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The re-construction of urban space in the place between art and architecture: Selected paradigms of in situ art of the period 1950–2000[1]

Introduction: the subtle balance between art and architecture in the field of in situ art

In her book *Art and Architecture*, Jane Rendell describes as a critical spatial practice the artistic practice which, as it is placed outside the exhibition space, critically intervenes in the existing public condition (Rendell, 2006: 4). In that case, as she argues, art becomes functional, not so much in the traditional sense, which is attributed to architecture, but mainly in the sense of providing tools for reflection, critical thinking and social reconstruction. This situation seems as an advantage of art, since in addition to its purely critical role – which architecture cannot play – it also takes on 'functions' in a way that architecture does by definition, such as settling and alleviating social issues: in that case of course art has to suffer limitations.

The idea of *in situ* art practice itself starts from the idea of abolishing the autonomy of the work of art. It is about a rift that takes place between the main artistic ideology of modernity that preceded and the art practice that followed and has as its starting point the idea of dependence, in the sense of dialogue and exchange, between the work of art and the space in which it is placed. In that case the idea of dependence is translated into a dialogue between the work and the elements and characteristics of its location. The project becomes an integral part of the site and this feature makes it more sensitive to external conditions. It is about the acceptance of the sensitivity and the fragility of the work in contrast with the autonomous work which dominated in previous years and was directly linked to the art market serving to a large extent its demands. *In situ* artistic practice, starting from this idea of interdependence of the

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[1] This paper is based on my in-progress Phd Theses under the title "Different versions of in situ spatial practice as a field of conjunction of art and architecture in public space during the second half of 20th century."

work of art, when it moves in the field of conjunction of art and architecture, shows up in different forms of enactment. The various forms of implementation of in situ art are always connected with different perspectives of public space and the social relations that develop in it and concern the categories of private, public, and collective. These relations, in the context of their implementation, translate into relations between closed and open space, between inside and outside, between suspension and movement. For the material and aesthetic expression as well as for the critical representation of these relationships, in each case, different forms and tools of composition as well as different procedures of materialization are employed.

This study examines urban projects that offer different versions of reconstruction and reinterpretation of the urban environment, as well as different manifestations of *in situ* artistic practice that have as a common feature the conjugation of art and architecture. Specific paradigms are selected from different decades, starting from the 50's with Aldo Van Eyck's playgrounds. What this paper maintains is that the specific projects, while oscillating between art and architecture, activate in varied modes specific components of the urban sphere such as the modes of coexistence between the visible and the invisible, the inside and the outside, the private and the collective. Thus they arrest the everyday flow of the undifferentiated space and time by offering an alternative discursive reality that stimulates the subtle interaction between objects and subjects.

The selected paradigms contain two levels of reading: firstly the subtle balance between art and architecture where, in the field of in situ practice, complex exchanges reveal and shape the modes of their materialization. Secondly, the delicate balance between modes of expression of the symbolic and the metaphoric. Each case constitutes a different version of this fusion in terms of meaning and modes of its expression. In the case of Van Eyck the above process takes the form of a counterpoint inspired by geometry and social ritual, while in the case of Daniel Buren it is more about a visual reconstruction of the urban environment that constitutes of a polyphony of sculptural, painterly and architectural elements. As far as the case of Rachel Whiteread is concerned, the architectural is fused with the sculptural in the form of an ephemeral monument that acquires metaphorical reading. In the selected projects different aspects of the category of architecture and its foundation are traced namely the threefold reality -materiality-construction. According to Benjamin Buchloh, long before the 1950s, sculpture had abandoned its role as a means of refining the material world, but also as a means of representing individual, anthropomorphic, holistic bodies in space, made of inert but permanent, if not eternal, matter and impregnated with illusory moments of a fake life (Buchloch, 1983: 278). Also from the 1960's begins a reaction to the idiom of modern art: art generally focuses on interaction with the viewer. The dividing line between the two individual components of modernist sculpture, the solid material reality and the viewer's perception of the work is broken. Buchloh refers to the sculptural installation as an identity and gesture outside and contrary to previous descriptions of modernist sculptural discourse (Buchloch, 1983: 291). He also refers to the two extremes of an axis on which sculpture has been resting ever since – knowingly or not: the dialectics of sculpture between

functioning as a model for the aesthetic production of reality (e.g. architecture and design) or serving as a model investigating and contemplating the reality of aesthetic production, (e.g. the ready-made, the allegory). Or, as he observes, "More precisely: architecture on the one hand and epistemological model on the other are the two poles toward which relevant sculpture since then has tended to develop, each implying the eventual dissolution of its own discourse as sculpture" (Buchloch,1983: 279). This research focuses on the first category, that of the function of the sculptural installation as a model for the aesthetic production of reality and more specifically on such cases of in situ art that provide social sites rather than autonomous art objects. It is about urban projects that construct experientially complex situations that profoundly affect those who encounter them by transforming the urban conditio. More particularly, specific cases of critical spatial practices are examined that either clearly go to the architectural composition and design, demonstrating an ambiguous alternation between utility, functionality and the aesthetic object (e.g. A.V. Eyck, D. Buren), or metaphorically extract architectural functions and properties and thus move to the intermediate area between symbolic and real space (e.g. R. Whiteread). Buchloch, points out the element of analytical approach as a dominant one in the case of the visual arts. According to him, the latter, has three main features: First of all it is an aesthetic and spatial sign in itself, secondly it is related to a wider architectural phenomenon, which may or may not support its own and different order of points and thirdly it is integrated, constructed and activated only through the individual act of perception that is introduced through the viewer in the interdependence of these two systems (Buchloch, 1983:286). According to Buchloch, since the 1960s, the formalistic notion of self-referentiality has been replaced by an increasingly complex system of analysis that would make the work operative rather than self-reflective and self-referential. The idea of situational aesthetics implied that a work would function analytically within all the parameters of its historical definition, social, political, economic, and not only in its linguistic or formal framework.[2] As he maintains, three concepts were of crucial importance for this transgression, namely the notions of specificity, place, and presence. These three notions constitute the three main axes of investigation of the selected examples of the present research which examines the concept of idiosyncrasy and the different ways of in situ art's materialization and enactment in the context of concurrence of art and architecture.

Aldo Van Eyck's variations on the theme of social interaction

It seems that Aldo Van Eyck, long before, has provoked the formalistic notion of "self-referentiality" in architecture as well as in art by adopting the analytical approach of the plastic phenomenon for his playgrounds created for the city of Amsterdam between

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[2] According to Buchloch, this transformation had already taken place together with the development of the original formalist methodology towards materialist semiology and production theory, that is, since the work of art – and especially the sculptural work – was released from the artist's raw material by incorporating materials from the mass production.

1947–1978.[3] The ambivalence that lies in Van Eyck's composition in terms of use and function serves as a means of activation of the common experience in the social environment. The architectural object that at the same time serves as a sculptural unit in a polycentric composition identifies with the notion of place waiting to be occupied.

By both employing centrality and numerical sequence in his compositions, Van Eyck manages to set his semi-sculptural elements free, allowing them to become varied segments of place and at the same time imparts rhythm and variety to their configurations in the urban space [fig. 1,2].

Fig.1 Playground, Zeedijk, Amsterdam, 1956.

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[3] After the war, a huge number of derelict and left-over spaces emerged in the city of Amsterdam. Numerous diverse playgrounds were designed by Van Eyck for central median strips set between lanes of divided roadways. The playground on Saffierstraat, built in 1950, was sited on a 120-meter-long but only 6-meter-wide median strip, which was paved in white concrete tiles set on a diagonal pattern, with five triangular sections of brown brick paving inserted on alternating sides (Mc Carter, 2005).
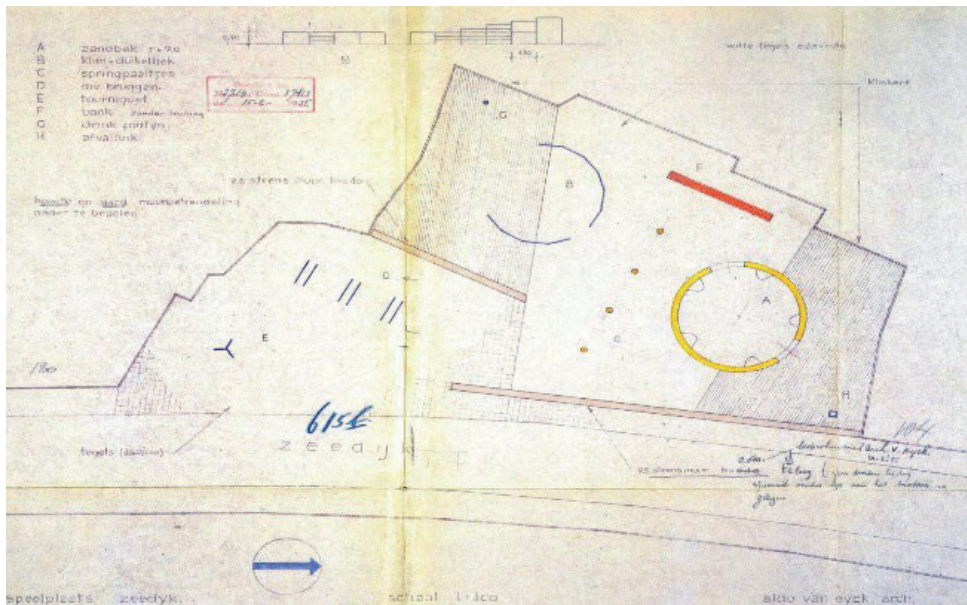
Fig.2 Playground, Zeedijk, Amsterdam, 1956.

Van Eyck's playgrounds in Amsterdam constitute architectural compositions and at the same time visual ones acquiring aesthetic perception. They are supposed to be the first site-specific installations in the city aspiring to restore social interaction in a devastated postwar urban environment. In terms of specificity and more particularly in terms of composition, materialization and function they are completely subordinated to the existing architectural site. While combining painterly elements, as well as sculptural and architectural ones, they are organized in patterns in varying scales aspiring to create a field of encounter where the public and the private coincide. Although they constituted playgrounds they can be seen and function as site-specific sculptural installations that are experienced through movement: The fundamental function of movement as an aesthetic practice and more specifically as a space evolving element is of fundamental importance in Van Eyck's compositions.

The work of Van Eyck is so expanded that becomes quite inseparable from its surroundings. His performance sites -playgrounds become everyone's land. The elementary character of these compositions draws from the idea of a spatial ambivalence that reflects mental realities. According to Van Eyck the structural relation between different orders of the city and relative rather than absolute sets of qualities constitutes the ambivalent and dynamic nature of urban space (Di Palma, Periton, Lathouri, 2008: 184). The element of performativity that stems from this specific kind of synthesis of two co-existing systems, the polycentric and the numerical, constitutes the dominant revitalizing feature of Van Eyck's project.

Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay an essay *'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'* distinguishes between concentration before a work of art as the viewer is being absorbed by it and the state of distraction in which architecture is being

recepted by a collectivity that is having a tangible experience (Benjamin, 2007: 239). In Van Eyck's compositions, where there is a coexistence of painting and sculpture, the visual activated horizontal level constitute the canvas where the compositional elements of the work unfold. The three-dimensional semi-sculptural elements that compose Van Eyck's urban installations are developed in space starting from the ground: the horizontal plane constitutes the main level of reference of the composition. The relationship between void and mass, space and matter, object and subject are built on a canvas that has its roots in painting. In Van Eyck's designs, color constitutes a structural element: in his composition for Saffierstraat playground ,the sculptural units form an inseparable whole with the painted surfaces at street level [fig. 3]. This kind of visual composition creates a zone of rhythmic alternation of color and sculptural motifs, an interweaving of an abstract flat painting composition and a sculptural installation. The viewer is introduced to an alternative perceptual field of the horizontal dimension of the city and moreover is invited to be more active in terms of its appropriation. Van Eyck creates a stage of performance, an active surface on which the user can move and interact: this new urban condition offers a new dynamic of alternative interplay between objects and subjects. The hitherto empty space among the built parts of the city is no longer just a space of transition; it now becomes a space with an internal structure that requires a different, more effective and participatory reading. This new place that is created stems from the succession of semi- sculptural architectural elements, which require to be read and relate to the rest of the environment while they built a new discursive reality.

The alternative reality that Van Eyck offers is the one of a shared experience that is mediated through the ritual quality that resides in the modes in which the semi-sculptural elements are developed in the urban site. This quality lies on two different aspects; on a first level on the abstract geometric formations of these elements in terms of their expansion in space and on a second level on their function as a metaphor of movement as an aesthetic element spatialization.

Fig. 3. Playground, Saffierstraat, Amsterdam 1951.

Van Eyck creates a counterpoint where the material formal elements constitute the harmonic centers of the composition while their performative appropriation through movement on the geometric canvas constitutes the vital element of melody. It is about a composition where the plastic form provides the 'counter form' of the 'existential' reality of the collective individual (Di Palma, 2008:186).[4] As Rudi Fuchs argues, it is about 'objects that are not anything in themselves but which have an open function' and therefore stimulate the imagination (De Roode, Lefaivre, 2002:7). Van Eyck pushes forms into their simplicity and then makes them function as movement generators.

Daniel Buren and the visual restructuring of the urban sphere

> So what are we talking about, if not about painting, sculpture, architecture, or theatre, since none of the territories proper to these domains can be seriously claimed? Each territory is lightly grazed, but just touched at its borders; at the same time, each territory keeps its distance from its neighbor, because the central concern is the site itself, the 'skin.' What the work DOES have to do with is what it does. It makes a place in a site and site in place. It is from site, in site, through site that the work takes place, places itself, poses itself, exposes itself.
>
> Daniel Buren (2005: 67)

Daniel Buren's *Les Deux Plateaux* constitutes a sculptural installation that comprises sculptural and architectural features and at the same time a work that is inseparable from its non art surroundings. *Les Deux Plateaux* was completed in 1986 in the courtyard of Palais Royal, a famous historic landmark of seventeenth century in the center of Paris designed by the architect Jacques Lemercier (Fig. 4,5). The work occupies a space of 3000 m^2 with 260 marble columns decorated with his black and white vertical stripes. The title of the artwork refers to the two levels, ground and underground, that are connected physically and conceptually.

Buren borrows from the architectural features of the site, i.e. materials, forms, scale, in order to offer a rearrangement of its visual structure. Through an analytical process he adopts the formal characteristics of the site and manipulates them in an abstract geometric way: He creates a geometric grid of columns of the same diameter but of different heights from the existing ones – the ones of the court – that are aligned with the facades of the Palais and with the garden's peristyle of the architectural site. The columns that constitute the main theme of the artwork are arranged in such a way that they create a harmonic whole of superimposing geometries, namely *plateaus* of different heights in counterpoint with the site. The materials used are the typical materials that dominate in the urban environment of the city of Paris: marble, stone, iron, water, asphalt. Additionally, as Buren argues, another element he is very interested is the Parisian underground which is pulsating with life while water circulates in the

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[4] Van Eyck's view of the city draws from the structured social patterns of tribal society and concerns its spatial dynamic as a dialectic between the man-made environment and material culture on the one hand and the social reality of the individual and the group on the other.

underground rivers and sewers (Buren, 2012: 1327).[5] In terms of materialization Buren inserts an additional layer of sculptural units that in an inverse way than Van Eyck's playgrounds – while having sculptural as an origin – oscillate between aesthetic and architectural, semi functional objects.

The abstract composition of the installation does not refer, at least at first sight, to a place that can be appropriated by the viewer. Nevertheless, the repetitive and sometimes monotonal sculptural units that are expanded in the existing site of the court create the effect of eternal multiplication in space and time and thus demand the viewers' participation in order to acquire their existence. Moreover while consisting minimal sculptural elements deprived of any detail, they offer the experience of duration and infinite motion while being appropriated by its spectators. Buren, while attempts a rearrangement of a section of the visual field of the urban sphere – in other words of a fraction of the city's architectural environment – offers a restructuring of its experience by its user. Thus he reminds us that the city consists of superimposed layers and what is more, he invites as to perform this urban condition. This metaphorical function is realized by bringing together art and architecture in the whole composition. As he interrogates, 'Who knew that the court of Palais Royal is in fact the result of a patchwork that extends from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century without interruption? (Buren, 2012: 1435).[6]

Fig.4. Daniel Buren, *Les Deux Plateaux* 1985 – 1986. Work *in situ* permanent, Cour d'honneur du Palais-Royal Paris France. www.danielburen.com.

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[5] Translation by author.
[6] Translation by author.

Fig. 5. Daniel Buren, *Les Deux Plateaux*
1985 – 1986. Work *in situ* permanent,
Cour d'honneur du Palais-Royal Paris
France. www.danielburen.com.

Buren questions art's conventional aesthetic rules, namely the *sculptural* and the *painterly*, while at the same time investigates the mechanism that makes these rules function in society; he is asking what art should be and at the same time what the relationship of art and society should be and this is realized by his gesture of incorporating the art-object in the existing site while at the same time keeping its aesthetic autonomy. As the artist declares he pays as much attention as he can to 'the viewer's understanding of the existing qualities of the place where the work will be sited as well as to the social relations that exist at the time something is shown' and he continues arguing that the connection is not only with the space but also with some idea that he wants to reinforce or show (Buren, 2005: 214). Buren declares the absence of any formal problem by claiming that it is reality that has to be created through art's intervention in the existing site.

Les Deux Plateaux, as in most of his installations, he establishes a permanent shift between an aesthetic object and a semi-functional one. He incorporates his art in everyday perceptual reality while at the same time he sets his specific aesthetic terms for the way elements of empirical reality appear in his work. The installation's grid is given material form by continuous lines composed of alternating black and white 8.7 cm squares; the grid extends in a decorative mode the repetitive composition of the Galerie d' Orleans ascribing also to the artwork a painterly character. This virtuality is intensified by the material chosen for these square patterns that constitute the filling of the grid, namely asphalt that as a molten material without contours amplifies the abstract character of the artwork. Buren's polygons, devoid of any structural function, produce an interplay between the painterly, the sculptural and the architectural. This is accomplished in two levels; in terms of their function as plastic elements as well as according to their relation to the ground. Therefore they acquire their painterly character from their alternating black and white stripes, their sculptural quality from their three-dimensionality and their architectural disposition from their morphological kinship with the monument's columns fluting, diameter, and height. On a second level there is a number of columns-polygons that are reduced to the ground level that are actually two dimensional and function as decorative cyclical patterns on the installation's canvas. A second set of columns belongs to the category of the sculptural elements of the artwork also because of their height that does not exceed the 60 cm height. And

finally there are the columns of differentiated heights that in some cases reach the three meters. Thus different virtual plateaus are created that alter the perpetual effect of the courtyard. The installation's painterly decorative sculptural elements are dispersed in space and juxtaposed with the site's historical and social attributes: space is transformed into a discursive field while the artist seeks to dismantle the illusion at the same time that he builds it. While the installation's abstract geometry suggests a pre-existed mental activity for spatial organization, at the same time, through its repetitive mode by which sculptural elements are dispersed in space, multiple rhythmical motives are created implying different readings of the built environment as well as alternative modes of appropriation. Space is transformed in a temporal field where rhythm and repetition constitute substantial elements for the installation's social function as they serve its organization as well as the processes of interaction that take place in it.

Rachel Whiteread's *House* and the hybrid monument

Rachel Whiteread's *House* can be characterized as a hybrid architectural monument that disrupts the conception of space and time. In terms of physicality it introduces a contrast between the prefabricated industrialized construction of house making and the process of casting of a visual artwork.[7] Thus in terms of its materialization it does not inspire compositional sense such as an architectural object does, since it constitutes a monolithic cast and monochromatic sculptural object. At the same time it functions as a monument, bringing into the surface the question of the artwork as a process of signaling and memorizing to a *place* giving meaning through the attributes of memory. This function lends to the artwork architectural attributes. In terms of *presence* and present time, the viewer is carried away through the vehicle of duration and of personal memory. The power of the artwork lies on its hybridity as a plastic phenomenon and at the same time as a physical object inextricably linked with an existing architectural construction, a real house: here, the notion of *specificity* is completely dependent on this condition and on the physical process of materialization of the artwork.

     In Whiteread's artwork, the relationship between the material reality and its everyday objects is a complementary and at the same time an interdependent one: the materiality of the work interacts with the material objects of everyday reality. The work constitutes an autonomous sculptural object and at the same time the imprint of a real object in space that bears and reveals the traces of everyday activity. It is about a material import in space and at the same time a process of detachment and revelation of the non-perceptible components of the material environment in aesthetic terms. Through the process of casting and moulding Whiteread re-disposes and re-arranges the material boundaries of urban space by extracting fractions from the everyday flow of time. In Whiteread's artwork we can experience the coexistence of the ephemeral and

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     [7] Rachel Whiteread's *House* in 1993 in the East End neighborhood of London opened a great public debate. Many issues resurfaced, including allegations of housing and far-right conservative racism, issues of local community history and a lost "lifestyle." The project was created from the only surviving building built in the 1960s and demolished in 1993. It took place between August and October 1993 and was demolished in January 1994.

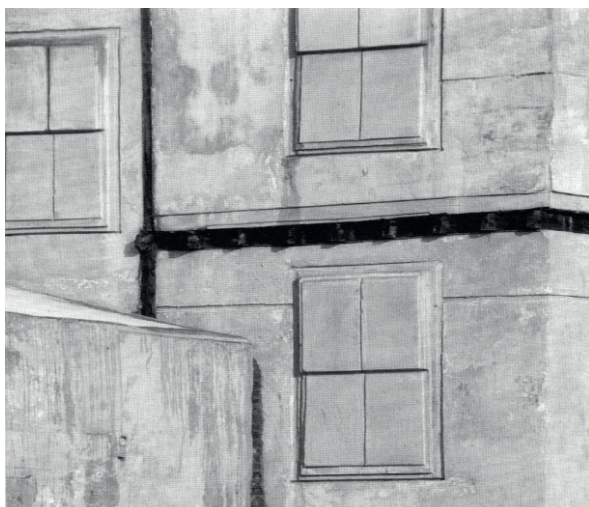Fig. 6. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, Grove Road, East London. 1993 – 1994.

Fig. 7. Rachel Whiteread, *House*, Grove Road, East London. 1993– 1994.

the everyday with the monumental in the context of the relationship between art and architecture that characterizes the work of the artist in general. It is about a special condition in terms of everyday's appearances: in the aesthetic field of Whiteread's artistic practice everyday space and time are expressed through the element of inversion and stem from the dialectical relationship between the inside and the outside, the individual and the collective, the visible and the non-visible. It is a about a literal inversion –the materialization of the inverted inner space through moulding- and at the same time a metaphorical one in terms of symbolic meaning. The inner and spontaneous everyday is being exposed in common view and at the same time, while facing the outside and the institutional, becomes vulnerable and transforms to a symbol of the ephemeral, of the accidental and the precarious. Whiteread's work illuminates the

dimension of the faintest lived time of the spontaneous and vulnerable everyday life and brings it face to face, in scale 1:1, with the undifferentiated institutional time. And above all, the symbolization of this controversy is created in a very subtle and expressive way; the inner domestic everyday appears denuded bearing the subtle nuances of the spontaneously lived space and time and stands fragile adrift to the ruthless and undifferentiated outside.

Through the relationship between the ephemeral, the monumental and the everyday, art and architecture, Whiteread offers another field of perception; that of the coexistence of art and architecture, everyday life and aesthetic reality. While re-feeding everyday life with new appearances of the invisible, Whiteread captures the immeasurable space and time that lies in the intermediate 'voids' of measurable reality, namely the intermediate field where art resides.

Conclusions

The selected paradigms share in common the fact that they do not follow a significant narrative in terms of art historicism. They represent different versions of specificity and at the same time they acquire different modes of subjectivity in the urban sphere. While they all constitute critical spatial practices in the field of construction of art and architecture and at the same time different modes of ambivalence in the social sphere, they articulate different questions for the viewer to reflect upon as well as various possible ways of being in the city. It seems that the answers to the questions posed and materialized by the artwork's structural features lie on the nature of the ambivalence and ambiguity rooted in each case.

In the case of Whiteread the element of ambiguity is found in the merge of the ephemeral, the everyday and the monumental. Whiteread offers an aesthetic condition for the viewer experiences different sections of time. In her work the process of construction is completely artistic in terms of material handling and formation. A monolithic cast, the outcome of the process of moulding, stands as a monument in the shape of a house and from that moment it claims its position in the sphere of architecture as an ephemeral monument that traces the moments of the private everyday life of its inhabitants.

In the case of the Buren the element of ambivalence is expressed by a hybrid work that derives from the visual reconstruction of the urban architectural environment by its own materials that are transformed into sculptural elements. The viewer is invited to perform the different layers of the urban structure visual and architectural and at the same time historical. In the case of Van Eyck the notion of ambivalence that is expressed by the ambiguity of being private and collective at the same time in terms of materialization is found in the semi- sculptural forms that oscillate between art and architecture. Van Eyck in order to materialize coexistence of the subjective and the collective he inserts an abstract geometric composition in the urban tissue. The process is by definition architectural as it involves the classical stages of synthesis, design and construction. In Van Eyck's work the artistic features on a first level are found in the concept and function of the composition as a visual expression of the relation mentioned

above, namely the conjunction of the subjective and the collective. On a second level, there is the sculptural character of the forms that function as metaphors of place in terms of appropriation and presence by the user.

Fig. 8. Aldo Van Eyck, Playground, Zaanhof.

Fig. 9. Daniel Buren, *Les Deux Plateaux;* Image taken by the author.

As have been seen through the examination of the above works different ways of materialization lead to various modes and idioms of specificity and reception.

The selected three cases range from the architectural process of synthesis and visual composition (Van Eyck) through the semi-sculptural-semi-architectural installation (Buren) to the artistic process of construction and materialization through casting (Whiteread): from semi-abstract geometrical space, through abstract geometry and repetition to a phasmatic version of space and time. All these versions of space claim the presence of the viewer in different modes in order to become experienced place: through real appropriation and use but also through memory.

One way or another, it seems that along the course of evolution of in situ practice, the special condition of the conjunction of art and architecture offer a significant fertile discursive field in terms of restructuring and reconsidering the urban condition especially when it is intended to unravel it's hidden internal processes.

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Abstract

This study investigates in situ art of recent art history and its potential regarding the reconstruction of public space and its meanings. Paradigms of art and architecture conjugation in site specific interventions are examined with a view to answer questions such as the transformative role art can play when it constitutes a plastic phenomenon functioning in a complementary or reactive way as a part of the urban and social space. In situ's art sculptural objects, due to their transitional form, serve as metaphors for space and time and their condition of constant change in the everyday life of the city. They constitute a physical input in the urban space that seeks to redefine its material boundaries and highlight the interaction between the individual and the city seen as an incomplete entity in a constant re-casting. Through the practice of repetition and movement, sculptural objects are put in dialogue with the objects we come into contact daily, taking part into a new aesthetic reality. It is about a process of re-configurating of the everyday aesthetics of the city, challenging the relationship between art and architecture and thus offering new modes of spatialisation. By examining specific paradigms from the in situ art of the second half of the twentieth century (e.g. Aldo Van Eyck, Daniel Buren, Rachel Whiteread), this paper, seeks to unveil the process of activating the coexistence of the visible and the invisible, the inside and the outside, the private and the collective that this specific artistic process offers in material terms. The main question that this paper seeks to answer is how in situ art-especially when oscillating between art and architecture- affect the everyday flow of the undifferentiated space and time? How does it shape the coexistence and interaction between city's objects and subjects? Which alternative – discursive – reality does it offer?

Keywords: in situ art, art and architecture, place, specificity

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