

# Reconstruction Era: The Anachronic Time(s) of Installation Art

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The most high-profile and hotly contested acts of reconstruction in recent years have all tended to involve Performance art. The Ur-example is of course Marina Abramović, whose *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005 sought to produce faithful re-performances of seven seminal works of Performance and Body art dating from the late 1960s and 1970s, including Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, Valie Export and Joseph Beuys. What made Abramović's re-performances so controversial was the legalistic framework that accompanied these works and their striking change of tone. Although Abramović sought the permission of the artist (or their estate) and extensively researched the documentation of each piece, viewers still had the overriding sense that they were watching a work by Marina Abramović—with all the psychology, dramatization and spectacle that this entails. As Carrie Lambert Beatty observes, Abramović's approach was explicitly framed as a normative protocol for re-enactment, but by recasting these historical works as a score, she also closed down "the iterability that is the score's most significant implication."<sup>1</sup>

I begin with the case of Abramović re-staging Performance art, because the issue of historical authenticity takes on a different character when we consider the reconstruction of Installation art, since—in the absence of a performer—the gaps between conceptual framework and material realization can be even more acute. We tend to refer to "reconstruction" as the task of remaking works after the artist's death (before that point, it is often simply a question of reinstallation), and when a significant proportion of the work has no direct material connection to the long destroyed or never realized original. But this definition is not hard and fast, and in reality most installations exist somewhere on a continuum between prioritizing the immaterial (a total experience or concept) and foregrounding the material (often carefully diagrammed by the artist with future reconstruction in mind).

This essay aims to chart the main changes in approach to reconstructing installations and environments between the 1960s and the present day. (I'm going to leave the question of reconstructing artists' studios to one side, since these tend to be more laden with romantic questions of aura.) I am primarily interested in what the motivations for reconstruction in different historical periods tell us about our changing relationship to Installation art. Finally, I will suggest that the accelerated interest in reconstruction activity we are currently experiencing points to the need for different models for understanding and remaking ephemeral works of art—one that involves artists in reconstruction, but not in the manner of Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces*.

The first efforts by museums to reconstruct artists' environments took place in the mid-1960s, and their focus was the reconstruction of experimental exhibition spaces created by the Modernist avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven under the directorship of Jean Leering was the first institution to undertake such a program of reconstructions, commissioning a replica of El Lissitzky's *Proun Space* (1923) in 1965,<sup>2</sup> and scale reconstructions of Theo van Doesburg's *Flower Room* (1925) and *Café Aubette* (1926–28) in 1968.<sup>3</sup> A third reconstruction project took place in 1970, with Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* (1922–30): a rotating sculpture in metal, wood and glass that throws rhythmic light patterns around the walls of a small room. Elsewhere in Europe, one of the

1 Carrie Lambert Beatty, "Against Performance Art," *Artforum*, May 2010.

2 A second reconstruction of the *Proun Space* was undertaken in 1970, because the first was requested for loan to two simultaneous exhibitions in London and Paris. Leering used this opportunity to make some changes to the first reconstruction. In 1995, the first reconstruction was sold to the Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Architektur und Photographie in Berlin.

3 The Van Abbemuseum recreated these De Stijl interiors designed by the Dutch artist for the Villa Noailles (in Hyères) and a café and dance hall (in Strasbourg) respectively, and at the reduced scale of 1:4 for the cinema/dancing room, and 1:5 for the big party room.

- 4 “As far as I know the idea to reconstruct El Lissitzky’s *Kabinett der Abstrakten* came up within the context of the exhibition “Die zwanziger Jahre in Hannover” (Kunstverein Hannover 1962) [...] The artist and curator Dietrich Helms (born 1933) pointed to the destroyed room for the first time after the Second World War and a discussion about the room in Hanover’s art scene started.” Email correspondence from Isabel Schulz, Head of Schwitters Archive, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, 13 March 2013.
- 5 “I also wanted to show historical developments, not as a historical phenomenon but because of the relevance of the works by Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Duchamp and Theo van Doesburg to current art. These artists wanted to unite art and life, and this bond has also been my ideal. What role can art fulfill in society, the usability of art in life, these were for me the crucial questions.” Jan Leering, in Christiane Berndes et al. (eds.) *Een collectie is ook maar een mens: Edy de Wilde, Jean Leering, Rudi Fuchs, Jan Debbaut over verzamelen* (Eindhoven, Rotterdam: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1999), p. 61, cited on [http://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/browse-all/?tx\\_vabdisplay\\_pi1\[ptype\]=18&tx\\_vabdisplay\\_pi1\[project\]=8&cHash=b006fd7b844b9809f9ba7d7de823b59f](http://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/browse-all/?tx_vabdisplay_pi1[ptype]=18&tx_vabdisplay_pi1[project]=8&cHash=b006fd7b844b9809f9ba7d7de823b59f)
- 6 “The intention of documenting the evolution of research on ‘Environmental art’ undergoes a methodological leap in 1966 caused by its diffusion as an art of total ‘actions,’ in which all conceptual and sensorial phenomena become unified....” Germano Celant, “Ambient/Art,” in Barbara Radice, Franco Raggi (eds.), *B76. La Biennale di Venezia. Section of Visual Arts and Architecture: Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures*, vol. 1 (Venice: Alfieri Edizioni d’Arte, 1976), p. 201, reprinted in Germano Celant, *Ambiente/arte: dal futurismo alla body art* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977).
- 7 According to the catalogue *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life*, accompanying his 2007 retrospective, *Yard* has been recreated fourteen times, but the Venice Biennial of 1976 is not listed as one of them. See Eva Meyer-Hermann et al. (eds.), *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), p. 358.

El Lissitzky, *Proun*, ca. 1922–23.

best-known environments from the historic Avant-garde, Lissitzky’s exhibition design for the Hannover Landesmuseum, the *Abstrakte Kabinett* (1928), was reconstructed in 1968 by the Sprengel Museum. This version of the *Abstrakte Kabinett* was made by the architect Arno Bayer and partly financed by Lydia Dorner, the widow of Alexander Dorner (who had commissioned the original work in 1928) in memoriam to her late husband.<sup>4</sup>

Leering’s aim with these reconstructions was to set in dialogue the historical achievements of the Modernist avant-garde with new art of the 1960s, which had become decisively more environmental.<sup>5</sup> Biennials and large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art had featured Installation art from the mid-1960s onwards, and this was inevitably followed by curatorial invitations to reinstall elsewhere works that had been originally conceived for specific sites. In some cases—as in Harald Szeemann’s exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form” (1969)—certain works were entirely made afresh with new materials, both conceptual (De Maria’s *Art by Telephone* [301]) and sculptural (Serra’s *Splash* [121]). It was not until the 1976 Venice Biennial, however, that Installation art was historicized and explicitly linked to the historic Avant-garde. Germano Celant’s survey “Ambiente/arte: dal futurismo alla body art” [“Environmental art: from Futurism to Body art”] juxtaposed one-room installations by thirteen contemporary artists—including Daniel Buren, Jannis Kounellis and Robert Irwin—with six galleries of historical documentation and reconstructions, including Tatlin’s *Corner Reliefs* (1915) and the Van Abbemuseum’s reconstructions of the *Proun Space* and *Café Aubette*. Not unlike Leering’s aims at the Van Abbemuseum, Celant’s desire was to contextualize the contemporary proliferation of Environmental art (which he dated to 1966 onwards) with its historical precursors.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, “Ambiente/arte” featured reconstructions of Neo-avant-garde installations, including Arman’s *Le Plein* (1960), Yves Klein’s *Immaterial Space* (1961), Lucio Fontana’s *Ambiente spaziale* (1961) and Allan Kaprow’s *Yard* (1961). Works not more than a generation old were now seen fit for historical reconstruction. Already, however, important differences in approach became apparent: Kaprow’s work was conceived from the outset as a score, which allows the work to be repeated *ad infinitum* (to date, it has had over fifteen iterations).<sup>7</sup> Arman, by contrast, kept an inventory of the objects in *Le Plein*, not all of which could be re-acquired for Venice, so the 1976 work was a hybrid of “original” and substituted materials more akin to traditional assemblage. Most artists seem to have followed the “score” approach, even if this was not explicit, as Celant recalls that most of the installations were destroyed after the biennial closed.

After this burst of reconstruction and historicization, there was a decline in interest in reconstructions, accompanying a deceleration of artistic interest in making Installation art. Harald Szeemann’s exhibition “Der Hang zum





Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800” (“Towards the Total Work of Art: European Utopias since 1800”) foregrounded the topic once more, but in typically idiosyncratic fashion. Szeemann’s focus was on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as manifested in visionary architecture (Boullée, Gaudí), opera (Wagner) and social organization

(Fourier), which he linked to utopian experiments in art from the socially-engaged (Tatlin) to the escapist (Facteur Cheval). The exhibition included a scale reconstruction of Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1919), a work that, as Maria Gough has recently argued, underwent replication for different exhibition contexts as early as the 1920s.<sup>8</sup>

Szeemann’s show also featured Marcel Broodthaers’ *Salle Blanche*, an environment accompanied by the artist’s own caption: “Reconstruction, as faithful as possible (?), of an installation made by the artist in 1968, that attacked, at that time, the idea of the museum and that of hierarchy. MB 1975.” Broodthaers’ parenthetical question mark in the subtitle adds a characteristic note of uncertainty to the work. Is this really a reconstruction? Although the 1975 tableau clearly evokes the architecture of Broodthaers’ home at 30 rue de la Pepinière, where the first avatar of his *Musée de l’Art Moderne* was installed in 1968, *Salle Blanche* is in fact a self-consciously theatricalized (pseudo) self-historicization. It is entirely in keeping with Broodthaers’ strategies of (and delight in) fictionalization to create a purported reconstruction of a work that never in fact existed.<sup>9</sup>

The most significant reconstruction for “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk” was that of Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau* (1923–37), commissioned from the Swiss theater designer Peter Bissegger, working in consultation with Schwitters’ son Ernst. As is well known, the *Merzbau* was a continuously changing installation that Schwitters worked on in his Hannover home between 1923 and 1937. It was eventually destroyed as a result of Allied bombing in 1943; by this point, Schwitters had fled Germany for Lysaker in Norway, where he immediately began a second version. After the Germans invaded Norway in 1940, he escaped to the Lake District in England, where he began to decorate a small barn in a similar fashion.<sup>10</sup> The part of the *Merzbau* that Bissegger decided to reconstruct for Szeemann’s show is arguably its most iconic aspect, based on photographs taken in the early 1930s, when the first phase of installation (surfaces densely layered with collage) had been covered over with white painted wood to create an angular gothic interior, reminiscent both of ecclesiastical architecture and expressionist theater design. After Szeemann’s exhibition, the reconstruction was acquired by the Sprengel Museum, where it remains on permanent display.<sup>11</sup>

8 See Maria Gough, “Model Use,” lecture at the College Art Association annual conference, New York, February 14, 2013.

9 It is also appropriate that *Salle Blanche* exists, like so many of these reconstructions, in the form of two “originals”—one owned by the Centre Georges Pompidou; the second a traveling copy owned by the Estate Marcel Broodthaers and stored at Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

10 The remains of the Lake District *Merzbau* are exhibited as the *Merz-Barn*, now in the collection of the Hatton Gallery, Sheffield, UK.

11 Five years later, another version of the *Merzbau* was made by London gallerist Annelly Juda for the exhibition “Dada and Constructivism” (1988–89), which is now used as the touring copy for museums.

12 This version of *Tropicália* was then shown at the University of Rio de Janeiro in 1990.

13 Since Oiticica left detailed instructions for each work, Basualdo has made a point of exhibiting these alongside the installations so that viewers can understand on what basis the installations have been made. Phone conversation with Carlos Basualdo, February 27, 2013.

In the early 1990s, the work of several installation artists who had died prematurely in the 1980s was subjected to the challenge of reconstruction. None of these have been more contested than those of Hélio Oiticica, who died in 1980. The first, partial reconstruction of Oiticica's *Tropicália* (1967) had taken place in 1986, when critic Guy Brett advised on a version to be presented at Galeria São Paulo, in an exhibition that also included reconstructions of the Parangolé capes (1965–).<sup>12</sup> The reconstruction of Oiticica's installations has been fraught ever since this moment, since the artist kept precise instructions for the works' recreation, but only some of the materials for doing so. This situation has been exacerbated since a fire in Rio in 2009, which destroyed seventy percent of Oiticica's work, so now most of his sculptural output also has to be wholly reconstructed if it is to be shown at all.

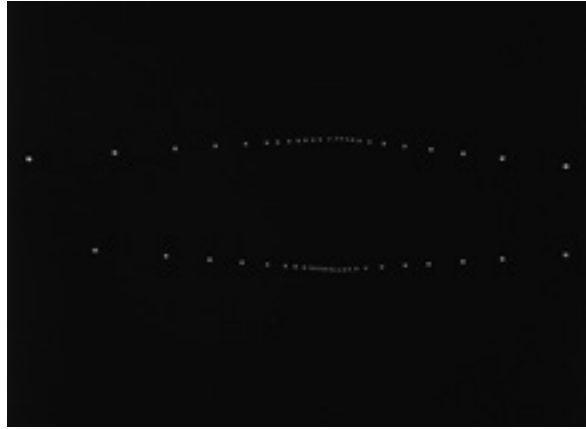
The first major survey of Oiticica's work took place in 1992 at Witte de With, Rotterdam, organized by Luciano Figuiereido on behalf of the artist's estate, Projecto Hélio Oiticica, together with Chris Dercon and Catherine David. It included reconstructions of *Tropicália* (1967), *Nests from Eden* (1969) and *Penetrable Invention of Light* (1978–80), which had hitherto existed only as a small maquette. In each of these installations, original materials were supplemented by substitutes: wooden frames and fabric were shipped from Rio, while parrots, straw, hay, foam flakes and sand were acquired locally. In fact, works like *Eden* (1969) seem to have been hybridized from the beginning: Oiticica kept two *Penetrable* components from the original installation at MAM Rio in 1967, shipped them to London for his Whitechapel show in 1969, and then shipped them back to Brazil, indicating that these elements of the installation should be preserved right from the start, while others should be added and discarded as necessary.

Witte de With also reconstructed two *Cosmococas* from 1973: installations that Oiticica made in collaboration with filmmaker Neville d'Almeida, and which were only ever shown in private in the 1970s. *CC3 Maileryn* is an environment comprising slide projections of Marilyn Monroe's face decorated with lines of cocaine, and a floor covered with sand and white balloons, while *CC5 Hendrix-War* includes projections (and the soundtrack) of Hendrix's album *War Heroes*, to be experienced from hammocks strung across the gallery. Again, these reconstructions were hybridized: the slides were original, but other elements were freshly acquired according to Oiticica's instructions (nail files, balloons, sand and so on). With such open-ended instructions, the impression made by these works tends to vary enormously according to who has installed them; sadly, some versions seem academic and lifeless, without any flair whatsoever. Curator Carlos Basualdo, who has showed Oiticica's installations in the touring exhibitions "Quasi-Cinemas" (2001) and "Tropicália" (2005), prefers to call his versions of the works "reinterpretations" rather than reconstructions, in order to emphasize that what the viewer sees is only ever an approximation of the artist's idea.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the sculptural sensibility required to follow artists' instructions compellingly, it is not surprising that some curators have found this prospect too daunting to consider. In 1995, the Witte de With decided to mount a retrospective of Paul Thek (who had also died relatively young,



Reconstruction of Lucio Fontana's *Ambiente Spaziale* [Space Environment], 1981 (1967), Castello di Rivoli, Turin.



in 1988), but decided that it was impossible to recreate his elaborate, sprawling installations, despite extensive consultation with Harald Szeemann, who had shown Thek's *Ark, Pyramid* (1972) at Documenta 5. Instead, the remains of these installations were shown as sculpture, rather than as part of an overall

environment. Unlike Oiticica, Thek never left instructions for his installations, which were created organically and as traveling works in progress, changing with each institutional iteration. The artist was saddened when Jean-Christophe Ammann wrote to him in 1976 that the museum in Lucerne had to destroy most of his *Ark, Pyramid, Easter* (1973) as they had no way of storing the installation as a whole.<sup>14</sup> In this instance, the artist deemed every component of the installation crucial and worthy of preservation.

Since the proliferation of contemporary art museums and culture as an “experience economy” beginning in the late 1990s, there has been a widespread consensus that the best means of understanding historic works of ephemeral art is through direct experience rather than photographic documentation. That reconstructed installations might also fuel the market has been an inevitable side effect of this activity. My chronology thus far has tended to gloss over reconstructions by commercial galleries, which took place as early as 1966–67 when Annelly Juda commissioned a reconstruction of Tatlin's *Corner Reliefs*, and 1970, when Pace Gallery decided to construct Piet Mondrian's unrealized design, *Salon de Madame B à Dresden* (1926).<sup>15</sup> (Both works were exhibited in Celant's 1976 Biennial, but I have been unable to confirm with these galleries whether they still own them or if they were sold.) When artists leave detailed instructions for works, it aids the process of reconstruction, but also renders them open to editioning for the market. Oiticica is once again a central player in this narrative, because his work is situated, as Irene Smalls writes, “on a continuum between unique object and score, and it is precisely these coordinates that are currently up for debate.”<sup>16</sup>

Following Basualdo's exhibition “Tropicália” (2005), the Tate acquired the eponymous 1967 from the Projecto Hélio Oiticica, who agreed that Oiticica's family could also edition it twice to make three installations in total. (There was already an exhibition copy in circulation, so the contract covered this and one further edition for their own purposes.) The original elements were basically confined to the frames of the *Penetrable* structures and their “walls” of fabric, plastic, and internal curtains, some of which were by then extremely brittle or had perished entirely. The rationale was that editioning would allow audiences in both Europe and South America to see the work without unnecessary shipping. However, in 2005, Nara Roesler Gallery in São Paulo, and Gallery Lelong in New York, each working with Projecto Hélio Oiticica, began to edition the *Cosmococa* installations for sale. This included *CC4: Nocagions* (1973) which had never been realized by

14 “It seems silly to have to throw away efforts like *Ark, Pyramid, Easter* just because the museum system can't find a way to accept it. There must be a way. Can't you educate your museum friends [...] so that they will become willing to spend some few thousand of \$ for a show that does NOT remain, that is NOT purchasable, that CANNOT be resold? That is the POINT of shows like *Ark, Pyramid, Easter*. And now it all has to stop, because no one can be bothered to find a way to support it. What a pity. And we're back where we started, looking at objets d'art, and worrying about pedestals, and frames.”

Paul Thek, letter to Jean-Christophe Ammann, reprinted in *Paul Thek: The Wonderful World that Almost Was* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1995), p. 190.

15 Pace acquired Mondrian's plans for a library-study for the German collector Ida Bienert via the artist's estate in 1969. Mondrian never realized the project, but held onto the designs until his death in 1944. Pace decided to recreate the room out of Formica laminates, with colors matched to Mondrian's tubes of paint, for an exhibition in 1970.

16 Irene Smalls, “Material Remains,” *Artforum*, February 2010, p. 96.

17 See Daniel Roesler's lecture at Tate Modern, "Shifting Practice, Shifting Roles?," London, March 22, 2007, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/shifting-practice-shifting-roles-part-8>

18 Mari Carmen Ramírez, quoted in Lyle Rexer, "After the Blaze," *Modern Painters*, Summer 2010, p. 63.

Oiticica and d'Almeida: a 90-cm-deep swimming pool installed amid colored lights, surrounded by slide projections of John Cage's manuscript *Notations* covered with lines of cocaine. Since the work was co-authored with d'Almeida, who has also edited his slides for Oiticica as individual photographs, it is hard to make the case that the work should not be for sale; more questionable, perhaps, is the limited editioning. If the work can be recreated more than once, why not make the edition unlimited?<sup>17</sup> The curator Maria Carmen Ramírez has strongly objected to this marketization of Oiticica's work, since he was "both an object-oriented artist and a Conceptualist," viewing his work both as a timeless intellectual "proposition" (complete with extensive notes and diagrams for reassembly) and a sensuous material experience in the present.<sup>18</sup>

Another high profile reconstruction of recent years raises a different set of issues. In 2009, Tate Modern reconstructed Robert Morris's *Bodyspacemotionthings* (1971) originally installed in the Duveen Galleries of what is now Tate Britain. The installation comprised a series of plywood objects for physical interaction, designed to give the viewer a heightened awareness of bodily perception, many of which evoke Morris's minimalist sculptures of the 1960s: sloped boards, narrow walkways, ropes, logs, balls. The 2009 version, made in collaboration with Morris, was made to the same dimensions of the first, but using higher quality materials, and underwent significant adjustments due to Health and Safety regulations. For example, in 1971, viewers could stand on a large ball and pull themselves around in a circle with the help of a rope; in 2009, this was no longer an option. The ball was reduced in size and could just be pushed around by hand.

The reason for the Morris reconstruction seems to have been twofold. Building on the success of Tate's experiences with participatory installation (such as Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*, 2003, and Carsten Höller's *Test Site*, 2008), the museum clearly wished to extend its commitment to this work by showing its radical historical precursors (Morris's show, after all, had legendarily been shut down after four days due to the number of injuries incurred by visitors). Secondly, this reconstruction would position Tate as a key early player within this history of participatory art. Although the 2009 installation resembled the 1971 project in many recognizable ways, the work also functioned within a completely different institutional framework: coinciding with the May bank holiday, Morris's reconstruction attracted legions of families with children. Originally planned to be open for just four days, it was extended to three weeks due to its overwhelming popularity, attracting over 100,000 visitors. In this context, the viewer's heightened attention to bodily perception (the *raison d'être* of the 1971 show) was overwhelmed by the struggle simply to get near the installation in the first place.

With commerce on one hand and mass audiences on the other, the future of reconstruction seems to be unstoppable, but another route has been suggested, once again initiated by the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Under the director Charles Esche, the museum has continued the project set in motion by Jan Leering of collecting reconstructions of historical environments. In 2007 it commissioned a reconstruction of Rodchenko's *Workers' Reading Room* (1925), and in 2009 it fabricated Moholy Nagy's *Raum*

*der Gegenwart* (1930); like Lissitzky's *Abstrakte Kabinett*, this was originally commissioned by Alexander Dorner as a display system for contemporary art at the Hannover Landesmuseum, but was never realized.

More experimentally, the Van Abbemuseum has invited the Museum of American Art in Berlin, an enigmatic organization specializing in the excavation and reconstruction of exhibition history, to remake Lissitzky's *Abstrakte Kabinett* for the collection. Unlike the version in Hannover, the MoAA's reconstruction is not a faithful version made of comparable materials but relies upon painterly illusion. Paradoxically, it is only when standing in this version that one understands it to be an installation created from a photograph; moreover, when the reconstruction is viewed as a photograph, it looks identical to images of the original. So the MoAA's reconstruction is not a conventional historical reconstruction, but seems to offer a commentary upon reconstruction itself, its means and ends. It also

points to the centrality of photography in the histories of Installation art and exhibition display.

Part of the Van Abbemuseum's program in recent years has been dedicated to building up a "museum of museums," a catalogue of different approaches to exhibition display. This has involved the artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh reconstructing Lina Bo Bardi's exhibition display system for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1968) and inviting the Danish collective Superflex to intervene in the re-installation of Rudi Fuchs' collection display of minimalist sculpture, first shown at the museum in 1983. Their project, *Free Sol*



Reconstruction of Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, 1981–83 (1933), Sprengel Museum, Hannover.

*Lewitt* (2009), comprised a fully-functioning carpentry workshop for making copies (reconstructions, if you will) of Sol LeWitt's *Untitled (Wall Structure)* from 1972. The resulting sculptures were distributed to the public for free, and at random. Again, the project takes us straight to the heart of the central problem underlying any practice of reconstruction: the balance between conceptual proposition and material object. In the case of *Free Sol Lewitt*, the artists took LeWitt's depersonalized approach to conceptual art (in which the idea is primary, the fabrication secondary) and returned it to the production-line logic with which it was always in dialogue—but this time, rather than constraining the objects' circulation to a certified market, the resulting sculptures were distributed for free.

Reinstallation, reconstruction, replica, copy: these terms seem to run along a sliding scale of authenticity, with concept and materiality exerting counter-directional pulls. In their book *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel remind us that sixteenth century art was marked by similarly multiple, overlapping and often contradictory approaches to the art object. Around 1500, they claim, there were two systems of belief running parallel: on the one hand, the art object was

**Hélio Oiticica, *Cosmococa*, 1992  
(1973), Witte de With, Center  
for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam.**

*Thanks to Tanya Barson, Carlos Basualdo, Germano Celant, Chris Dercon, Paul van Gennip, Roland Groeneboom and Catherine Wood for answering my questions; to Ben Murphy and Natalie Dupecher for research assistance; and to Nikki Columbus for editorial feedback.*



viewed as *substitutable*; its materiality was unimportant, since its significance lay in function, as a means of access to the divinity. On the other hand, there was an incipient belief in the *performativity* of the object: the view that a work of art is irreplaceable, produced by a unique authorship at a particular

time and place. In the substitutable model, each iteration is unique because of its context, but the score remains a constant kernel; in the performative model, the singular iteration becomes more important than the score.

This co-existence of competing temporalities is highly suggestive for our own era—but requires a few adjustments. Today, the word “performative” rarely connotes the one-off; increasingly—with the phenomenon of re-performance—it returns us to the idea of the score, and the substitutable, and the two terms start to collapse. Purely score-based works do exist today (Hans-Ulrich Obrist’s “do it” [1993] offers a whole online exhibition of them) but the examples of Superflex and the Museum of American Art in Berlin point us to a more layered and complex paradigm in which the two temporalities coexist and overlap. Rather than demoting the question of materiality entirely in favor of the conceptual, inviting artists to take the lead in reconstructions might ensure that the result is never solely an empty replica, a dutiful but inadequate imitation of the past. When artists undertake the work of reconstruction sensitively, two authorships and two temporalities can co-exist in one anachronistic object: an archival representation of the past, and a voice that speaks to the concerns of today. This double vocality is what differentiates the examples of Superflex and the MoAA from that of Marina Abramović at the Guggenheim, whose reenactments of past performances take them far away from the spirit in which they were first performed, and tip them too forcefully towards a celebration of herself (and the institution) in the present moment.