

VU Research Portal

Between dematerialization and documentation

Zonnenberg, N.S.J.F.

2016

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Zonnenberg, N. S. J. F. (2016). *Between dematerialization and documentation: conceptual art in a curatorial perspective*.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

SUMMARY

Within art history conceptual art has gained importance in its radical break with modernist traditions of art's production, distribution and reception. At the end of the 1960s conceptual artists focused on criticizing the autonomous and aestheticized status of the artwork, as well as the broader implications of the general art system that lacked socio-political engagement. This resulted in an artistic practice that appealed to the "dematerialization of the art object." Although this positioning of the conceptual artists essentially challenged both traditional institutions and art market, it was soon to become included in the same system they were trying to dispute. Due to the use of contracts, certificates and other documents that contained the information of artworks that were physically not accessible, conceptual art, ironically enough, could be commodified and sold and eventually ended up in many public art collections. Whereas many of the first collectors of conceptual art were private persons who entered into an agreement with the artists that was mainly to support their work, the public disclosure of these works was not important and the documents were to be regarded the artworks themselves—which created problems for their continued exhibition.

In this thesis the dilemma of exhibition within conceptual art practices is analyzed and set against its theoretical discourse, as well as its historical ascription, in order to gain insight into the strategies and methodologies that conceptual artists applied to show their work. Anticipating Michael Newman's suggestion that the remained documents of conceptual art contain some sort of "open-ended assignment" of conceptual art as a movement, the main question that is inquired here is how historical works of conceptual art should be handled within a contemporary exhibitionary context: What should be considered the "original artwork," and, to what extent is the continued exhibition of such work, which is, after all, the task of public collections, conflicting the intentions of the art historical "movement"? Wouldn't it be better to accept the documentary status of many works of conceptual art, and present these in books and publications, as was initially be thought to be the proper place for it? Or, if the exhibition in a spatial configuration is nevertheless compulsory, what other formats of display would be appropriate to effectively convey these works?

While the historical exhibition of conceptual art appears to be an opportunist endeavor in many aspects, the analysis of this history provides an understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of conceptual art's "ontological condition," as well as of the artistic and curatorial strategies that guaranteed the survival of conceptual art as a movement. Exhibitions do not only represent artistic or aesthetic, but also and even more

institutional or socio-economic strategies, and it is in regard to this that a curatorial perspective reveals the communicative, or even “promotional” politics of conceptual art rather than its theoretical affirmations—although these aspects cannot entirely be separated within conceptual art. In three case studies of museum exhibitions of conceptual art the historical development of conceptual art within an exhibitionary context is outlined, which both explains and unravels its state of preservation within the collections of public museums of contemporary art. Within this development a principle of “recreation,” has currently entered the field, which offers “re-evaluative” perspectives and methodologies of exhibition-making that are more appropriate for a continued exhibition of conceptual artworks. It will be argued that the approach of recreation can encourage innovative and experimental methodologies of exhibition with respect to conceptual art’s critical attitude towards the “art object”—although conflicting modernist tenets of originality and market value—within contemporary museum practices.