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DOROTHEE VON WINDHEIM: AN EARLY WALL WORK. *STRAPPO AD ASOLO* 1973 REVISITED IN THE CONZ ARCHIVE

It is November 2018, and the staff of the Conz Archive pull out a 170 cm long rolled cloth packed in brown wrapping paper with a big red label *fragile* on it. The piece is not particularly well-preserved, which is interesting taking into account what it actually is. Now it is being unpacked for the first time—the first time in how long? In the right corner of the rolled plaster sealed with five wax stamps, the signature and date are engraved: *D. v. Windheim 1973*. I know exactly what it is as German artist Dorothee von Windheim did only one project with Francesco Conz. It was very well documented because the process of documentation was one of its premises so even with my limited knowledge I can easily match the pieces. Some bits of the plaster fall on the wrapping paper. As a result of various measures, more or less intentional, a fragment of the surface of a wall from a 17th-century convent in Northern Italy is lying on a table inside the archive in West Berlin.

Like many others, the Conz Archive seems quite chaotic at the first glance: entities of all sorts map myriads of relations, some explicit

and some shielded from the eyes of the visitors; subjected to its internal logic it is nevertheless susceptible to contingency and the risk of omission contends with a chance of disclosure. The Conz Archive is admittedly vast: it consists of more than three thousand items collected or produced by Francesco Conz over the course of more than 30 years. Starting in the 1970s, the Italian collector, curator, and publisher cooperated with various artists representing the avant-garde movements of the time: Fluxus, Concrete Poetry, Actionism, Lettrism. A variety of artworks can be found here as well as some secondary sources: photographic documentation of ephemeral events (happenings, site-specifics, performances), correspondence, many editions and books, private photographs, notes. Moreover, it is accompanied by the so-called *Fetish Collection*: a set of mundane or exciting everyday objects accumulated over the years of curating and collecting. The collection is currently located in a big warehouse in the northern part of Charlottenburg, where a team of curators and conservators documents and arranges its content.

Francesco Conz: At the threshold of the *Golden Time of Asolo*

At the beginning of the 1970s, Francesco Conz was determined to work with the progressive artists of the time. The actual shape of his curatorial practice was, however, altered during the subsequent years. Not satisfied with the conventional role of an art collector, Conz aimed to expand his agency. He wanted to enable (and to some extent control) the production, accompany the entire artistic process, assemble what emerged and document the event in a vast series of photographs or unique publications. In his article from 1995, Henry Martin commented on what in subsequent years came to be Conz's practice as follows: "[his] vision (...) was highly didactic, and partly curatorial as well. He was interested in creating documents that preserved and transmitted a complex memory of an otherwise fleeting art and that thrust it onto a larger and possibly more public scale; and he was also interested in helping the artists to set up new and curious situations in which to continue to work."¹ Additionally, Anne Kirker concludes that "Francesco Conz has worked with numerous artists who are experimental in their approach and whom international fame may or may not have touched. (...) [The] editions have given enduring life to concepts which in many instances were born in the 1960s and 1970s when artists threw caution to the wind and iconoclastically engaged with an art practice that reached out, not drew back."² On the one hand, Conz wanted to work with already established artists who fascinated him and create space for their avant-garde productions. On the other, he aimed at enabling artistic production before artists themselves were widely acclaimed. The didactic approach mentioned by Martin is perceivable in Conz's aspiration to document the productions; it could, however, be argued that his publications and exhibitions did not reach vast audiences and many of them were produced solely to suit his personal interests and tastes. Understandably, during the 1970s, Conz must have made necessary contacts with prominent artists and curators. At

the end of 1972, he stayed for a while in Berlin, where he met Joe Jones and Günter Brus. He was also introduced to Viennese Actionism and met Hermann Nitsch whom he later visited in Diessen. There, Conz was introduced to Gerhard Rühm who told him about the Wiener Group and visual poetry. In 1973, after selling his gallery in Verona, Conz moved to Asolo, where Count Orazio Baglioni di Asolo offered to rent him a palazzo where the process of his engagement in the current art practices could evolve.

Hence, between 1973 and 1979, Asolo became an unusual location for a robust and diverse range of art production: many artists visited Italy to work, create, and enjoy each other's company (e.g., Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Joe Jones, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann). Some remarkable events took place in the environment of Asolo, which became an important venue for the development of Fluxus as an artistic movement. Later on, Conz related to this period as the "Golden Time of Asolo": "far from the ski resorts and beaches, Asolo had remained protected from tourism. A true paradise for artists, for me and for art. (...) Marvellous evenings, creative meetings, dinners in the inns of the surrounding countryside and unending discussions in the Coffee Centrale into the early hours of the morning. Works which have become history were done there from 1973 to 1979."³ In the first year of his residency in the palazzo, a few projects were already curated by Conz. Hermann Nitsch created his famous *Asolo Raum*⁴ and Günter Brus was working on *I Cardinali* and *La Croce del Veneto*. The first Joe Jones exhibition was organised at this time.⁵ However, the more robust activity dated to the latter period, after Conz's trip to New York in the winter of 1974,⁶ where he made some further important connections with Fluxus artists (e.g., John Cage, George Maciunas, Jonas Mekas) and became more convinced of what he was aiming in doing, namely, engaging in Fluxus-related projects.

Conz became an active agent in shaping artistic production and at the same time, he aimed at conceptualising and writing the history of it. Documenting and publishing enabled capturing

what was ephemeral in artistic processes, sharing ideas between artists, publishers, and providing publicity as well as exposure of production that would otherwise remain unrecorded. Nicholas Zurbrugg notes that “Francesco Conz’s career offers a remarkable example of the way in which an independent agent provocateur can continually re-make art history—both practically, by publishing innovative editions of the changing and evolving ‘other work’ by those artists he thinks of as ‘the saints of the new religion’, and theoretically, by showing how such innovation inevitably modifies ‘the self-consciously defined ‘tendency’.”⁷ Conz’s interest, however focused on certain tendencies, expanded to projects that cannot be subordinated to the idea of Fluxus. Such is the example I would like to discuss in this paper, one of the very first in which Conz got engaged in curating, producing and documenting. This was the work *Strappo ad Asolo* by Dorothee von Windheim from 1973. It is noteworthy as an engaging artwork, quite representative for the period and also because it was important in shaping Conz’s ways of producing and documenting art in the following years.

Dorothee von Windheim: Finding Asolo

In the second half of the 1960s, Dorothee von Windheim studied in Hamburg with Dietrich Helmes and Gotthard Graubner and was engaged in guest participation in Bazon Brock’s lectures.⁸ At the beginning of the 1970s, after abandoning painting in a traditional sense,⁹ von Windheim was engaged in a series of self-portraits employing mixed tools such as photography and imprints. She had already been researching the phenomenon of imprinting and handling found objects since the late 1960s: she used various tools to imprint her own silhouette on the flat tissues of the pictorial surfaces (mostly cloths) and some 3-dimensional surfaces (e.g. trees). The theme of an imprint and the possibility of reflecting reality on a surface of a flat art-piece became central to her practice. For similar reasons, she exploited the possibilities of imprinting and reflecting provided by photography. She experimented with

overlapping cloths and papers which she had soaked, bleached, burned, and cooked with paint and grease. Von Windheim considered the results of her work to be projections into the material of her own physical condition.

After finishing her studies at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg in 1971, she decided to spend the next four years in Italy (thanks to the DAAD scholarship she acquired) and for the following few years she settled in Florence. In 1972 she accidentally visited “Firenze Restaura” at Fortezza da Basso, a huge exhibition dedicated to the topic of frescoes and their restoration process. As she mentions, “I felt like being struck by lightning: the possibility to separate frescoes from the wall behind them, demonstrated in detail in the show, seemed to be a technique invented for me. What was possible with the frescoes should be possible with the walls which interested me.”¹⁰ The artist did not hesitate to contact the restorers present at the exhibition expressing a desire to learn their methods and persisted until they accepted her as “some kind of apprentice.” Within their silent agreement, she exchanged part of her time and craft for their knowledge while working in churches and courtyards. What is more, the restorers allowed von Windheim to use their materials and working space at Palazzo Pitty for her own pieces. As she mentions, “I’m sure they did not really understand my artistic intention. I guess they considered my wall works more like practical pieces and praised my hard work. I do not remember how long I continued to work with them, it could not have been too long but it was an extremely intense time.” Her subsequent artistic practice was a compound of her experiments from before 1973 (imprinting reality onto flat artistic surfaces) and the particular technique she used in order to strip the material surfaces off the walls at the architectural sites and transport them into the artificial realm of the work of art. As she mentions, “in that period I was very much busy with *strappo*¹¹ which I had discovered as an artistic possibility for me though it is a conservation technique.”¹² The artist admits that she used this technique quite frequently (mostly during her stay in Italy, but not only)



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1 Dorothee von Windheim, *Strappo ad Asolo*, 1973, photo by Giorgia Palmisano, courtesy of Archivio Conz, Berlin, 2018

2 Series of photographs documenting the process of producing *Strappo ad Asolo* in 1973 done by Dorothee von Windheim. They are published in the publication *Strappo ad Asolo* (Verona: Pari Editori & Dispari, Reggio Emilia, 1974). Copyright VG Bildkunst für Dorothee von Windheim, 2020

and it could be argued that she developed her own artistic forensics using precisely the *strappo* technique.

At some point during her stay in Italy, Dorothee von Windheim met Francesco Conz and after his invitation, she decided to create a piece in Convento di san Luigi at Asolo near Padua.¹³ Understandably, it was based on the conservation technique that she was practicing at the time. Those are the origins of the *Strappo ad Asolo*, the only work of von Windheim's that is documented and stored in the Conz Archive. Although as mentioned von Windheim regarded herself as a painter precisely because of the flatness of the surfaces she worked with, she sometimes played with the expectations and her regular practices by shifting the shapes of the plaster surfaces taken from the sites. She underlines that she "was fascinated by the idea of being able to take away, to carry away, clamped under my arm a rolled piece of the wall, which is normally immovable. Sometimes I had an intention to withdraw from the spectator's view what normally would be in the centre of interest, what would be the most worth looking at. So that the viewers would activate their imagination and rely on it because there was not much else. I would rather call *Strappo ad Asolo* an object than a sculpture. An object with an included secret. The seals underline this untouchability/invisibility."

All this marks the uniqueness of *Strappo ad Asolo*: it was the very first of von Windheim's projects which had a three-dimensional part of a building as its subject. Later the same year she created similar pieces: a 180 cm high roll of plaster on gauze (*eine Mauerrolle*), taken from the wall of the Fortezza da Basso in Florenz.¹⁴ Besides *Strappo ad Asolo*, *Strappo (Fortezza da Basso)*, some small rolls and 4 or 5 reliefs, all of von Windheim's other wall pieces are flat or even additionally flattened surfaces (e.g. *Pfeilerabwicklung* from 1975). Thus, as a big sculptural object—the 172-cm tall rolled imprint of a column from the convent—*Strappo ad Asolo* remains unique. During the process, the artist glued a panel of fabric to the surface of the pilaster from which, after the adhesive dried, the plaster (the outer shell of the wall)

was taken away. Afterwards it was rolled and sized with seal and plaster. As von Windheim recalls, "*Strappo ad Asolo* was indeed a very special project: my statement was to hide the merit. With the help of the seals, I prevented the possibility of looking at the surface which was the topic of the work. Anyhow, this work can be understood as a challenge to the imagination." While investigating her project in depth, one acknowledges that this mystery intended by the artist offers several levels of interpretation.

As an art piece, *Strappo ad Asolo* is not limited to the object itself and could be regarded in at least three additional ways: as a documented process (a site-specific performance), as documentation (von Windheim chose the way she documented her work). The third aspect was introduced to me by the artist herself and "[it] is the place where the piece comes from, the negative which has remained on the surface of the wall. Or the renewed/restored building from which any trace had been eliminated. Or even the memory of the missing wall if it has been demolished."

One of the useful concepts to investigate this work simultaneously on the three aforementioned levels is the notion of framing. First, framing understood as a specific physical process of informing the matter and discursive procedure of conceptualising it as art. Second, framing as institutionalising the work of art: how is it possible for such a practice to be recognised as art and why? The first understanding concerns the work of art itself—both as an object and as a process—and divides into two major sub-problems: analysis of the work of art and of the means of documentation process (considering that framing is a constitutional act of photography as an art medium, documenting with photographs is both framing and contextualising).

I will conduct an analysis of *Strappo ad Asolo* by following the aforementioned problems which interweave in the course of the narrative, mapping the context and nature of the piece, the documentation of which drew my attention during my visits to the Conz Archive. Firstly, I look closer at the ontology of von Windheim's work and its uniqueness in the wider context of the site-specific art of the 1960s and 1970s.

Secondly, I reflect on the documentation process as part of the performative site-specific process and consider its effectiveness. Finally, I wish to underline the importance of the *Strappo ad Asolo*—both for von Windheim and for Conz.

Framing part 1: Defining and Institutionalising

As Craig Owens observes, by placing the modernist concept of “the death of the author” in the new context, the art practices of the 1960s and 1970s invoked the theme of framing. He writes that those practices “shift attention away from the work and its producer and onto its frame—the first, by focusing on the location in which the work of art is encountered; the second by insisting on the social nature of artistic production and reception.”¹⁵ Before turning to the social and institutional understanding that Owens offers, I would like to consider the ontological nature of framing. In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*,¹⁶ the concept of *parerga* (*para*—outside, *ergon*—artwork) denotes something decorative, an external addition that is not part of the exposition. Hence, *parergon* separates the immanent content of the artwork from the outside and is positioned in the latter. Additionally, the frame becomes a distraction: it drags our attention away from the artwork and marks art as something artificial, detached from the rest of the experience. In contrast, in *Truth in painting*¹⁷ Derrida refers to the process of framing—understood as informing the matter—as a critical moment for it to become a work of art. Thus, *parergon* becomes the condition of the possibility of the artwork and points to its paradoxicality rooted in the circularity of the notion of art: ultimately the work of art must become its own premise; it becomes its frame so that it can appear as an object in the discourse. Consequently, within a discursive order, the frame becomes the institutions, languages, and theories surrounding the object or even the art history as such. The concept of frame is plausible precisely because it marks the inseparability of the “art” and “non-art.”

To mark the transition from the ontological to institutional understanding of framing, Owens collates Derrida’s notion with Foucault’s idea of a discourse. As the historian writes, “Sometimes the postmodernist work insists upon the impossibility of framing, of even rigorously distinguishing a text from its con-text (this argument is made repeatedly in Jacques Derrida’s writings on visual art); at other it is all frame (...). More often than not, however, the ‘frame’ is treated as that network of institutional practices (Foucault would have called them ‘discourses’) that define, circumscribe and contain both artistic production and reception.”¹⁸ This requires an analysis of the particular historical moment which made it possible for this kind of site-specific and performative practice to be recognised as a work of art. As von Windheim herself notes, during that time she was quite well informed and attracted to the contemporary artistic tendencies. During her stay in Italy, she had visited some great international exhibitions such as documenta 5 and the Venice Biennale but also encountered contemporary art in less mainstream venues. As she recalls, she “was astonished to discover how many Italian and international artists passed by and exhibited in Florence. Galleria Schema was some kind of a secret melting pot. I often went to Milan, Turin or Genoa to see the art galleries. I encountered land art, conceptual art, *arte povera*, performance art.” As she adds, she even became acquainted with the artists who particularly interested her and became inspired to develop her own work.

The beginning of the 1970s is a moment of the rise of site-specific tendencies, which were embedded in the practices from the preceding decade. In their art history overview, Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh suggest that: “(...) in its stripping away of surface incident, in its proclivity for industrial building materials (steel in the case of Richard Serra, sheet rock in the case of Michael Asher, plywood in the case of Bruce Nauman), and its love of simple, geometric shapes, even if these were now the shapes of spaces rather than objects, site-specific work was clearly extending some of minimalism’s principles.”¹⁹ While site-specific art draw from the aesthetics of

minimalism it also ensued from the institutional critique associated with dematerialisation of the art object and questioning of social conventions. Besides minimalism, it was inspired by other practices of the time such as installation art, happenings, performance, land-art. While many artists (e.g. Richard Serra, Michael Asher) were making material and conceptual insertions into the enclosed (gallery) spaces, some others (like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer) had surpassed dealing with locatable objects by working on the architectural sites and in the landscapes.

The change at the beginning of the 1970s was hence remarkable: it opened up a field of visual art that in the previous decade had been dominated by minimalism; different kinds of materials were included; new actions were recognised as artistic practices; engagement with architectural or natural sites gained popularity. The main premise behind the projects was a desire to desert the established institutions and re-site works in different spaces. The stakes varied: from opposing the exclusive nature of the art market to expanding the possibilities of practices in some unusual locations and focus a new light on it and the objects/people found within. Hence, such practices frequently tackled the above-mentioned division between “art” and “non-art.” The temporal intervention into the local spacetime—usually accompanied by leaving a mark in it or taking something away—became a rupture in the continuum of its existence. By interfering with the history of certain spaces, the site-specific event becomes a turning point of its unfolding story. Derrida equals the occurrence of the event with the moment of the invention: “(...) the singular structure of the event allows the coming of what is new in a ‘first time ever’.”²⁰ However, the act itself must be supported by the social institution: “(...) [the event] will only receive its status of invention, furthermore, to the extent that this socialisation of the invented thing is protected by a system of conventions that will at the same time ensure its inscription in a common history, its belonging to a culture.”²¹ In the following paragraphs, I will look at von Windheim’s work as inspired by the aforementioned practices additionally marking the uniqueness of her work.

Framing part 2: Performing and Documenting

The only spectators present during the creation of *Strappo ad Asolo* were Conz himself and Mario Parolin, a photographer he worked with who accompanied von Windheim during the process.²² Some regard the presence of the audience as a compulsory element of a performative event however, it may be proposed that certain practices could be regarded as performative even in the absence of the viewers. As noted, the site-specific projects from the 1960s and 1970s were strongly linked to performative practices, many of which aimed at altering the understanding of the artist’s agency and opening up the notion of an artwork to the new kind of practices. Additionally, the site-specific art of this time managed to shape its own and quite particular kind of performativity. Nick Kaye notices that European sculpture and American post-minimal art of the late 1960s achieved the testing of the conventional distinctions between the work and its location mostly by “mapping the complexity of knowing the site” and “addressing the logic of materials.” As he writes:

in identifying the “logic of materials” with processes of transformation, in deploying materials as catalysts for change, or defining the artwork as a point of intersection between processes, these practices frequently aligned the nature and affect of materials with notions of event and performance, challenging the material integrity of the object and the stability of place and location. Here, not only is site-specificity defined in exchanges between visual art and performance, and between materials and events, but, in the wake of minimalism and land art, the body also became a key aspect of the terms through which the site and the site-specific work were elaborated.²³

In this way, not only the act of interfering with the site is performative, but the subsequently produced object acquires its own performativity: as a residue or index of the event to which it refers and maps the agencies, temporalities, and localities associated with it. As Kaye concludes, “(...) the relationship between the object and its context reaches, through sculpture, toward performance, (...) materials and objects, in implying or precipitating events, assert a relationship with their material, spatial or environmental contexts.”²⁴

Moreover, the fact of the intentional, specifically-schemed documentation marks the performativity of the event. Von Windheim was very much aware that by setting a specific framework for the documentation, she informs us of the character of the process. The artist, therefore, decided to register the process of removing the plaster from the pillar with a camera, properly positioning it on a tripod and framing became an inherent element of the event. She then scrupulously documented the process by taking photos of the subsequent stages of work. These are contained in a book that was later published by Conz. In the archive, there are several copies of *Strappo ad Asolo - Convento di S. Luigi - giugno 1973* which was published the same year in 500 copies. It consists solely of von Windheim's photographs and the article by Dietrich Helms where he writes:

The eleven photos that document the work process as it progresses are taken from the same point of view. In the centre of each one can see the pillar from which the surface of plaster is removed. We can recognise that the surface of the pillar is first covered with a fabric, and then (...) the plaster peels off. The process, when confronted with our ideas of artistic creation, seems extremely succinct. A simple technical procedure without any mystery, an act that requires skills and experience, but not necessarily any intuitiveness nor spontaneity of artistic act.²⁵

The series of photographs documents the process in the absence of the artist (as she is the one taking shots) which creates a unique aura: the site and the architectural object become the central subjects of the event. Her agency is withdrawn from sight, so the attention is focused on the space and materiality of the building. As a consequence, as Helms notices, in the photographs “which disregard the person and focus on the matter, a reversal occurs: the thing becomes an agent. (...) The attitude to the subject seems to be dictated by the object itself. (...) All the visual decisions of the photographer become inconspicuous, serve the clarity of the matter. (...) the artist withdraws behind the thing. She thereby helps it to be noticed as meaningful.”²⁶ When commenting on her work, the artist repeatedly claims that her withdrawal from the scene of the event not only positioned the matter in the centre of the aesthetic experience, but also allowed it to express her presence. Von Windheim found herself in the meaningful materiality of her pieces: in the sites she was working at and in the material objects produced in the process. This also is a characteristic feature of the art of this time and a marker of its performative character, independent of the time-space of creation and the presence of the audience. As Kaye underlines,

in this focus upon material properties, the site-specific work occurs as interventions into unfolding complexes of inter-related (...) processes, which have implications for the material, space, time and ‘body’ of the work. Here, the ‘anthropological dimension’ of site-specific sculpture is realised not simply in forms, but in the performance of the site itself: in interventions into the energy, actions and processes which materials precipitate and in those processes and exchanges which express material affinities between the body, the object and the environment it defines and is defined by.²⁷

While discussing the modernist concept of “the death of the author” in the context of visual art of the 1970s, Owens emphasizes that



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3 Photographs done by Mario Parolin as part of the documentation curated by Francesco Conz, Asolo, 1973. Currently in the Archivio Conz, Berlin

4 Dorothee von Windheim, *Strappo ad Asolo*, 1973, photo by Giorgia Palmisano, courtesy of Archivio Conz, Berlin, 2018

the actual withdrawal of ego from the art piece was possible only in the feminist practices of the time. In his article “From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After ‘The Death of the Author?’” from 1985, he writes, “the privileges reserved for the author in our society are distinctly masculine prerogatives; the relation of an artist to his work is that of a father to his children. To produce an illegitimate work, one which lacks the inscription of the Father (the Law), can be a distinctly feminist gesture; and it is not surprising that Sherman's and Levine's works lack the melancholy with which Richter and especially Paolini register the disappearance of the figure of the author.”²⁸ Von Windheim might have not explicitly defined her work as feminist but, as Owens notes, wishing to fully withdraw oneself from the material of the artwork, and trusting that the dispersed self will be sustained within it, is feminist as an ontological possibility of action. The artist's desire to question the authorship by the withdrawal of the self and disappearance from the work becomes even more manifest when observed through the process of documentation and disagreement she had with Conz during the production of *Strappo ad Asolo*.

Francesco Conz believed that issuing paper publications would enable sharing the experience of the artistic process and aesthetic experience with those who were unable to participate in it. As Wayne Baerwaldt comments, “regardless of the terms in the working relationship between artist and producer, [he was] more actively concerned with reactivating the original creative impulses of the artist, by whatever means possible.”²⁹ In this particular case, Conz fulfilled the artist's will: the publication following the *Strappo ad Asolo* employs the photographic documentation that the artist created, as von Windheim wished it to do. However, photographs taken by the artist herself were not the only ones made during the process. As noted, Conz invited another photographer to accompany the process. The artist mentions that she “had a rather big quarrel with Conz and his photographer, Mario Parolin. I did not want to accept photos with *interesting* frames nor did I want the pictures with me as a performer. The art piece, namely the pillar had the main or even the only role to play. That is why

I did the photographic documentation (defiantly) myself.” As a result, the Conz Archive contains two portfolios with large-format photographs and one with many additional small prints all done by Mario Parolin. Despite von Windheim initially being quite reluctant to document the practice in such a way, later on she used this material when presenting her work on exhibitions and in publications. It may be argued that the existence of this series of photographs disrupts the coherence of the *Strappo ad Asolo* because withdrawing her own presence was one of the artist's main premises. On the other hand, by adding a different perspective to the documentation, it widens our understanding of the activities undertaken in the project. Paradoxically, the mere coexistence of the photographs that give such different perspectives on the same project exposes von Windheim's aim: when comparing two perspectives and seeing what she did and did not intend to do, we clearly understand her decisions as serving her intentions.

Object—index—photograph

In the second part of her article from 1977: *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America*, Rosalind Krauss describes how in the 1970s photography became the operative model for abstraction in art. She introduces a specific understanding of the notion of the index: “as distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents.”³⁰ Namely, indexes are marks and traces of particular causes, where the cause is the thing to which they refer. In the realm of artistic practices, the concept of index traditionally refers to photography: the natural world's order imprints itself on the photographic print. Krauss expands the scope of indexical practices within contemporary art, indicating abstract artists who often seek to employ the same quality to what she calls *uncoded events*. She introduces several examples of two-dimensional installation pieces³¹ exploiting the conditions of architectural sites. These practices reduce the abstract pictorial object (painting, sculpture) to the status of impressions or traces.

Hence, the work of art is no longer detached from its surroundings (or it is underlined that it never really was detached). The projects of the early 1970s exposed that dependence on the existential presence of the external world and conditions surrounding their becoming. On the one hand, von Windheim's project mirrors some of the practices of the time. On the other, it could be regarded as unique for this kind of practice as it was not directly connected to the institutional critique, and aesthetically had little to do with the most popular examples of minimalism and the context of her practice was quite different from that of the American artists. Firstly, I would like to compare her work with other examples of site-specific architectural projects of the time. Secondly, I will point towards the uniqueness of von Windheim's work. I would propose a comparison with Lawrence Weiner's *Square Removal* from 1968 as it was also about stripping plaster off the wall and transforming it into the pictorial space. In the case of *Square Removal* what became the painting was the negative, namely the lack of plaster. Other examples could be Michael Asher's project in the Toselli Gallery in Milan in 1973, where he requested the removal of all layers of white paint covering the walls and ceilings of the gallery or Gordon Matta-Clark's commodities made out of the site-specific actions and put in the gallery spaces as independent art objects (e.g. *Bronx Floor*, 1973; *Bingo*, 1974). Some other examples are introduced and extensively commented upon in Rosalind Krauss' article. Moreover, the *arte povera*'s aesthetic should be mentioned, because von Windheim's projects share some affinities with the movement. As Nick Kaye notes, the "account of *arte povera* touches not only upon sculpture, installation and notions of 'anti-form', but land art, conceptual art and performance, drawing on an eclectic range of post-minimal and process-based activities which, in various ways, erode or break down the constraints of the object form [Robert] Morris describes."³² Accordingly, in von Windheim's practice of this time, the use of certain features of minimalism and conceptual art in her on-site commitments is present, just like the fidelity to the rawness of the materials she worked with.

At this point, I would like to highlight the distinguishing features of the artist's practice. Von Windheim's art of this period was embedded in specific skills (related to the preservation of frescoes) and for a while, she was occupied with working solely as a craftswoman. She performed her artistic practices outside of any institutions, on sites and only afterward transported them into the galleries. What is more, she was engaged in the locality and history of the spaces that she worked within, giving close attention to the character of the materials and their legacy. The artist herself notes that she moved to Italy out of the interest in the Early Renaissance and Etruscan art. The uniqueness of the architecture was of great importance for von Windheim. As Christian von Holst mentions, "the simple forms of the architectural elements [she worked with] are purely Tuscan, late offshoots of the glorious architectural history. Such wall surfaces cannot be found anywhere else, not north of the Alps, not even north of the Apennines."³³ However, by using the means of the fresco preservation process she started preserving surfaces that were not artistically valuable: ordinary pieces of walls or pillars in the case of *Strappo ad Asolo*. She was preserving something unimportant or even devoid of value and transferring it into the realm of the pictorial space of painting, a process that had gained recognition in the institutions only few years before (mainly thanks to famous Germano Celant's *Arte Povera* exhibition from 1967).³⁴

In *Strappo ad Asolo*, what is brought to our attention is the decay of the materials, shapes, and colours. Especially that what was subject of the preservation process was already wretched and old.³⁵ The decay becomes hence part of the aesthetic process and the very topic of the piece. As von Windheim stresses, she "was concerned with the materiality, the surface, and texture of the walls surrounding us and in enclosing them within pictorial pieces, detaching them from their original context. She interrupted the process of decay, until then, paying close attention to the signs of our everyday history buried in the stonework, which always accompanied the great history—or even made it up."³⁶ By bringing our attention to the subtle, ongoing presence of the

natural processes within the spaces annexed and modified by man, the artist opens up possible understandings of the passage of time. As Jens Christian Jensen notices, “what we encounter is the transferring an element of human everyday life into a picture: in this process something transient becomes a sign of permanence. (...) The artists shows us wall surfaces the temporalities of which do not coincide with our human sense of time; they come from further afield, they are older than us and will outlive us. She relativizes our concept of transience.”³⁷

When writing about the approach to her practice in Asolo, von Windheim notes: “Now I am particularly interested in the process of moulting and subsequent transplantation. Once the static becomes portable and thus available, the real is transported into the realm of the sign.”³⁸ Dealing with the roll of more than 1.7 meters in length we are confronted with a particular sign, embedded in its materiality and yet a silent one, not revealing its full history. One must look into the documentation of the process to get a grip of its meaning, but even then the work does not reveal the whole meaning. The object-index remains uncanny, somehow independent of its history. Krauss could be quoted once again, as her writing strongly corresponds to the artist's intentions: “The painting as a whole functions to point to the natural continuum, the way the word ‘this’ accompanied by a pointing gesture isolates a piece of the real world and fills itself with a meaning by becoming, for that moment, the transitory label of a natural event. Painting is not taken to be a signified to which individual paintings might meaningfully refer (...). Paintings are understood, instead, as shifters, empty signs (like the word this) that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent, or object.”³⁹

In *Strappo ad Asolo*, a piece of rolled plaster becomes the index of the pillar's surface and at the same time of the building and site as such. Series of photographs could be regarded as the index of the event. Interestingly, this archival content—documentation and the object—preserves the action of preservation. As Jens Christian Jensen writes commenting on Dorothee

von Windheim's practice, “she turns the process of the restoration upside down. She does not save from the decay but demonstrates the process of preserving. She does not preserve artworks, but by preserving she creates them. The detached surface of a wall becomes a painting and receives a new quality.”⁴⁰ In this way, von Windheim's practice corresponds with the post-structuralist critique of the stability of the sign: the piece of building taken outside of the original context, so the stolen surface of the wall refers to the primal site of its existence and at the same time fails to make this reference full and clear. The additional action of rolling the surface and locking it with the seals permanently alters the shape of the surface and hinders us from accessing its full appearance. In Tschumi's words, “the project takes issue with a particular premise of architecture, namely, its obsession with presence, with the idea of a meaning immanent in architectural structures and forms which directs its signifying capacity.”⁴¹ Another important feature of von Windheim's practice is persistence in translating the three-dimensional entities into the pictorial spaces of the wall-pieces. *Strappo ad Asolo* is not, however, a flat object, but is still taking a stance in the discussion on a topic of the possibility of representation. It could be argued that von Windheim's project refers to minimalism or poor art as it does not aim in adding any new ideas or objects to the world but rather discovers what is already out there. However, this stance seems all too naive. By being stripped, the body of the pillar and space surrounding it is somehow altered and doubled: the plaster is taken away and put aside, transported to some other space where it recreates the aesthetic experience (or fails to recreate it and creates a new one). The pillar remains at its site but the negative space of what was taken away is added. The intrusive act of the artist reveals how human agency may interfere with architectural sites and disrupt the process of decay. Notably, all artistic projects done by von Windheim in Italy (apart from *Strappo ad Asolo*) were in a way illegal: “all the other wall pieces I did on my own accord and most of them without permission. I was not aware (or better: I did not want to be aware) that, in fact, I damaged and stole.” In this

context, the artist recalled an idiomatic Italian phrase “fare uno strappo alla regola” which could be translated into English as “to tear the rule apart” or “to make an exception to the rule” which corresponds both with the *strappo* technique and the *raison d'être* of some of her projects.

What has the archive ensured?

As noted, the process of documentation was an inherent part of von Windheim’s practice and the dynamics between documenting and performing were directly affecting the site where she worked. Due to that, the obvious distribution of the presence—the site being present to the performance and absent from the documentation—is disrupted. When we encounter the art piece in the archive where it is stored or in the gallery space where it may be exhibited, we find ourselves in the place of mapping: the event (performance), the place (site), and the time (past). These are all remote but somehow present, and come together within the aesthetic experience. It is not mere representation because this mapping is performative itself: it invites the viewers to evoke the exchanges between the site and the agents from the piece and documentation. As Kaye writes, “just as site-specificity arises in a blurring of the opposition between a work and its contexts, so, where documentation is a tactic of the site-specific work, the distinctions between documentation and notation, between that which is remembered and anticipated, recorded and produced may come under question.”⁴² In the case of *Strappo ad Asolo*, as intended by the artist, the rolled piece of wall carries the secret which is untouchable and ever unattainable. Yet by the means of documentation, it awakens the imagination and achieves the mapping of the remote sites, moments, and agencies.

While further commenting site-specific art, Krauss notes that “The ambition of the works is to capture the presence of the building, to find strategies to force it to surface into the field of the work. Yet even as that presence surfaces, it fills the work with an extraordinary sense of time-past. (...) Like traces, the works (...) represents

the building through the paradox of being physically present but temporally remote. (...) The procedure of excavation succeeds therefore in bringing the building into the consciousness of the viewer in the form of a ghost.”⁴³ This specific aura of which Krauss writes is most certainly present in von Windheim’s project. She managed to transport something inevitably material and real—a piece of an architectural site, the plaster of the pillar of the existing convent—into the realm of an indexical sign. Her documentation practice, although faithful to the process and meticulous, supports this uncanny aura. Even the additional photographic documentation provided by Conz—however revealing—does not eliminate this aura. When discussing the topic of the authenticity in a context of reproducibility, documentation, and publication in the 1970s, Baerwaldt notices that “(...) the idea of informing a work is intrinsic to its importance, not the material form of the idea or even the general condition of that art over time. Its support surface (cloth, wood, ceramics, etc.) was and is often as ephemeral and temporal as the brown wrapping paper on which actions and performances were sketched and later delivered on stage (...).”⁴⁴ In my understanding, *Strappo ad Asolo* is an example of how the specifically informed and documented project fuses the characteristics of the material and non-material means of practice and creates an aesthetic experience which outlasts the event and the moment of creation.

In the context of the Conz Archive, *Strappo ad Asolo* is not a typical project since it focuses mainly on Fluxus, Concrete Poetry, Actionism, and Lettrism. It could be argued of course, that Fluxus as an artistic movement focussed on various practices, ranging from happenings, performances, scored events (and scores themselves), objects, and paintings. After 1973, Conz and von Windheim did not cooperate with each other ever again. Regardless of that, I believe that *Strappo ad Asolo* was an important project both for the artist and for the curator. At the time they were both at the turning points of their careers. As noted, Conz was still before his remarkable trip to the United States and not yet convinced what kind of artistic practices he should

engage with. It was thus one of the pioneer projects that helped to set the framework of the subsequent production and documentation practices and multiple editions that he published. Moreover, it could be argued that *Strappo ad Asolo* was the only project, or one of very few projects, fully curated by him.⁴⁵ Von Windheim's piece reveals that Conz was initially interested in unpredictable and possibly completely unprofitable projects and invested in documenting what he found valuable on different merits. When we look at his subsequent collaborations, especially those site-specific ones that happened frequently in Asolo, they resemble the work he did with the young German artist at the beginning of the 1970s. The site-specific performances done in subsequent years by Conz's favourite artists (e.g. Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Al Hansen or Geoffrey Hendrick) were documented in a similar manner: the vast photographic documentation was accompanied by carefully composed publications, usually published in a few hundred copies, often with the signatures of the artists.

As for the artist herself, *Strappo ad Asolo* both assimilated her various interests and engagements of that time and set the direction of her career for the years to come. Ten years later, in 1983, while visiting all her working sites, von Windheim returned to Italy and additionally published a diary from her journey. She revisited locations and reflected on some of her projects done in the 1970s. As she notes, "the Asolo Project was the one and only commission in those early years in Italy, and thus worked as stimulation, support and encouragement for my subsequent works." In 1975, von Windheim—with three other artists—became a laureate of the Villa Romana Art prize which was dedicated to young, experienced but not institutionalised artists. The outcome of the period of residence in Florence was an exhibition at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart at the turn of 1975 and 1976. As Christian von Holst underlines, the exhibition was very coherent as all the exhibited works had "(...) one thing in common: they do not overwhelm the observer, they do not penetrate him by means of immediately communicating effects, by strong colours or astounding forms. Silence characterises all of them as well, and

certain restraint, the richness of nuances in the seemingly the simplest statements (...)." ⁴⁶ The author dedicates separate remarks to each artist, and he comments at length on von Windheim's works. At this time, two years after working on *Strappo ad Asolo*, her practice had become firmly established, she became more aware of the means and ends of her work. In the catalogue, we can see six artworks from the years 1974-1975 that are similar to what she did in cooperation with Conz. The year 1977 marked an important moment in her career: she took part in documenta 6 where she exhibited an eight-element pillar setup and a three-element balcony balustrade. As Volker Rattemeyer's comments, "the plaster surfaces, removed from the wall and fixed on gauze, were placed so quietly and unpretentiously on the sides of the Fridericianum that I would only become aware of them after several visits to the Kassel exhibition. At first, I encountered them rather incidentally and after, in the course of the documenta, ever more consciously."⁴⁷ In 1979, von Windheim had the first solo exhibition in the Kunsthalle in Kiel which consisted of one cycle of works (*Persiane I – III* with photographic documentation). In the following years her career was directed towards site-specific projects with the use of different techniques and materials which resemble the practice carried out in Asolo in 1973.

This all is obviously hidden from the eyes of the beholder who happens to look at this inconspicuous, monochromatic roll of plaster. According to the intentions of the author, the object speaks very little, at the same time arouses curiosity, inviting to study its story. I remember that when I saw *Strappo ad Asolo* for the first time, I immediately felt the urge to unroll the cloth and get a look at what is inside, to capture the meaning preserved on the surface of the pictorial space—not knowing of course, whether there was anything to look at. Exploring the documentation raises a similar wish: to set in motion what is now immobilised on photographs and descriptions. In both cases, however, there is "nothing" inside: both the artwork and documentation are merely material signs with no external references; like so many other entities they are what they are and nothing more.

Notes

- ¹ Henry Martin, "Asolo and Afterwards: A Voyage through Archive Conz," in *Fluxus: una storia veneta* (Bassano del Grappa, Colognola ai Colli: Museo Biblioteca Archivio, Adriano Parise, 1995).
- ² Anne Kirker, *An introduction in Francesco Conz. Intermedia and the Avant-garde*, eds. Anne Kirker, Nicholas Zurbrugg (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1997), 7.
- ³ Francesco Conz, "A Fluxographic Autobiography," in *Fluxus! An Exhibition of Textile-Art Multiples*, eds. Nicholas Zurbrugg, Nicholas Tsoutas (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1990), 5-6.
- ⁴ Conz was becoming interested in the Viennese Actionism at the time, hence he decided to invite Hermann Nitsch to Asolo. The project was exemplary for what artist was engaged at the time and did not particularly correspond with the location. As Nitsch commented years later in his notes, "in 1973, i was invited by francesco conz to create a space in asolo. i installed a sacred room in order to give an overview of the o. m. theatre project. itried to show all the important elements of my work: action painting, relics and photographic documentation of actions. (...) in 1980, the room was dismantled because conz moved from asolo to verona." See: Hermann Nitsch, *Atlas* (Napoli: Viaindustriae Publishing, 2017), 95.
- ⁵ Patrizio Peterlini, *Introduction in Winterreise From Asolo to New York and Vice Versa 1974* (Verona: Archive F. Conz, 2007), 18.
- ⁶ The trip, which Conz took with Günter Brus, Beate and Hermann Nitsch, was quite important both for the artists and the collector and is described in detail in a separate publication from 2007. See: Peterlini, *Winterreise From Asolo to New York and Vice Versa 1974*.
- ⁷ Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Francesco Conz & the art of re-making art history," in *Francesco Conz. Intermedia and the Avant-garde*, eds. Anne Kirker, Nicholas Zurbrugg (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1997), 14.
- ⁸ See: Dorothee von Windheim, "Beruf: Malerin. Referat im Rahmen de Symposions »Paragone 2000 - Ende der Malerei«,," in *Dorothee von Windheim. Ausstellungskatalog, Ausstellung im Museum Wiesbaden* (10. Sept. - 19. Nov. 1989), ed. Volker Rattemeyer (Wiesbaden: Wiesbaden Museum, 1989), 10-14.
- ⁹ Although she *buried* her last painted picture in 1971, she stresses: "When asked of my occupation, I say: a painter. I am a painter. Whether I work with the scalpel or a camera or a needle, what comes out of it has something to do with painting. (...) Above all, I understand painting in terms of quality. Painting as a quality is a term for certain coloured events. (...) [It] is designing surfaces with colours—in opposition to the three-dimensional art such as architecture or sculpture on the one hand and uncoloured drawing or graphics on the other." See: Windheim, "Beruf: Malerin. Referat im Rahmen de Symposions »Paragone 2000 - Ende der Malerei«,," in *Dorothee von Windheim. Ausstellungskatalog, Ausstellung im Museum Wiesbaden*, 10-14.
- ¹⁰ See: Dorothee von Windheim, *Who am I? The supplement to the catalogue of the Dorothee von Windheim exhibition in the Museum Wiesbaden, Sept 10 to Nov 19, 1989* (Wiesbaden: Wiesbaden Museum, 1989).
- ¹¹ *Strappo* is one of the Italian conservations techniques, literally meaning "tearing", lifting off the paint layer, attached to a facing with an adhesive. In each case the resulting material must be applied to a new support in order to be restored.
- ¹² Unless stated otherwise, all Dorothee von Windheim's statements come from our correspondence (between Dec 16, 2018 and Jan 26, 2020).
- ¹³ As the artist mentions, Conz had even a plan of inviting her for a show in the exhibition space in Venice and although the date was settled, the exhibition never took place.
- ¹⁴ This art work was a part of the Christel und Klaus Maas' collection in Moers, which does not exist anymore and has been divided between them. The artist herself does not know where the artwork is currently located.
- ¹⁵ Craig Owens, *From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 126.
- ¹⁶ See: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Kant regards the notion of frame both in the Introduction and in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*.
- ¹⁷ See: Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- ¹⁸ Owens, *From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?*, 126.
- ¹⁹ *Art since 1900, modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, eds. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 540.
- ²⁰ Derrida, *Psyche. Invention of the Other, Volume I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 5.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*, 6.
- ²² In his remarks on projects done in Asolo, Henry Martin notes that while many of them were highly public, as the artists committed to interact with the day-to-day life of the city and its sites, others were quite private or done exclusively for the camera (e.g. Al Hansen's *Running Event* from 1974 or Geoffrey Hendrick's *Between Two Points* from 1974). See: Henry Martin, "Asolo and Afterwards: A Voyage through Archive Conz," in *Fluxus: una storia veneta* (Verona: Parise Editions, 1995).
- ²³ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 139.
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*, 142.
- ²⁵ Dietrich Helms, *Über die Widerspiegelung des Künstlers in den Sachen in Strappo ad Asolo* (Asolo: Pari & Dispari, 1974).

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*, 149.

²⁸ Owens, *From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?*, 125.

²⁹ Wayne Baerwaldt, *On reading authenticity, Fluxus & the multiple of Editions Conz in Francesco Conz. Intermedia and the Avant-garde*, ed. Anne Kirker, Nicholas Zurbrugg (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1997), 20.

³⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on Index. Seventies Art in America. Part 1," *October*, vol. 3 (Spring, 1977): 70.

³¹ She refers to Gordon Matta-Clark's *Doors, Floors, Doors* from 1976, Michelle Stuart's *East/West Wall Memory Relocated* from 1976, and Lucio Pozzi's *P.S.1 Paint* from 1976.

³² Kaye, *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*, 141-142.

³³ Christian von Holst, *Katalog für die Ausstellung Kinast-Klotzer-Schuler-v.Windheim. Kunstpreis Villa Romana Florenz* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1975), 8-9.

³⁴ It could also be aligned with the longer tradition of the ready-mades which were also non-art objects—but still products of human labour and of everyday use—transfigured into art pieces. However, the most famous ready-mades of the time differed aesthetically from what von Windheim produced.

³⁵ The convent was erected in the early 17th century. Interestingly enough, when artist visited the site ten years after *Strappo ad Asolo* was produced, the convent was under renovation and she had problems getting permission to enter the space. See: Dorothee von Windheim, *A Ten Years' Afterplay. Florence 1983/Köln 1984* (Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 1986).

³⁶ von Windheim, *Who am I?*

³⁷ Jens Christian Jensen, *Über die Arbeiten von Dorothee von Windheim in Dorothee von Windheim. Katalog der Kunsthalle zu Kiel und Schleswig-Holstein* (3.10. - 14.11.1979), ed. Ulrich Bischoff (Kiel: Kunstverein Kiel, 1970), 5-8.

³⁸ von Windheim, *Who am I?*

³⁹ Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2," 64.

⁴⁰ Jensen, *Über die Arbeiten von Dorothee von Windheim*, 5-8.

⁴¹ Bernard Tschumi, *Cinegram Folie Le Parc De La Villette* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), cited after: Kaye, *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*, 42.

⁴² Kaye, *Site-Specific Art. Performance, Place and Documentation*, 218.

⁴³ Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2," 65.

⁴⁴ Wayne Baerwaldt, "On reading authenticity, Fluxus & the multiple of Editions Conz," in *Francesco Conz. Intermedia and the Avant-garde*, 20.

⁴⁵ This was suggested during a conversation with Stefania Palumbo who is currently one of the directors of the archive and Gigliotto Del Vecchio in the fall of 2018.

⁴⁶ von Holst, *Katalog für die Ausstellung Kinast-Klotzer-Schuler-v.Windheim. Kunstpreis Villa Romana Florenz*, 6.

⁴⁷ Volker Rattemeyer, "Finderin und Seherin. Zur Malerei von Dorothee von Windheim," in *Dorothee von Windheim. Ausstellungskatalog, Ausstellung im Museum Wiesbaden* (10. Sept. - 19. Nov. 1989), 6-7.

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