

After 'The Death of the Author'. On Re-installing Anna Oppermann's Processual and Open Ensembles

Ute Vorkoeper, «inside installations», S.M.A.K. Gent, 10/12/2006

Preface



Being Different (Why is she so different), left: Biennial in Venice 1979; right: Serpentine Gallery, London 1981

Anna Oppermann's ensembles are overwhelming. They are crowded full of information, full of objects, drawings, photographs, texts and images of objects, drawings, photographs and texts that are spread into the exhibition space. Already at the first glance at these two versions of the Ensemble "Being different (Why is she so different)" it becomes obvious that here everything we know about documentation, preservation and representation is turned upside down. On the left side you see the installation at the Biennial in Venice 1979, on the right side the installation at the Serpentine Gallery in London, 1981.

Anna Oppermann died long before discussions like "Inside installations" started. 1993. We were left without any instructions. Anyway, studying her ensembles we can exemplify most of the problems of preservation and representation that arise by installation art. Looking at the efforts and experiences in re-installing the work after the Anna's early death in 1993 might give us as well some new impulses concerning a future dealing with installative works and estates. Although there stay of course some central demands for classical preservation our re-installative work of the past decade will lead a bit apart from what was discussed earlier in this symposium. By reporting on the experiences I will change the focus and question the traditional notions of objectivity, truth and authenticity that still seem to dominate the conservation discourse of re-installations. I would like to shift the attention from these concepts to the field of interpretation, interactivity and ongoing processes.

First I will introduce you very briefly to the artist and line out her working process in terms of her so called method. Second I will discuss briefly her modes of undermining the modern concept or function of the author as well as the conditions of the modern museum. Third I will report about some re-installations of Ensembles which show the interpreting mode in that we try to *keep* the work as well visible and alive. And at last I will try to resume the possibilities and problems of this kind of "living preservation".

Introduction to the Art of Ensemble

Anna Oppermann was born in 1940 in northern Germany and she died much too early in 1993. She studied at the Hamburg College of Fine Arts and lived in Hamburg. For many years she taught at the University of Wuppertal and later at the University of Arts in Berlin.

Although her work was shown during her lifetime in important international exhibitions - twice at the documenta, at the Venice and Sydney Biennials - she is not as internationally known as she should. Unlike the work of 1990's European artists who definitely work for an international audience, Anna Oppermann worked excessively with texts written in German. However, when she was asked to show her work abroad, she incorporated Italian texts in Italy, English texts in Great Britain, and French texts in France. Or she added translations.

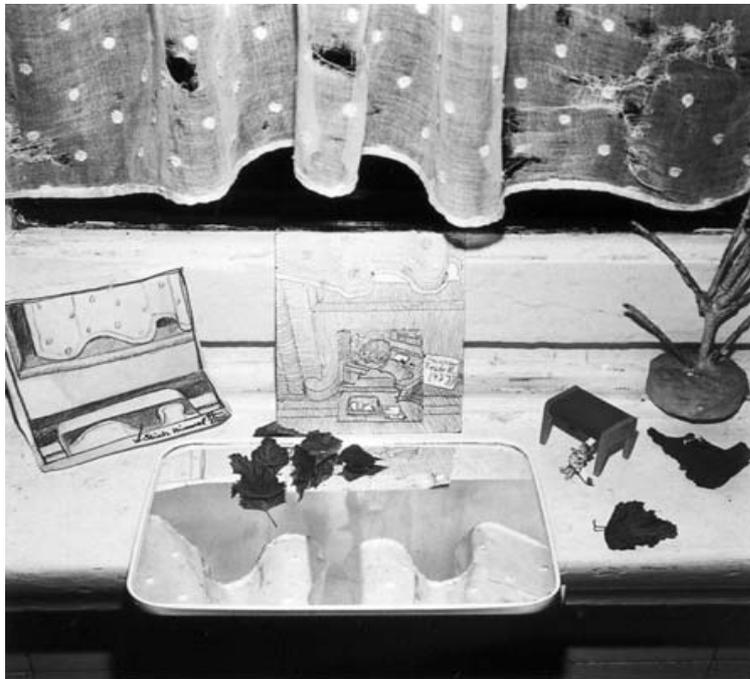
Oppermann's ensembles evolved from the deeply perceived dilemma of mediation. I mean by that: Her consciousness of the impossibility of mediation without error, fault or loss. The beginning of an ensemble is already marked by two assumptions: Firstly, the knowledge that no finished work of art can ever transmit the artist's intention immediately and completely. Secondly, the experience that she could not decide – I quote Anna Oppermann –

"what was more important or more true to the artistic statement: the real object, the sketch, the intellectual argument or the completed picture. Each part had something that the other would lack."

What seems at first like a resigned acceptance, became the fuel for prolific, passionate and joyful works of art. It was exactly the acceptance of this lack of immediacy and the inevitability of every transmission being faulty that allowed to open up traditional meanings, gender stereotypes and clichés.

Ensembles are visible processes of an ongoing mediation. They evolved during long periods of time - some of them developed for more than twenty years. Thus, an ensemble is just the opposite of a finite, complete and original art work. It is outlined once by growth and change, once by preserving its own development in time and space as visible parts within its growing and changing corpus. That means: the ensembles embody views and perspectives of nearly all stages during their development.

Let us look briefly at the working process which Anna Oppermann reflected again and again in texts and diagrams. She explained a certain "method" that structured the process. Each work began with a small still life - consisting of a found object, first sketches, some plant leaves arranged in a corner or on some table (or windowsill). This very first ensemble circumscribes always a problem or experience which the artist was confronted with in a poetic, at times quite literal way.



Mirror Ensemble, left: working state, Hamburg 1968; right: Paula Modersohn-Becker-Haus, Bremen 1978

The image shows the beginning of the "Spiegelensemble", that is the Mirror Ensemble which Anna Oppermann began in 1968 (sometimes dated 1965). The image on top of the left side shows a small and quite orderly situation on a windowsill. We see a curtain, a mirror, some drawings and dry birch tree leaves. The themes of the ensemble are – to cite Anna Oppermann in a catalogue of her work in

1984: mirror, mirroring, Narcissus, narcissism, fool, ego deficiency, role models, society, giant, dwarf.¹

This initial still life was "scanned" by the artist in diverse ways through further drawings, photographs, and textual descriptions. And these "scans" of the initial situation would become part of it, expanding the ensemble.

Following psychoanalytical schemes of the creative process, Oppermann distinguished two phases within her working process: a primary and a secondary one. While the primary process could be characterized as one of approximation to the objects, of getting really close to them. The secondary process is defined by distance: She would enter "related systems" - such as philosophy, sociology, psychology and literature - looking for corresponding or striking information. During this phase she would also make "combining" photographs, i.e. views taken from a greater distance. This second phase involves as well spatial considerations, the building of models or the creation of special architectures for the display. The colored photo canvasses which mostly determine Anna Oppermann's work are the outcome of this second phase.

On the image on the right side we see a much more complex state of the mirror ensemble after its progression over 10 or 13 years. This image is from the Paula-Modersohn-Becker-House in Bremen, in 1978. (It is interesting to note that A.O. dated the beginning to 1965 and not 1968 as the catalogue states) The initial still life appears in quite a similar arrangement as a small, but nevertheless recognizable particle on the right side of the installation. (top right)

The Death of the Author

The ensembles' explosive and open form undermined the modern art museum's mode of presentation, to singularize and to expose. An ensemble bursts the white cube with an enormous amount of different views and modes of representation. All of them ask for different modes of reception such as: watching, reading, contemplating, reflecting - even, if allowed, touching, grasping. Ensembles irritate museum's discipline of perception. This tendency is to follow up to today's art works: Here the modes of undermining the museum's structure and of involving the viewer are maximized when the recipient is asked to enter the work and to directly deal with it.

The proximity, but moreover the translation between different media, between different codes and representation systems, as well as the transmission into changing spaces in differing inscriptions define the aesthetics of an ensemble. Even though they are built out of static materials, every part is moveable, transportable and changeable. On the other hand, as we saw, ensembles do also collect, keep and repeat information.

As Anna Oppermann's work undermined the museum's conditions of presentation and preservation during lifetime it does so even more since her death. While during her lifetime all her shifts of the role of the artist and the mode of representation could

¹ Anna Oppermann. Ensembles 1969 bis 1984. Hamburg-Brüssel, 1984, p. 34

easily be overseen by placing her as a person, the artist, the author, in the middle of her work, this construction broke apart with her death. When she died the person Oppermann as the one who gives sense, who is the substitute for the missing unity or totality of the Ensembles was gone too. For quite a lot of people her death therefore meant also the end of her work. They could not imagine someone else replacing the 'authentic' and unifying artist.



Anna Oppermann behind her hair in her Ensemble "Being different"

Anna always knew about this misinterpretation. She fought against all assumptions that her ensembles were mere subjective, private or even autistic utterances. Against people's attempts to place her in the center of her ensembles. Therefore she found a

striking image which marks her very different, ambivalent position: hidden behind her hair, sitting in the middle of her Ensemble Being different, she is simultaneously visible and invisible, responsible and not, blamable and not to blame. She is at the same time subjected by the mass of information – and still the main instance of decision, the person who finds, produces and decides what is displayed. Of course this ambiguous and dialogical view undermines the modern concept of the artist / author who is sovereign and produces original new works.

By wrongly assuming the person Oppermann as the motif and aim of all ensembles one must misinterpret each ensemble as a self-image, well, a split or spread one but a self-representation. In this case one will oversee what the ensembles really are: Each one shows a discourse unfolded in time and space about a certain theme or thematic complex like love, relationship, narcissism and schizophrenia, outsiders, substitute problems, art making and selling, myth or pathos. All these visual discourses are of course not Oppermann's personal discourses. They are not subjective at all – well, I mean not-subjective in the common sense of the word. Oppermann's view and reading was always directed towards the world and the others – not against or into herself. The form of the ensemble reflects this ongoing dialogue with the others that easily could include everything and everyone who already thought, wrote or made comments about the actual theme. He/She got quoted and debated in the ensemble. This undergoes the modern function of the author in a quite radical sense.

Since any left work has always the same problem I would like to quote Michel Foucault from his famous essay "What is an author?" to make the shifts in Oppermann's work more visible.

"If somebody finds in a notebook full of aphorisms a reference, a hint to a date, or an address, or a laundry bill: work or not work? Why not? And so forth ad infinitum. How can we determine a work from the millions of traces that somebody leaves after his death? A theory for the body of work does not exist yet, and those who naively start to publish the work fail to notice such a theory, so their empirical work will bog very rapidly."

What a problem it must be when the life work and all of its distinct parts are non finite by definition, when they do not include exceptionally dates, addresses or laundry bills but do really often so as meaningful particles. Here the "unity of the work itself" which the theory was/is still searching for is shown as the impossible. What we see is a split and non finite form. Also, the classical modern author is undermined by a dialogically operating artist who collects, reflects and arranges instead of creating something radical new. Moreover, this different author named Oppermann kept her sources always visible.

Furthermore: As Michel Foucault – and in different but related form Roland Barthes - lined out years ago, that an end of the modern concept of the author leads to a new understanding of writing and reading as a collective but not a personal process, this collectivity is a very important motif of Anna Oppermann' process and form. It is the dialogue, the inclusion of others, at last the viewer as a collaborator in generating meaning and understanding.

Interpreting Re-Installation

From this point of view it might be understandable that I negate the claim that with Anna Oppermann's death her work is also finally done, ready, completed. I don't think this is the correct interpretation. I would argue that the development has been interrupted but will never end. The works are still open and - as before her death - they need to be continued.

Anna Oppermann's estate is not only the artistic material she left, but the request for handling it, dealing with it. The main task of preservation is to keep and to pass on the open form visible to the viewer. This suggests a quite unusual way of dealing with an art work after the death of the "author" - in the double sense which I tried to line out. Sometimes it implies not only rethinking, but also a re-inventing and re-processing of the work. The team immediately turns into participants, even collaborators of the work

Since 1993 there were fifteen new installations of ensembles worldwide. In nearly all cases I was in charge of the planning and realizing of the re-installation. As examples I will show briefly four of the presentations.



I start in the beginning, with the first re-installation after Anna Oppermann's death in 1993: It was the ensemble "Embraces, the Inexplicable and a Line of a Poem by R.M.R." - which you see here in the installation at Kunstverein Cologne in 1982. The ensemble was started in Florence, in 1977. Finally, it was bought by Lower Saxony for the Sprengel Museum in Hannover. Shortly before it was shown at the Kunstverein in Hannover in the following version:

The reinstallation took place in the summer of 1993, shortly after Anna's death. The opening was in August. Herbert Hossmann, the husband of Anna Oppermann, the Munich based art historian Karolina Breindl and I built the first team. We thought that we would more or less reconstruct the last version of the work in the Kunstverein of Hannover in 1989, after photographic documents. Soon it turned out that we had to be much more interpretative:

Embraces, the Inexplicable and a Line of a Poem by R.M.R. Kunstverein Cologne 1982



The ceiling height of the museum was twenty centimeters too low to reconstruct the arrangement of the canvasses. So we had to reconsider former situations and to make new decisions, since we wanted to integrate all the parts of the last version.

We also had problems with the installation of the small particles, the drawings, objects, photographs, newspaper cut outs, etc. As you can see it on this image, there was no real arrangement of this area during the last installation. Anna Oppermann did it in a very reduced way. But we had a quite large amount of parts to deal with. Also there was no helpful documentation of these parts in any of the former installations. We could only see parts and fragments. So we had to decipher, compare and sort out the particles first in order figure out connections and ramifications. Concerning the installation, we guided ourselves by the arrangements on the photo canvasses of the ensemble, and we also looked at the fragments shown on the documents of previous versions.

Embraces, the Inexplicable and a Line of a Poem by R.M.R., Kunstverein Hannover 1989



Embraces, the Inexplicable and a Line of a Poem by R.M.R., Sprengel Museum Hannover 1993

This was the result. We still thought too much in terms of reconstruction so that our reinstatement in the end was a bit too clean, too proper. Nevertheless, everybody was quite happy because nobody had thought before that reinstatement would work at all.



Paradoxical Intentions (to lie the blue down from the sky...), Städtische Galerie im Sophienhof Kiel, 1991

The image shows the ensemble "Paradoxical Intentions (to lie the blue down from the sky)". The title mixes up two German proverbs and is hardly to translate. It means at the same time lying like a trooper and to promise someone the moon.

"Paradoxical Intentions" is Oppermann's last huge work. We see it in its last installation made by the artist for the Städtische Galerie im Sophienhof in Kiel, in 1991. The ensemble was arranged in a quite narrow, but elongated white room with different ceiling heights. Anna Oppermann decided to built it as space within the space, that means one could walk around and look back through a window in the center of the whole complex.

When Anna Oppermann was still alive, the ensemble was packed and shipped to Australia for a new installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. When she died it took us one more year until we decided to go ahead with this installation.

We were confronted with a situation that was so completely opposite to the one in Kiel that we first thought we would never manage to do it. The space in Sydney was very low, so that we could not put more than two canvases on top of each other. To reconstruct the space -in -space situation would have gone beyond the capacity of this space. It would have become simply too small for all the material we had to reinstall. So I had the idea to use the specificity of the given room - in respect to the

way Anna Oppermann always used the specificity of a situation instead of simply redoing the last version of an Ensemble when it was necessary. Since the gallery room had a window right in the corner where one could look from the outside to the inside we decided to use the museum's walls as the room-in-room walls. The canvases were arranged on the walls and on the floor.



Paradoxical Intentions (to lie the blue down from the sky...), MCA Sydney 1994

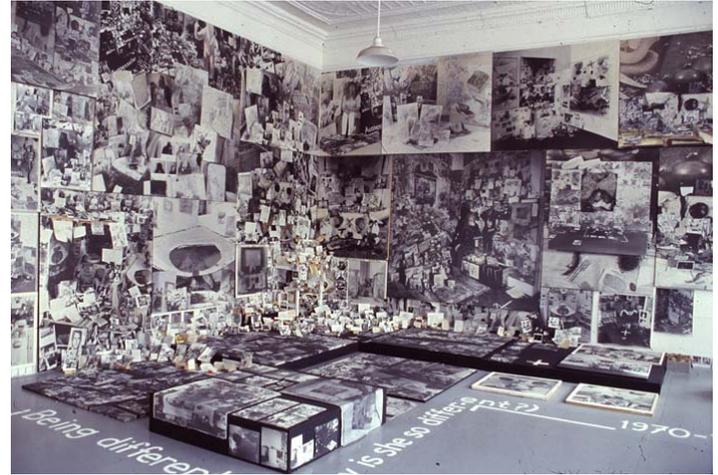
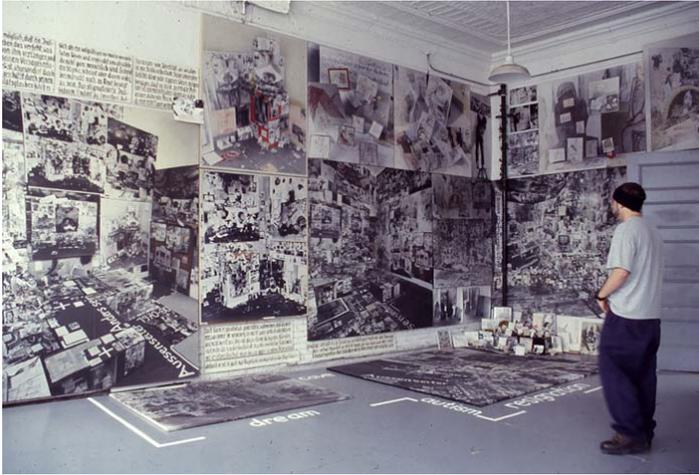
Even though the whole installation looked rather different we kept central ideas such as the kaleidoscopic all-over structure and the possibility of looking through from the front and from behind. And the language problem that I mentioned in the beginning was solved by a folder with translations of all important texts in the ensemble which Ines Lindner did.

A second reinstallation of the same ensemble was done in Celle five years later, in 1998. The given gothic architecture was certainly a challenge but in the end it worked out quite well. The space was quite large and wide so that we could rebuild the room-in-room situation from Kiel.

In Celle the center again was - like it was in Kiel - a bit shifted to the right. But the arrangement of the canvases and the small particles is also different - depending on the new space.



Paradoxical Intentions (to lie the blue down from the sky...), Aufbau Gotische Halle Celle 1998



Being Different (Why is she so different), P.S. 1 NY 1999: view of the left and the right side of the installation

In 1999 we showed the Ensemble "Being different" (which I started with) not only for the first time after Anna's death but since fourteen years at P.S. 1 in New York. Well, I started with studying images of former states where Anna Oppermann had to display it in very low or narrow spaces. Here, again, the spatial conditions differed very much. Furthermore I wanted to integrate all parts that we found in the Oppermann archive. So it became a complete room installation over three walls integrating the entrance door. On the image left side you see the left corner and on the right the right of the same room.

Since the ensemble had been presented in London there were English texts already integrated. Besides, I decided to provide the viewer with translations of all important texts which could be read on the canvases. A scheme of the installation was drawn and put on a low table along with a bench in front of the installation. The texts were marked by numbers - so one could take a seat while watching and reading through the ensemble.

Throughout the years the installations got better. The less we decided to redo the same but to rethink the former states and to communicate with the material in order to find new arrangements the more we worked out living installations.

Still you did only see results – like it was during Anna Oppermann's lifetime. The viewer stands in front of the installed ensemble watching the overwhelming result which must have been produced in a somehow overtaxing and mysterious artistic process. But there was and is no mystery behind it.

Reinstalling as Plastic Process

I would like to invite you to follow closely the latest re-installation of the ensemble "The economic aspect" at Gallery Kienzle&Gmeiner in Berlin in September 2006. Before packing and shipping I had studied the details and all former versions of the Ensemble and made a rough plan of the installation.



First we had to cover a doorway and a chimney and then it started as Oppermann's ensembles mostly start: In the corner.



Afterwards we hang the canvases on the right and left wall



Then Herbert Hossmann and me figured out the structure of the floor zone of the ensemble and I made an architectonic frame for the center installation of the small particles which is orientated at the provisional character of a table Oppermann used in former installations. Later there will be a light bulb installed and the construction will be covered with a white sheet



We added photographs and texts on the walls. Then the floor and pedals were painted white.



Afterwards follows the installation of the center. You see me installing the light, covering the table and placing the first small parts – drawings, texts and photographs mounted with pins on small wooden blocks.



The scene seen from above... The arrangement of the small particles needs to be worked over and over again. several takes several

My description of the building process wants to make apparent that it is a plastic or aesthetic, in a way an artistic process. It demands hundreds of bigger and smaller aesthetic decisions when evolving in space. Also And the installation process takes time – in this case it was five days. Since there is no finite version you have to declare an – temporary - end. The “result” is to be visited at Gallery Kienzle&Gmeiner in Berlin until February 2007.



Keeping the Non Finite

The re-installations of ensembles break with several taboos of dealing with an oeuvre after the death of its creator. I tried to demonstrate that the necessity to do so derives from the artwork itself. A work that is based on the dialectics of progression and preservation / change and repetition and that is consequently dialogical will always ask for an ongoing dialogue. Basically it is this request for continuation *that is to keep*. This demand asks for the curator's openness to communicate with the artwork and – even more – it asks him/her to make aesthetic decisions - instead of repeating a given form.

The respect for the *original* art work here means *to apply and to perform the material due to the artistic concept and process*. It means to work on, to actualize, to decide at each new space of presentation how the work has to appear in respect of its own history, the changing context and situation. This means a fundamental shift of traditional tasks. But it is founded in the shift of the concept of authenticity and authority which the artist/author made by him/herself before.

Anna Oppermann's ensembles can be exemplary for a wide range of works of internationally known artists. Well, most of these artists are still alive so that the problem has not occurred yet. But some of them already thought of the situation "after" their own death - like *Christian Boltanski* and *Sarkis*. Unsurprisingly, the both of them have been of the same opinion: There is no curator who can handle their works in both, an interpretative and a respectful way. Therefore they refer to theater and music as the classical fields of interpretation that art historians and art curators should study.

Regarding my experiences with reinstalling Anna Oppermann's work I would definitely agree with this. Compared to a music score, concept art or installation works demand certain pictorial or sculptural settings whereas the aesthetics of the realization is a question of interpretation and this is in the responsibility of the one who interprets.

These demands become even more urgent when one plans "retrospective" exhibitions or bigger work shows. They beware from getting retrospective at all. So next year, opening on May 16th 2007, there will be a big Oppermann-show subtitled "Revisions of the Art of Ensemble" at Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart. It will form a by interpretation actualized overall ensemble out of the re-installations of "Mirror Ensemble", "Being Different", "Paradoxical Intentions", "Portrait Mr. S.", "Gestures of Pathos", "The Artists' Task to Solve Problems (Problems with Space)" and "The economical aspect". The selection of the works will give an impression of the artistic development as well as a notion of every ensembles formal and significant peculiarity. And of course it longs to show the work's actuality and its openness for ongoing interpretation. ²

² It is the first big work show not only after Oppermann's death but since twenty two years. And – who wonders – it will not take place in a museum but in an ambioned space for contemporary art.

Of course, finally this does not mean that we can deal with left artistic material without any respect or knowledge of classical preservation. Preservation of the material is even more needed to keep the idea and the material when everything is handled again and again – like in Anna Oppermann's case. It commands special preserving methods to handle and to take care of the newspaper cuttings, ephemeral found objects, photographs and delicate drawings from decay. Estates of non-finite works call for a combination of careful storage and keeping in order to allow vivid reinstallations.

This should be the average way to deal with art which was developed against one or all museum's principles like keeping artworks as autonomous and timeless cultural objects. In such cases museums should no longer only take care of the material left by the artist but of keeping alive *the idea, the concept or the process*. If the artistic concept recalls time, movement and permanent shifts, growth and change – as it is with Anna Oppermann's ensembles – the Museum has to take the responsibility for this openness towards future. It has to be open for new and unforeseen installations.

Thank you.

Images p. 1-11: courtesy Estate of Anna Oppermann / art agents gallery
Images p. 12-14: courtesy Galerie Kienzle&Gmeiner; pictures: Wolfgang Selbach