

Virginie Bobin – *Stratifications, reactivations : Sheep Plug, by Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy (Issues raised by the production, exhibition, conservation and documentation of contemporary art installations)*, Research thesis, Master of Museum Studies and Contemporary Art, Ecole du Louvre, Paris, directed by Cécile Dazord and Stéphanie Elarbi, 2006-2007.

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INTRODUCTION

If one were asked to describe *Sheep Plug* in a terse and peremptory way, the term that would logically spring to mind would be “installation”. If one were looking for more information on the piece, one would refer to the *Dionysiac* exhibition catalogue¹, particularly as the initial framework for this thesis was the event that took place in the Centre Pompidou, in Paris, from February to May 2005. In this catalogue, one would find the names of two artists, Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy, and that of a collaborator, Roberto Ohrt, as well as a date, 2005 (in itself problematic, as we shall see). Alongside this information one would be given a few nuggets of information about the context of the production as well as a list of materials and objects of varied composition.

The existence of this list brings us back to the term “installation”. Although it has been over-employed in recent decades, it encompasses a variety of realities and, above all, an ontologically complex artistic form that raises questions that are dealt with differently, and occasionally irresponsibly, by different museums. The *Inside Installations, Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art* project website², which tries to find generic solutions to conservation through the study of some thirty cases, proposes the following definition : « An installation is more than a collection of physical objects, but often includes relationships to the space and dynamic behaviours ». The young British art critic, Claire Bishop, who wrote an essay about this topic, adds: « Installation art creates a situation into which the viewer physically enters, and insists that you regard it as a singular totality »³.

Installations do not raise the same issues of production, exhibition, documentation, storage or restoration as pictures or sculptures. For one thing, as these two definitions indicate, a “viewer” is necessary to activate the piece. Whether as a spectator or an actor, depending on the type of installation, the work only takes on meaning by being went over, crossed, physically tested. Indeed, a lot of these pieces call for senses other than sight : touch, hearing, smell, even sometimes taste. This in turn asks new and difficult questions of documentation : notably, how to create a complete record of

¹ *Dionysiac*, cat. exp. Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2005

² www.inside-installations.org

³ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art, A Critical History*, London, Tate Publishing, 2005, p.6.

the piece without considering all its interactive aspects? The viewer's body, the sense of space, the place of exhibition, all of these factors define an installation just as much the objects it contains do.

The objects, for their part, can assume varying significances depending on the artist's initial intention. The upheavals brought by historical avant-gardes to ways of conceiving art completely reinvented the notions of originality and authenticity, notably with regard to materials. This is true for all forms of artistic expression, but above all for installations, which sometimes juxtapose manufactured objects, organic or perishable materials, and new technologies, each of which can be conserved and reinstalled, thrown away and replaced, or left to rot according to the artist's conception.⁴ These different approaches can sometimes be found within the same piece, which, as it happens, is the case of *Sheep Plug*.

Like many installations, this work by Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy raises the issue, first addressed by Walter Benjamin, of « exhibition value ». Indeed, the installation only exists when it is “installed”, in its connexion with the viewer and, intrinsically, in the way each of its constituents relates to the others as well as with their specific identity. These internal relations occurring within a piece tend to evolve as the piece is re-installed. Indeed the piece sometimes ends up as nothing more than a succession of significant strata that constituted themselves in the specific time and space of exhibitions. This implies a certain form of incompleteness, and the Anglo-Saxons describe these pieces as “process-oriented works”. The contemporary art restorer Stéphanie Elarbi emphasizes the relativism required of the various actors confronted with these works in order to apprehend them: “The contemporary art exhibition does not present completed, permanent objects so much as devices to be actualised (...)”⁵. The criteria needed to appraise such works are likely to vary, and the museum or the gallery has to act as mediator to a set of complex parameters, or is even occasionally expected to produce the form.

How are these choices made? If the artist is alive and willing, it is relatively easy to ask him or her for advice. But even in that case, the oral tradition which prevails in the art world raises a number of difficulties. Despite growing awareness of the issue among art professionals, and several attempts to

⁴ "L'abolition de la frontière entre les matériaux de l'art, les matériaux usuels et les déchets, qui étend la première catégorie de manière à y faire entrer les deux dernières, est donc allée de pair chez les artistes les plus radicaux avec le renversement de la hiérarchie traditionnelle des matériaux (...). Qui plus est, non seulement ils abandonnent les matériaux capables de garder les formes, une fois reçues, pendant un laps de temps correspondant à plusieurs générations humaines, mais ils privilégient ceux qu'ils savent voués à une décomposition rapide (...)."
Krzysztof Pomian, "Sur les matériaux de l'art", *Matériaux et techniques de l'art au XXème siècle, Technè*, n°8, 1998, p.7-15.

⁵ Stéphanie Elarbi, Ivan Clouteau, « Exposer et pérenniser l'œuvre contemporaine, Penser son contexte de maintenance », *Penser autrement l'art contemporain, Technè*, n°24, 2006, p.69-73.

standardize methods of documentation, the bulk of the data is still recorded in a random, usually incomplete way, and indeed sometimes only exists in the memory of a curator or a registrar.

This leads to the critical issue of data transmission. The artist, the assistant, the contemporary art professional, any depositary of the knowledge and techniques, or, in other words, the memory of a piece, must imperatively pass on this knowledge, if not the piece will be doomed to disappear in the medium to long term. During a recent INCCA seminar at the Tate Modern in London⁶, Vivian Van Saaze, a contributor to the aforementioned *Inside Installations* project, used the metaphor of aviation's black box to describe the way in which all the data of the installation should be recorded from the very beginning of its production. Unfortunately, and usually because of a lack of communication between the different intervening parties, this black box is often cruelly absent.

This brief review of the issues raised by contemporary art installations seemed apposite since the piece with which we will be dealing is affected by all of them. Indeed, *Sheep Plug* belongs to what the American critic Jerry Saltz calls "scatter art"⁷, or a form of creation which is more redolent of the "big bang" than any visibly organised entity. Jason Rhoades' and Paul McCarthy's installation concentrates all the aforementioned "problems": a mix of perishable, aggressively smelly materials, of presentation systems that need to be reactivated, of remains of performances and of video projections, the whole devoid of a blueprint for its erection, so much so that the piece presents itself more like a witness to successive productions and performances than a display of objects. It is the creation of a long chain of actors, from the two artists to a series of intervening participants, assistants, galleries, critics, and even a purification factory, to mention but a few, all of whom inextricably contribute to establishing the identity of the piece.

Moreover, *Sheep Plug* was never purchased by any institution or art collector. As is often the case with monumental installations, museums are avid to display them but are less eager to take the risk of conserving them in their permanent collections. As a result *Sheep Plug* was never systematically documented. Furthermore, Jason Rhoades passed away in 2006, a little after the *Dionysiac* show, and this sad event contributed to the "disappearance" of *Sheep Plug*. The two other co-owners, Paul McCarthy and the Hauser & Wirth gallery, seem uninclined either to pursue the project, or, in the case of Hauser & Wirth, to store and try to sell it. Currently, the piece exists in limbo, hidden in the basement of a private German collector to whom it does not belong, under the responsibility of the art critic and freelance curator Roberto Ohrt, who installed it there in the surprising form of an "exhibited storage".

⁶ *Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles ? Artists' Installations and the museum*, Tate Modern, London, 22 March 2007

⁷ Jerry Saltz, *Time Out New York*, 17 avril 1997, p.42.

Because of all these elements, the study of *Sheep Plug* in the specific context of *Dionysiac* no longer makes sense. The piece which was displayed in the exhibition was only a version, a momentary expression within the history of a longer process. The challenge of “elaborating a history of the piece, acknowledging its different modes of exhibition, and the ever-changing circumstances of its creation”⁸, or of attempting to locate the various manifestations of the project, the networks of relations and production, its constitutive, temporary, exchangeable or renewable elements, all in the wider context of a global reflection on contemporary art installations issues, became altogether more complex.

How did *Sheep Plug* come to life? What were the different factors that influenced the history, form and status of the piece? What really constituted it? Above all it is worth bearing the working relationship between Jason Rhoades and Paul McCarthy in mind. *Sheep Plug* is both the product of their respective artistic conceptions and of an intermittent collaboration as part of what they called: *Proposition*. The piece that interests us is inseparable from one of these *Propositions*, made in 2002, during the eleventh *Dokumenta* in Cassel - *Shit Plug* - which can be considered both the genesis to and anterior “version” of *Sheep Plug*. From Cassel to Reykjavik via Zurich, every occurrence of the “*Sheep Plug* process” which preceded its arrival at the Centre Pompidou will be dissected. Between stratification and reactivation, the display of the installation in 2005, at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, as a part of *Dionysiac*, leads me to question the role of an institution faced with such a piece. Finally, the problematic status of the work today raises the issue of the physical and theoretical survival of *Sheep Plug*.

- I- **Accumulation, “bad taste” and self-citation : *Sheep Plug* in the work of Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades**
- II- **From *Shit Plug* to *Sheep Plug* : echoes and reactivations**
- III- ***Sheep Plug* at *Dionysiac*, 2005 : the installation meets the institution**
- IV- ***Sheep Plug* today: a disappearance?**

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⁸ Sylvie Coudert, « l’Exposition comme œuvre », in *Le Jeu de L’exposition*, Actes des Premières Rencontres du Collège des Arts, L’Harmattan, Paris, 1998 , p21-44.