

Interview with Karin Hasselberg  
by Falke Pisano

**Your exhibition "New Socket" at Sandy Brown exists as two sculptural works on pedestals and a telephone on the floor, accompanied by an image in the press material (three objects, four things we concluded before). I know your work for some time now and have been intrigued by the way your practice takes place as a serial reflection on notions like site-specificity, criticality and objecthood. What I find interesting is the relation between your structural use of language in the conversations we have and the concentrated use of form and material in the works, where language, written or spoken, is mostly absent but for the titles.**

**Before we speak about your current exhibition, maybe we could start with an earlier series of works, which spans over several years in which you started to think about site-specificity and the conditions of production and representation of art works, your "hole digging" series?**

It was seven years ago that I started to dig holes in the ground and to record these acts on video. This was the result of an intuitive need to interfere with nature and to exhaust my body physically. At the time I was living in the Bijlmer, a suburb of Amsterdam. As part of yet another project of urban planning, the house I lived in would soon be demolished. Surrounded by grey concrete buildings and excavators, I felt the urge to go out and dig a hole in the ground. With the starting point of a site as something "physical", the series of holes, of which there are sixteen to date, made over time at various locations, has become an enquiry into understanding concepts of socially and economically structured sites -- sites, which for me, very much constitute that of the art world and which I, as a producer of works, inevitably see myself being part of.

**The objects you are showing at Sandy Brown can be read chronologically. Could they be seen as a continuation of the thought-process in the Hole digging series?**

The digging of holes has made me think a lot about how sites have been understood and dealt with in art history. Especially around the time of land art and conceptual art, but also before that time I think. Today I relate to site-specificity through the awareness of how art always is perceived and understood under the influence of the time and context in which it is presented. Every hole piece is linked to the piece before and after. It is a chain of thinking, I use the holes to "solve" and pose problems related to art production, often to the very piece itself. Step by step, the holes have led to the objects here in the gallery.

**Could the objects you are presenting here be seen as a kind of strategic re-materialization of art, in the sense that you are critical about the effect of the so-called de-materialization which did more to expand the reach of the art market than break with it?**

Yes. Based on how I perceive the circular impossibilities of placing oneself outside a system which one is part of, much of what has been articulated through theories of institutional critique, for the last two years I have been working on the proposition that the critical function of an artwork might be more convincing in the form of un-criticality. Coming from a more context and site related way of working this felt like turning 180 degrees. Considering the once critical agenda of site-specific works of art, I was really now thinking in terms of producing a *non-site-specific* work of art.

**And is this the reason why the objects you show are made of traditional materials like bronze and glass?**

As part of this thinking it was important that the object produced should really signal it's own status as a commodity, therefore I choose to work in these "familiar" materials that would be recognized as art.

**The work which I'll call Work 1 is a bronze sculpture, 20cm wide by 30cm high and 2mm thick. It is a slightly curved sheet where the shape of a parrot is cut out of. What is the original reference of this sculpture?**

A photograph of Sherrie Levine's bronze sculpture "Loulou" from 2004.

**So, what we actually have here is the photographic background (of a work by Sherry Levine) as a sculptural object?**

That sounds nice! This object, or Work 1 as you call it, is the first attempt to realize this *non-site-specific* object. The title of the sculpture is "Medium Grey with Darker Grey Table" and that title comes from the background in the photograph, the work by Levine was documented on a dark grey table against a grey background. The image actually comes from her gallery's online catalogue. In my thoughts on making an object *non-site-specific*, or *specific to any site in the art world* (back to underlining the commodity status), I cut out the work by Levine and only kept the "site" in the photograph, and turned this "site" into the object. The background in the photograph becomes rather abstract through the bronzing process, as a "logo" or "symbol" or "sign" of a site. Any site. But then the title again refers to that specific site in the photograph. I see this process of decision making as walking around many corners of consideration on sites and their specificities. On one hand it matters exactly which site it is, and on the other hand it does not matter at all. Just thinking now, maybe it would be more appropriate to say *any-site-specific*.. Well.

**The second thing, which we don't see in the exhibition as a work but is present as a reference in the press material, is a found image of a crystal rabbit. I understand it as relevant in your thought process, what did you discover through this image?**

The image, which is in a book with works produced by the Russian firm Fabergé, shows this delicate transparent little rabbit photographed against some sort of faded grey-blue-white background. When I saw this image it opened up for me thoughts on possibilities for a transparent object to become part of its site by the site being visible through the object itself.

**Lets follow your trajectory to the next work. This is a glass object, existing of lumps of glass melted together, not particularly small or big. The shape does not seem to point to anything figurative or otherwise determined, but comes across as rather accidental. The main feature of this object is its transparency, which is the same quality the crystal rabbit possesses. How did this transfer, from the image to the abstract object, take place?**

I actually like the image of the rabbit as it is very much. I also like that the rabbit is not an artwork, but yet it does not have a use value. As an object it is really perfect. Also the page in the book is very beautiful. But, then I thought, I should also take on the challenge of producing a transparent object. This was a bit tricky though since I only knew that it had to be transparent, not it's form. As opposed to the bronze I wanted this object to be entirely abstract and non referential. I settled

for glass as the material, because the highly polished rock crystal in the rabbit was actually intended to mimic the look of glass, but I could not make a drawing for the glass blower since I could not fix a form on paper. Instead I had to stand next to him while he produced the object, and tell him where to put the glass blobs and how big they should be and when he should stop. It was a very intuitive process for me.

**I think I understand this procedure, in relation to my own practice: you develop certain parameters for a sculpture (as I do for a text or installation) that are the main directive in the making of the work. But these parameters - for instance the fact that 'it' should be transparent, non-referential and an object - leave a lot open, they clearly have a limited reach and there is no way to continue solely on a formal or conceptual logic. So, you have to find other ways to make decisions. Even if, in my work, I try to minimize this 'illogical' space by developing a kind of modular logical system, I feel there is always still a lot of ground left to cover. Usually I aim to navigate this space in the simplest way (for instance by using geometric forms, a limited range of colours, my own voice, a non-expressive way of writing) but, of course, even then there are so many decisions that are simply not 'legitimizable'. So, there usually comes a point where I make a kind of switch and start to work in a more affirmative way with the possibilities of these 'free' decisions. Do you experience something similar? How do you deal with these limits of logic?**

It is such a struggle. Though I think that in this transparent object exactly this was its condition. I actually started off thinking about using geometric forms. I thought of geometric forms as something coming to me rather than coming from me. But then these geometric forms were so loaded I thought. So I turned to, as I think of it, the complete opposite.

Something that was very difficult was to decide the thickness of the bronze. The material and size and even the edition is all based on Levine's "Loulou", but how does one decide on the thickness of a digital image translated in to a three dimensional object?

I am not sure if this falls under the same kind of uncertainty, but I have been making a series of works containing images of parrots made by other artists. I call these parrots art-parrots and it started when I was reading an exhibition catalogue on the work of Louise Lawler. In the catalogue (Louise Lawler and Others) Andrea Fraser was talking clearly and enthusiastically about one work after another until she came to the work "portrait" from 1982, a parrot photographed against a red background. At this point she, Andrea Fraser, got confused and didn't know how to read the work. She made some attempts but realized, as she put it herself, that she had no idea of where she was going. This interruption in flow of language caught my attention and I started to use the parrot as a "sign" of something "ungraspable".

**It might be an interesting point to talk a bit more about the objects in relation to the spectator and how they might be approached or read. I think I can mention that we spoke before about this and that I told you that I see your sculptures as thought-objects, in that sense I consider the choice for glass, and what this choice is based on, more constitutive for the sculpture than the actual material itself. Although... I realize now, it might be because I haven't yet seen the sculptures in real life!**

For me taking on this challenge of making a work of art that looks like "a work of art", also requires that the object produced *functions* as "a work of art". It should be let go, in the sense that it can be seen and contemplated only by it's visual appearance. But then again what we have

been talking about here in this interview might change the position of the object and how you relate to it as a viewer. I see this interview as a try out for ways to produce tools to read these objects. We or I have used the word site-specificity for example. I think that as a viewer one might get more out of the objects here if one has an understanding of what site-specificity means in an art historical context, what it managed and not managed to achieve.

**One of the aspects that might guide the spectator in her or his reading of the work are the pedestals you show the objects on. Do you consider these to be part of the work?**

The podiums are a necessary tool to present these works here in the gallery, but they are not part of the work.

**The third object you show stands in quite a contrast to the other two: it is an actual telephone, a Bang & Olufsen model, placed on the floor, and it is attached to a socket in the wall. Does it work?**

It could work. The phone which is a *Beocom 2000*, first hit the market in the mid-eighties and was in production until as long as 2003. As described on a designer website: "The shape was crisp and precise, and very different. It created a real stir. People without a need for a new telephone bought it simply for the looks. The success of the Beocom telephone was its combination of freshness and friendliness. The idea of a colourful telephone that became the focal point of a room was new."

At an earlier visit to Sandy Brown I noticed this telephone in the gallery office. I thought I had to do something with it. In my thoughts on site constructions constituted by social and financial relations I thought of moving the telephone out in to the gallery space, and in this way change the pattern of movement for the gallerist. She would have to go out in to the gallery space to answer the phone. But, then it turned out that the phone was not connected. And that it was not bought with the intention to connect it but only to create an "office feel" in the gallery office. In fact, there is not even a telephone socket in the gallery.

**So, you found yourself in a bit of a predicament!**

Indeed. At first I discarded the idea of including the phone all together. But then I thought; she (the gallerist) has this phone that does not have a connection, that should not have a connection, well, then I'll install a connection that does not have a connection. A socket, with no connection in the wall behind it. An *intention-specific* socket for this very phone.

In terms of reading these objects one after the other, for me this telephone brings the thinking back to the very space and situation of here and now. I don't think that this work could exist on the same premises anywhere else. In some way, we are back at the idea of digging a hole in the ground.

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