

Amnesia and anamnesis

Krijn de Koning
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The site-specific installations of Krijn de Koning are reminiscent of the work of Daniel Buren and Michael Asher, who have been incorporating the exhibition space into their work since around 1970. Art became a reflection on its context: not only the white cube of museum or gallery, but also all the other places where art was displayed were scrutinized. De Koning's work is much less explicitly directed towards the demystification of the art context than, say, Buren (his tutor). The ideological intensity of seventies art has evaporated. That does not mean that De Koning is not analytical, but rather that his method is more indirect and historical. I see him less as an institutional critic and more as an archaeologist. At the sites where he constructs his works, he peels away old layers of time and adds new ones. The utensils he uses are simple, harking back to the minimalist tradition: right angled walls, floors and volumes made of plasterboard, chipboard or wood painted in bright colours. In the case of De Koning, however, the effect is seldom bright, neat, and minimalist. For works like his installation in the art centre Begane Grond in 2001, De Koning - like some kind of builder from hell - does not make the space more orderly and practical, but rather more difficult to navigate and to understand. There is a non-human quality to some of his installations. It is as if they were not built by representatives of any recognizable civilization. But their unfunctional qualities are sometimes intensified until they take on a kind of science fiction quality, more suggestive of the monolith in 2001: A Space Odyssey than of most minimal art. The structures have no recognizable function or purpose. Why would anyone want to divide a space in such a totally irrational way as De Koning did in the Begane Grond, with its awkward differences in height and its strange passageways?

Bas Heijne has pointed to the importance of ruins in the work of De Koning. Ruins are human constructions which have been reconquered by nature; in the Romantic era they were a spot in which to muse about the transience of this world. Often they were set out in landscape gardens like ready-made follies, simulations of a distant past. The construction De Koning erected in a small wood in Hilversum (1999) is a reverse ruin: it is not nature which has taken possession of a construction, but rather the construction which has forced its way into nature. Indeed, in the modern era nature has often been turned into a ruin: a single tree that remains after a landscape has been turned into arable land. Like ruins in which the ravages of time become visible, De Koning's works are time structures. But here it is not the work itself which is the ruin; rather, it turns its context into a ruin. Their oddness, and the absence of a true dialogue with the context, robs that context of its integrity and logic. In 2001, in the courtyard of a dilapidated hotel in Metz, De Koning addressed a genuine ruin, although one not yet overgrown by plants: the new structure penetrated into the old.

In early 2003 Krijn de Koning had an exhibition in the Musée des Moulages in Lyon which was unique in several respects. The museum has a collection of plaster casts of classical – and a few Medieval and Renaissance – sculptures, housed in a restored factory. While such collections were once a prominent component of European culture, in the twentieth century they were increasingly seen as an anachronism and many were destroyed. The

collection in Lyon had long been neglected; during the sixties most of the casts, which had been discoloured by layers of dust, were clumsily painted over with white paint. De Koning began by arranging the plaster casts in a number of closely packed groups. In between these groups he created 'paths' marked by means of coloured partitions made of plasterboard. Just as in Metz, he was dealing with a 'ruin': a long neglected collection. By positioning the casts close together, without any logical or scientific organizing principle, he reduced them to a kind of forest of plaster trees and shrubs, again highlighting the alienation between his structure and the context. De Koning was not trying to actualize the context, to make it accessible or interesting, as installation artists often do when they are called in to perform an 'an intervention' in a museum. In fact, the reverse is true; his pieces emphasize the anachronistic qualities of their context.

Walter Benjamin regarded ruins as one of the areas in which the Baroque and the Romantic come together. They play an important role in his analysis of the German Baroque tragic drama: these plays were highly allegorical and, according to Benjamin, allegory is 'in the realm of thoughts' what ruins are 'in the realm of objects'. The clash between De Koning's structures and their surroundings goes beyond the limitations of the allegory of German Baroque poets, who on the one hand displayed a melancholy fixation on the ruins of meaning with which they worked and, on the other hand, subordinated them to Christian moralizing. De Koning makes montages, dialectical images of ruins and new structures that suggest that here is something beyond allegorical mourning. But the alien and illogical character of his structures also suggests that our minds are incapable of fathoming that beyond.