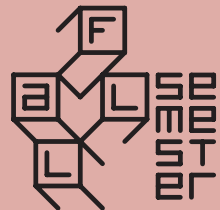
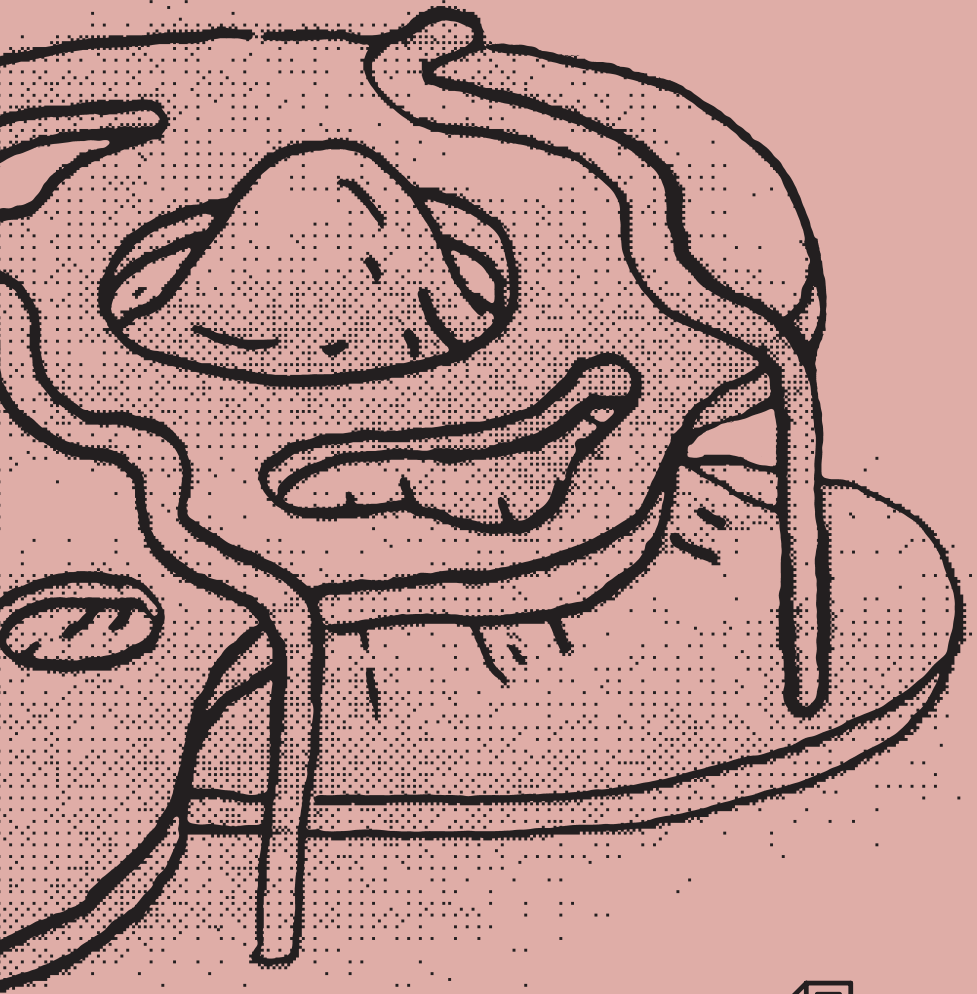


Dorothea von
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From Exhibiting
to Embedding:
The Situated
Art Work



1. Artworks and situations

Pierre Huyghe,
Untilled, 2012

Pierre Huyghe's contribution to dOCUMENTA (13) required some effort in order to be discovered at all. It was not just that Huyghe had chosen a decidedly decentered exhibition site: a composting facility located in the Aue-Park. Even after one had located the site, it was anything but obvious that it was art. One found oneself in a kind of overgrown lot: a pile of compost, sprouting growth, through which a walkway led—at times really just a beaten path, with algae-covered puddles. The hills were overgrown with plants and weeds. Off to one side, paving slabs were stacked; nearby, a mound of black chippings. An

ant colony had formed at the foot of an oak. Even on closer inspection, it was unclear what had been altered artistically and what hadn't, where the composting facility ended and the work of art began.

There was something like a center to the work: a reclining concrete figure placed on an open space in the middle of the lot—a replica of an artwork by the sculptor Max Weber from the 1930s, which on its shoulders had, in lieu of a head, a beehive populated by a trembling, buzzing swarm of bees. And there was the elegant white female greyhound called Human, who, with her pink leg, became the trademark of this documenta. Other elements of the work came to light over time: the compost hills were planted with psychotropic, medical, and aphrodisiacal plants such

as deadly nightshade, and angel's trumpets. Cannabis was also there, as well as rye, which although a completely harmless grain, it is particularly likely to harbor ergot, a fungus that can be used to synthesize LSD. At some point, visitors began to sense that the stacked slabs were arranged in a particular way, as was the surrounding basin, in which tadpoles splashed. Huyghe had collected several artifacts—he calls them “markers”—from various times and contexts.

The stacked sidewalk slabs, for example, recalled the form and materials of the aesthetics of Minimal Art, while a felled tree alluded to Robert Smithson's *Dead Tree* from 1969. A bench, tipped over and resting between the stone slabs, was part of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's installation at Documenta 11 and a small, desiccated oak lying around was part of Joseph Beuys's *7000 Eichen* (7000 Oaks).

Among these artistic arrangements, other organic/biological processes of formation were at work: that bees and ants would disseminate seeds from the plants was part of the artwork's conception. The way in which this occurred of course evaded

planning. The bees not only distributed seeds, but also multiplied themselves, so that the head of the sculpture continued to grow; becoming after a few months monstrously swollen. The site was characterized by an interplay of design and the undesigned, making it seem strangely charged—a place where the artistic labor invested in its composition became palpable, even if this composed quality was never entirely revealed.

Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970

Spiral Jetty is Robert Smithson's magnum opus. It is a monumental piece of Land Art constructed in stone on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1970, taking the form of a spiral: the ancient symbol connecting beginning and end, space and time, and expansion and contraction that traverses cultural and natural histories. The work that had been covered by water for years before suddenly reappearing, has a somehow mythical status that not only derives from its remote placement in the salt desert. Smithson himself, in an essay corresponding to the work, describes how

the overpowering, mythical experience of the place hit him when he first encountered it, how space and time began to intertwine through circular movements and how the form of a spiral appeared to him as in a vision.¹ Smithson's film that is also part of the work *Spiral Jetty* unfolds manifold connections from this spiral form. He interweaves the salt crystals that grow on the jetty with the solar system, prehistoric times and science fiction – thus reality and fiction, present and past – in a spinning dynamic.

Daniel Buren

Daniel Buren has worked in situ since the 1960s. From his first situated pieces with their pre-printed striped motif onwards, it is the elision of the boundaries between art, framework, site and context of presentation that characterizes Buren's art. He incorporates all parameters respective to their context, which influence the existence and experience of an artwork, into the work's conception from the very beginning and thus abolishes the clear-cut distinction between artwork and context. "Context" here can encompass

many different levels: it can stem from the architecture of the given place or from the conventions of its use, from its relations to the city, to history, or to society.

Decor, Villa Empain/ Boghossian Foundation, 2016

Villa Empain is an Art Deco villa built in the 1930s in Brussels, which today houses the exhibition space of an art foundation. For this space, I recently curated, together with the artist Tino Sehgal and Asad Raza, the Artistic Director of the Villa, an exhibition titled *Decor*, involving twentieth and twenty-first century artists who have no fear of the decorative. Among the participating artists are Daniel Buren, who realized an artwork in situ; Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who has realized several works that occupy an ambivalent place between installation and interior; Felix Gonzalez-Torres, with some of his curtains that suggest hospitality and domesticity; Philippe Parreno; Pierre Huyghe; Marcel Broodthaers; as well as one of Carl Andre's floor pieces that can be walked on, which the artist also called zones or

roads, in order to highlight that artwork and viewer share the same space.

Decor is an exhibition about the decorative in contemporary art and, at the same time, itself a decor of this (already highly decorated) Villa. Through this ambivalence, it addresses a kind of blind spot in modern art: the unresolved and conflicted relation to decoration. With the inception of modernity around 1800, the idea of a decorative artwork became a contradiction in terms. Painting was separated from architecture and became autonomous, thereby abandoning decoration as its primary function. Historically, this was the end of the decorative and integrated aesthetic object, and the advent of the modern idea of the work of art. From now on, as Hegel writes in the *Aesthetics*, the artwork's "function is not merely filling surfaces on a wall; on the contrary, it is there on its own account."² The decorative is a zone from which the artistic object must retreat in order to become an artwork in a modern understanding (which is why art wants to be everything, just not decorative). So why, now, take a step back from this development?

Because, we are interested in the decorative objects' different way of being and mode of operation. An artwork functions like a magnet; it asserts itself as a center, as a protagonist in the production of meaning. Decor, by contrast, draws the gaze only to then deflect it back onto the broader spatial and situational context. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer calls this the "double-sidedness of decorative mediation." As decor, the object cannot assert autonomy, because it exists— by definition —only in relation to a place and as the carrier of a function. We bring artistic positions from the visual arts together to approach this paradigm of the decorative, and, in this villa, make its mode of operation tangible.

2. The situated artwork

What do these artistic approaches have in common? Despite their different aesthetic orientations, they share, I would claim, a common interest. They are works that do not want to be autonomous, that are not exhibited (in the sense of showcased objects), but enter into a connection with the place in which they are

embedded. The common interest that they share is their concern with the forms and processes of this embeddedness; their concern of situating the artwork. The term “situated” has in recent years become a central topos of a critique of science, triggered by Donna Haraway’s concept—formulated as early as in 1988—of “situated knowledge”; a concept also increasingly embraced in art contexts. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Artistic Director of the last documenta, for instance, opened her first press conference with a live hook-up to Donna Haraway, in order to declare, in an almost paradigmatic manner, a “site-specific turn.”

With the concept of “situated knowledge,” Donna Haraway substantially critiques notions of knowledge as abstract, absolute, autonomous, and universal. She contrasts the idea of disembodied objectivity with specificity and embodiment. All the while, she does not give up the idea of objectivity, even when there is no more “outside” perspective from which the world is “observable.” Her concept can be understood rather as a plea for a different understanding

of objectivity, for considering the respective historical and political embeddedness of scientific practices as well as the material conditions of the production of knowledge, i.e. the objects, tools, technologies, institutions etc. that are implicated. A situated knowledge is embodied, embedded, inserted into language, into cultures and traditions; it is always local, delimited, and conceived from its own, present situation, based on experience, and experimental.

Does it make sense to carry this concept over into art? What can we even understand by “situated artwork”? I propose to describe the works presented here as attempts at situating, which—each in their own way—approach the idea of a situated artwork.

In the case of Robert Smithson, turning away from a predominant notion of art based on the centrality and autonomy of the object begins with a literal movement to the periphery. In order to bring about an idea of art that includes “nature” in all its discursive and material pervasiveness, he had to abandon the city for places like deserts and salt lakes,

which he calls sites, where his works are able to enter into total correspondence. In this way, Smithson situates his work. The permanence of their connection to these places removed from civilization annuls, at the same time however, something of their character as a work of art—at least, if one understands work in a modern sense as a distinct, mobile, and flexible entity, made accessible to a public. This inseparable merging of work and place is expressed by Michael Heizer as “the work is not put in a place, it is that place” (1970)—a phrase that Smithson quotes repeatedly in his texts.

These embedded works can be seen in contrast to other works that Smithson realized for the art context—for museums and exhibitions. These works conform relatively seamlessly to the modern concept of the artwork. They are non-embedded, mobile, and flexible. The dichotomy between these two modalities is mirrored in Smithson’s contrasting of the two terms site and non-site. The salt lake in Utah is a site, “the physical raw reality,” as he says. Museums and exhibitions are non-sites, non-places, neutral

containers in a sense, in which the works have a non-embedded existence.

For Daniel Buren, by contrast, the museum is anything but a non-site. For him, the museum is the primary place where art meets society, and where a debate on the public realm can take place. “I don’t think,” he writes, “I would be interested by the prospect of heading off into the desert to do a piece, as so many artists did back in the 60s. [...] I might go to look around, but not to work. Because at that point, one finds oneself in places where human beings are merely visitors and no longer social beings.”³ Buren’s problem is not the museum per se, but the modality of the exhibited, in the sense of an exhibited, exposed, out-of-its-place work. For him, to produce an artwork in the studio that points to a reality (the planned, later existence in an exhibition, in a museum collection) without really being able to take this reality into account, to incorporate and configure it (even though it is a crucial determinant in the experience of the work), expresses an inconsistency through which an artwork loses an essential part of its energy,

its power. This is why he, rather than exhibit, wants to embed. For this reason, he creates artworks that are, in a way, situated in a constant exchange between a place and its artistic transformation.

Buren realizes this pervasiveness of place and artwork by means of the object-as-decor: the decorative object does not draw the gaze like a magnet and attempt to hold it, but directs it to the context, to the situation. The form that his turn to the decorative took proved a strong impulse for our Decor exhibition. But because the artistic forms and media that he works with stem from painting, there is no permeation with natural processes, with the organic and crystalline, as we have with Smithson.

Pierre Huyghe, who studied with Buren and has engaged strongly with Smithson's work, represents a kind of synthesis between these two positions. His documenta work *Untilled* is on one hand literally rooted in its surroundings while it continues to spread roots at every moment of its existence, and on the other hand remains an artwork in a public art exhibition (and does not occur in the desert). The work

binds itself with the place, unfolds itself from the place, is pervaded by it through to its core, but it is not this place. It situates itself, but it does not become this place (the work is not that place). For it belongs to its concept—namely, to be situated—but is not for this place alone. *Untilled* is rooted, situated, but remains a structural entity that could take place somewhere else in a changed form—which it indeed does, for instance this summer at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

In light of these three artistic positions, the concept of a “situated artwork” can be grasped more precisely. The situated artwork realizes itself in a distinct, peculiar double-structure of being on one hand situated, and on the other also a work of art in the sense of the modern, flexible, and mobile concept of an artwork. Precisely because the defining concept of the artwork in modernism is based essentially on the paradigm of autonomy (and thus the opposite of situatedness), its connection to processes of situating requires fundamental work into art's way of being, on the ontology of art. Situating art cannot happen on the level

of content or form. It requires literally foundational, or better, foundation-changing work to be done on the ontology of the artwork. One could list a whole series of artistic positions over the last 50 years that cast a searching eye in this direction. Buren and Huyghe manifest two significant positions in this process that are both at work on a changed ontology of the artwork, even though they have entirely different means: Buren the operating principle of decor, Huyghe the exploration of a method that lets the work develop organically from a place, thus being situated there. In their work, both succeed in evoking the feeling of somehow relating differently to the idea of art—even though one cannot put one’s finger on this relation. Therein lies their risk, one could say, and their aesthetic quality.

Untilled is the first work from Huyghe in which this situatedness of the artwork is fully formed and hints at the ontological level—in the sense of an artwork in which artistic and organic/biological processes of giving shape are so interlocked that it remains a work of art without a stable form, and is pervaded by contingency down to its

innermost structure. Huyghe’s method becomes clear when one compares it to other works that are referred to as Earth Art, such as Walter de Maria’s *Earth Room* (1977). De Maria takes the earth into the New York gallery space, with which it stays unconnected. Huyghe, on the other hand, starts each work with an inventory of what is already there. It can be the roofing of the museum (as in his recent work for the New York Metropolitan Museum) or, as in Kassel, the local plants. The starting point is the situation of a place, to which his works literally enter into a rooted connection.

From an art historical perspective, the concept of the “situated artwork” can be pinned down in three historical steps: The pre-modern, non-autonomous artwork exists embedded in architecture, in ritual and in ceremonies. It is situated, but in a rigid and fixed manner. Like the altarpiece, say, which has a fixed and unalterable place in the altar or in an established religious ceremony. In contrast, the modern, autonomous artwork is mobile and flexible. The forms of its inclusion (such as in a museum) are structurally open and variable, and will

become—as we see from looking at the development of museum and exhibition spaces in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—more and more variable. The museum of the nineteenth century presents itself as a decorated space that is densely filled with tightly hung paintings. The white cube of the late-twentieth century appears in comparison as an emptied, quasi-disconnected space, in which the artworks can be put, almost free-floating, into new, always changing interrelations.

These processes do not take place independently of societal developments. On the contrary: the historic moment in which the altarpiece leaves the context of the altar and the church in order to become an exhibited artwork in a museum corresponds to the transition from pre-modern, feudal-aristocratic societies into structurally more open and liberal social orders. Exaggerating somewhat, one could say that the change to the altarpiece—its disconnection from a closed cosmology and insertion into a structurally more open one—carries the whole modern paradigm within

itself, and the key driver is separation from handed-down, fixed, and rigid ties. The paradigm of the autonomy of the artwork reflects a belief in the productivity of these dynamics of separation—just as the whole history of individualization could be told by way of the steadily increasing distance between the artworks in the museum. If one describes the “situated artwork” as an attempt to develop an ontology of art of the twenty-first century (prefigured in some artistic tendencies of the twentieth), as a concept of work that integrates both elements—embeddedness and flexibility—in its distinct double structure (on one hand, situated, on the other, also being work), it could also produce a relationship to societal processes. Here, we would look for situated ties that are not rigid. Without it ever becoming an explicit theme, a search for balance is inscribed in these works that aims to connect the displaced, the more flexible—thus a formative individual and collective experience of the twentieth century—with new forms of contextualization and integration without lapsing

into rigid modalities that, in a sense, fall behind the achievements of modernism and modernity. The liberties that modernity brought with it go along with the dissolution of ties in all areas of life. That this has for some time been seen and experienced not only as liberating, but

increasingly also as both an individual and societal problem, throws up—probably for each of us—very practical questions of how to establish ties that are lasting but not rigid. To arrive, aesthetically, at a calibration, a balance—that is the search that is inscribed in the “situated artwork.”

1 For a detailed analysis see Michael Lüthy, “Das falsche Bild. Robert Smithsons verworfene Erstversion der *Spiral Jetty*”, in: *Was ist ein Bild? Antworten in Bildern*, ed. by Sebastian

Egenhofer, Inge Hinterwaldner and Christian Spies, Paderborn 2012, pp. 279-281.

2 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2 (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 807.

3 Daniel Buren in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in: Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, Milan 2003, p. 130.

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