere of the object, the viewer rather than the artists.

It was a singular sight: a shower, copied down to the last detail and placed high on a plinth in a studio space in the artists' initiative, Duende in Rotterdam. The shower was a replica of the shower belonging to Arno van Roosmalen (curator of the City Collection, Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam) which was to stand for a month as part of the project REST, by Liesbeth Bik, Jeanne van Heeswijk, Jos van der Pol and Hans Snoek. REST invites people to spend a number of weeks at Duende to concentrate on what interests them most but never have enough time for. Arno van Roosmalen chose to spend four weeks studying a different art work each day and making a visual description of it. His stay was marked by reflection, something he said he only ever managed to get around to doing when he was in the shower. Taking up this theme and with the aim of making his stay as pleasant as possible, Bik and Van der Pol, together with the London-based artist Peter Fillingham – who spent eight months as a guest at Duende – decided to reconstruct van Roosmalen's favourite 'thinking place' and place it in his room in Duende. Van Roosmalen then decided to take this pleasant surprise as his first study object.

Décor

The Shower Piece was not the first reconstructed space made by Bik and Van der Pol. Their first was The Kitchen Piece from 1995 which they made in their own work space in Duende. For sometime, the space had functioned as an open house where parties were held and artists, and others from the art world, gathered together. Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham decided to give these events a direction by duplicating the kitchen where these meetings took place and positioning the copy directly opposite the original. This peculiar, alienating duplication exposed the situation that had gradually developed. Detached from its highly functional purpose, the kitchen referred to its social function - that of a meeting place. This duplication particularly affected visitors' behaviour, because it drew their attention to their role in the situation as a whole. Where they were initially drawn almost silently into the events of the evening, now, simply by entering the space via this décor, it became apparent that they were literally stepping onto a stage where, as a participant/guest, they could provide the evening with a structure.

After Duende, Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham installed the kitchen in two other places: Cubitt Gallery in London and in the exhibition Peiling at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 1996. In contrast to Duende, here the kitchen functioned and was used intensively. Museum staff and visitors stayed in the kitchen as if it had always been there, making coffee and tea and even eating occasionally. However, in spite of this everyday usage, the kitchen, which was clearly placed on display in the space, remained first and foremost an art work. The border between art and reality remained intact causing the public to be very much aware that they were being included in an artistic construction they could choose to become involved in, or not.

In the museum especially, where art objects are always sacrosanct and untouchable, it became clear that the central theme of The Kitchen Piece was the confrontation between an ethical art work you had to keep your hands off and a utility object that had to be touched and used in order to acquire meaning. The kitchen obscured the border between the two, resulting in a confusion of ideas. In response to the presentation at the Stedelijk, a discussion arose between the supporters and opponents of the project. The art world in particular had a problem with the kitchen, regarding it as superficial and populist. People viewed it as a publicity stunt and couldn't see a deeper artistic point to exhibiting a copy of a kitchen other than an obligatory, readymade-like introduction of everyday life into the museum. People also questioned whether, by moving the kitchen from the studio space where it had had a specific activating function, into the museum, it hadn't lost its genius loci and become displaced.

Replica of a readymade

Judging from the doubts expressed by the art world, it would appear that the kitchen was regarded too much as a kind of style room or large readymade. Even if the kitchen resembled a style room, it wasn't one. The intention behind the kitchen and shower was not to reconstruct a historical situation similar to a style room. The spaces are not excerpts from society, but are directed at the art world itself, blatantly making the 'purpose' of art the subject of a discussion.

The spaces are also not readymades. As functional objects, they withdraw from the dysfunctional character of the readymade. Besides, they are replicas and that is something the nature of the readymade will never be. In this, the spaces distinguish themselves from the apparently related interiors of Guillaume Bijl. Bijl transports society into the exhibition space through kinds of contemporary style rooms. He makes use of the alienating, detached atmosphere of the museum in order to hold a mirror up to society and to expose how we arrange it. Everyone recognizes, for instance, the interior of a driving school or a supermarket, but one doesn't feel at home in this constructed scene. Familiar reality is here removed,

framed and transformed into an image, in precisely the same way Duchamp did eighty years ago with his readymades. Whatever the extent to which the shower and kitchen by Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham are borrowed from reality and made special by being placed in an art context, the subject of the work is not the representation of reality nor the aestheticizing of everyday culture. It is even less about penetrating the social codes of the interior. The external appearances of the spaces is not important. Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham want to be rid of the removed status of the art object and bridge the gap between art and public, art and life. The public literally has to enter into the art work and refusing to participate is forbidden.

In The Kitchen Piece in particular, it becomes clear that this work is primarily concerned with the art work as a social space with the discussion about art being the real subject. It is a social sculpture, even if Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham direct their attention and energy primarily towards realizing the infrastructure within which this social meeting can take place. They share this attitude with other young artists who have worked with different kinds of meeting spaces. In the work of someone like Ross Sinclair – who is known in the Netherlands because of his reconstruction of his studio in Shift at De Appel (1995) – the faithfully constructed interiors are always only the stage sets for the actual work: social intercourse with art. A similar kind of meeting, though somewhat more controlled, took place in Otto Berchem's installation, The Green Room, a year ago at the Rijks Academy, where he allowed the new applicants to relax before their interviews. The spaces of all these artists, in contrast to traditional style rooms, are not only literally extracted from reality – life simply carries on within in them.

Institutional criticism

Without a lively debate, these kinds of spaces lose their meaning. They become no more than normal readymades of a very sober kind when compared to those of Guillaume Bijl. However, The Bookshop Piece, realized in Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in 1996, and a recent project by Bik and Van der Pol in Norwich were different. Although these works were open for use, they also had a strong metaphorical content.

The Bookshop Piece – also a collaborative project by Bik, Van der Pol and Peter Fillingham – was a replica of the ICA Bookshop in London, which was installed in a room in Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam in the summer of 1996. The bookshop – which was copied, contents and all – supplied the museum for a few months with a complete and functioning bookshop. The replica of the shop, which specializes in interdisciplinary, philosophical and cultural studies criticized the lack of academic research within Dutch museum culture and its defunct, old fashioned, specialisms. While the books in the ICA bookshop expose a profound connections between extremely diverse cultural phenomena, Boijmans van Beuningen Museum continues to cling to old-fashioned disciplines that are difficult to reconcile with each other. Although the museum is an academic institution, it carries out practically no research at the level that is to be found in the bookshop. With The Bookshop Piece, Bik, Van der Pol and Fillingham symbolically attempted to destroy this cultural poverty in a single blow. A depot of knowledge was brought into the museum which could serve as a kind of academic source and which the staff and public could feed upon for a few months.

After this symbolic comment on the functioning of the museum, last autumn Bik and Van der Pol made an installation which commented on the commercial essence of exhibitions in East in Norwich. In an underpass in the local art school, they made an exact copy of Konrad Fischer's original gallery in Düsseldorf. In the late sixties, in similar underpass and with a very small budget, Fischer created an art podium and a meeting place which came to be one of the best in the Europe of its day. Bik and Van de Pol's Proposition for Reclaiming Space is a tribute to Fischer, but perhaps it is even more a tribute to the phenomenon of the in-between space; the meeting place that positions itself just outside the established order, making certain things possible which would otherwise never take place.

Living Art

Where readymades seem to have long since lost their discursive potency and have been boxed into an aesthetic category – Duchamp's urinal is no longer simply a urinal, it is now a priceless art object, as Sherrie Levine demonstrated a few years ago by exhibiting a winged urinal – Bik and Van der Pol's spaces are able to provoke debate about the relationship between art and life, art and the market and blow new life into the aestheticizing compulsion of the museum. However, a precondition for this is that the public has to want to take part in the debate. If they lose interest and turn out not to be sufficiently provoked, these spaces too will become nothing more or less than an aesthetic category, a dead style room – and the museums already have enough of those.