

IN-BETWEEN

Jasper Niens







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Plus
de l'air

Dutch artist Jasper Niens' work is about space. Not in a representational way – like perspective space in a painting – but literally: it consists of space, it is space in the sense that the artist employs space as a material.

Moreover this space is not demarcated in the sense of separating the artwork from the public thus enabling the public to watch the work. Rather, the space used is the same space as that used by the public – the artwork is situated in our space, it is part of our space. Conversely this entails that we, the public, are in the artwork's space as well. That is to say, we have to enter that part of public space where the artwork's space converges with ours. In other words, the artwork is in our space and we are actually in the artwork. Which means that we're not just watching the work but are literally part of it, we participate in the artwork, we ourselves are components of the work. The work can only exist when we're in it.

This entails that the work is not really about space at all, it is about what happens in space, in this specific space that is the artwork. So it is about us, the public, people. It pulls us in, so to speak, by just being where it is and the real subject matter is how the work's parameters and material qualities affect what we do – so it is not about space but about behaviour. Our behaviour, the public's behaviour in public space determined by the potential and boundaries the work provides. So our experience of the artwork is really the experience and maybe the growing awareness of how we behave under specific circumstances. The work makes it possible for us to experience ourselves.

At the art fair Preview Berlin 2008, Niens built a neutral wall with three doors. Each gave access to a small space (one square metre) in which another door was situated. Having opened that second door one found oneself in a conventional gallery stand where West exhibited artworks.

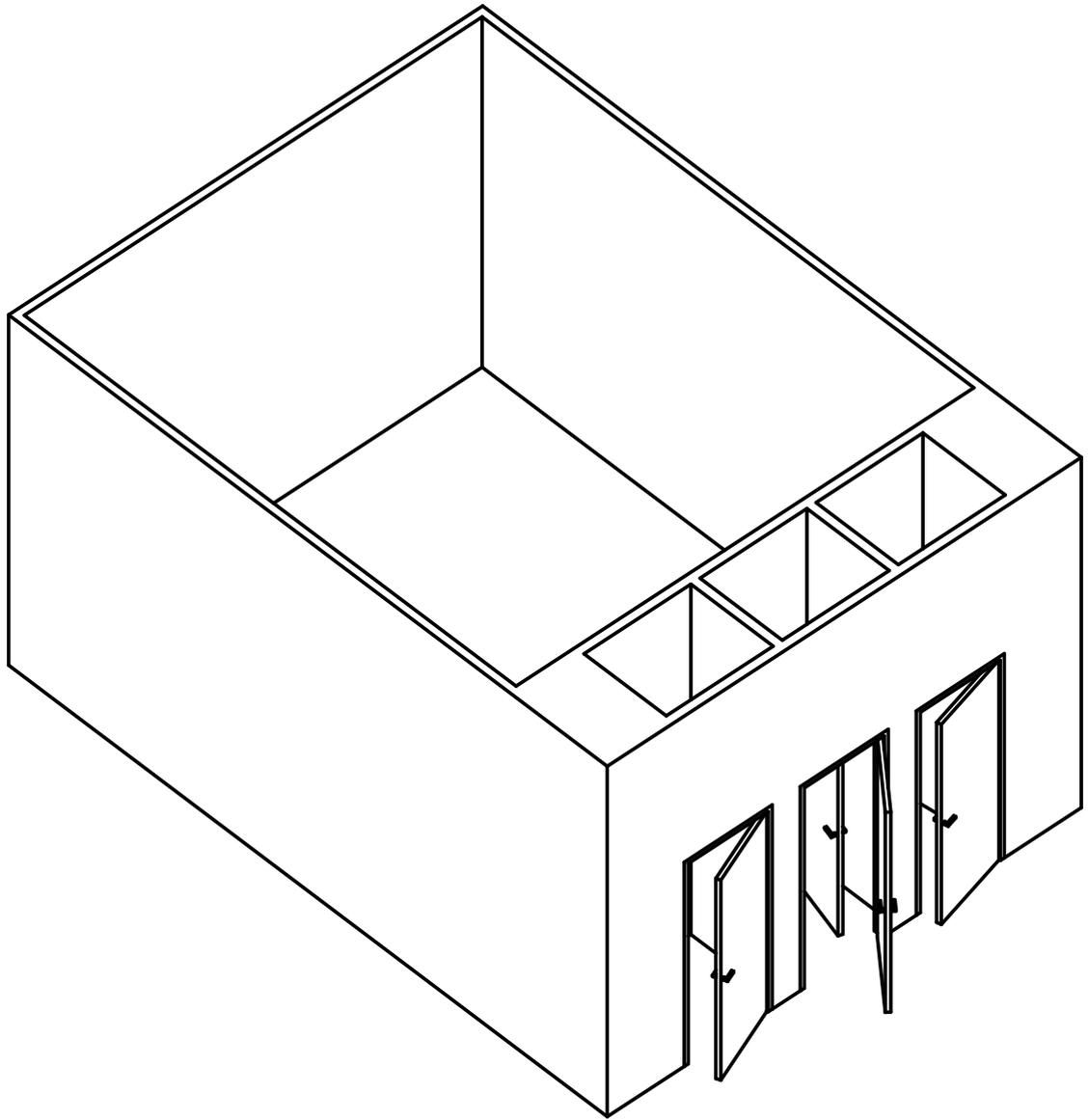
So there were really three spaces: the 'normal' space of the venue, the small space between both doors and the gallery stand. Two of these spaces are really familiar, the art fair space and the stand's space. The essential space here is of course the space in between which is a kind of vacuum, a non-site so to speak, where one is suddenly all alone, cut off from both worlds – the world of normal behaviour where one walks along an art fair or is inside a gallery stand. In other words, the worlds of everyday consciousness and of art consciousness. Of course, these are connected to each other and surely the art space exists in and is part of the larger space of the venue but the space in

between separates them or, rather, shows how they can be experienced on different levels – it emphasizes the contrast between the ‘normal world’ and the ‘art world’. The space in between is a kind of transition area, a kind of ‘sluice’ between both worlds. In it one has left the world of trivia and is about to enter the world of Art and the elaborate path one has to follow to do so provides a way of initiation, a rite de passage. At the same time, the factual architectural elements that make this ritual possible belong to both worlds – the wall is part of the world outside the stand but it is also part of the stand and part of the art domain. The small space in between then becomes an ambiguous place for reflecting on the position of art in the world, of the visitor’s relationship to both, as well as a commentary on the status of art as something ‘sacred’, something ‘different’, belonging to the spiritual domain of the initiated and closed to others. Obviously there is more than a bit of irony here; there is no reason to take the whole thing seriously, it could just be a satirical prank played on those who feel initiated into art and thus, by association, spiritually superior to the uninitiated people outside, on the other side of the wall. But in the small space between the doors one is not yet initiated nor can one fall back on familiar certainties – one is completely alone there and stripped of every kind or gradation of social identity. That applies to all of us – and maybe realizing that and being somehow humbled by it is the real meaning of this literal and spiritual passageway.

A year later, Niens showed a work on Art Forum Berlin under the title *Handicap Principle II*. As the stands are open at the front as well as at the back, the construction of a closed space was needed to isolate the public outside from the public inside the stand.

Between the sidewalls of West’s stand, Niens erected a cylindrical contraption in which there was room for a few people. The cylinder could be made to rotate by the public, from the inside as well as from the outside, which took considerable strength.

Here again the people inside the cylinder are parts of the artwork. They partake in it, are more or less trapped in it and at the same time they are needed for the work to be able to function. Although not unpleasing to the eye and of seemingly hi-tech design fitting for a contemporary work of art, it was basically not so much a sculpture to be judged by the aesthetics of its shape (although ‘minimal sculpture’

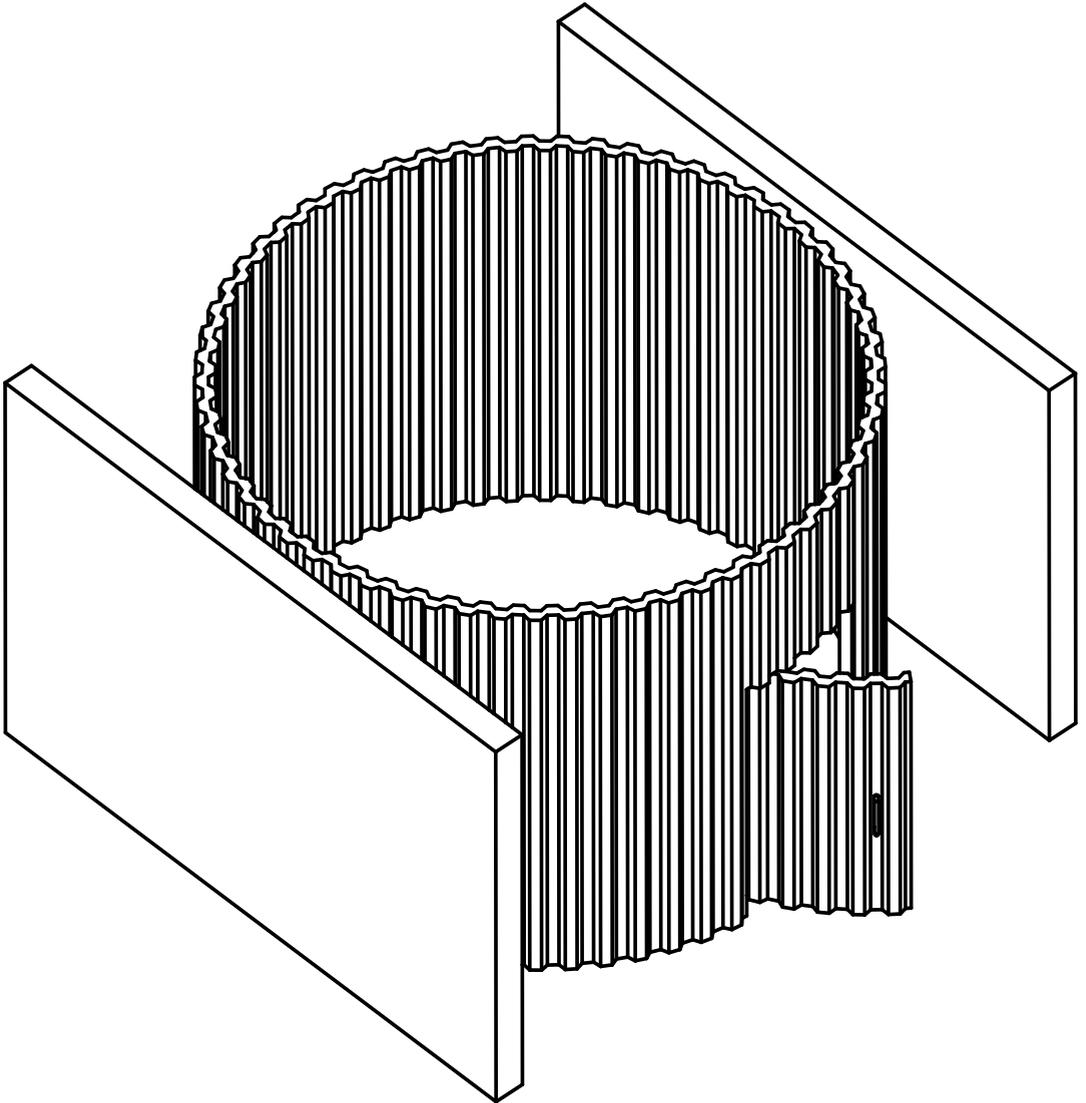


6 DOORS

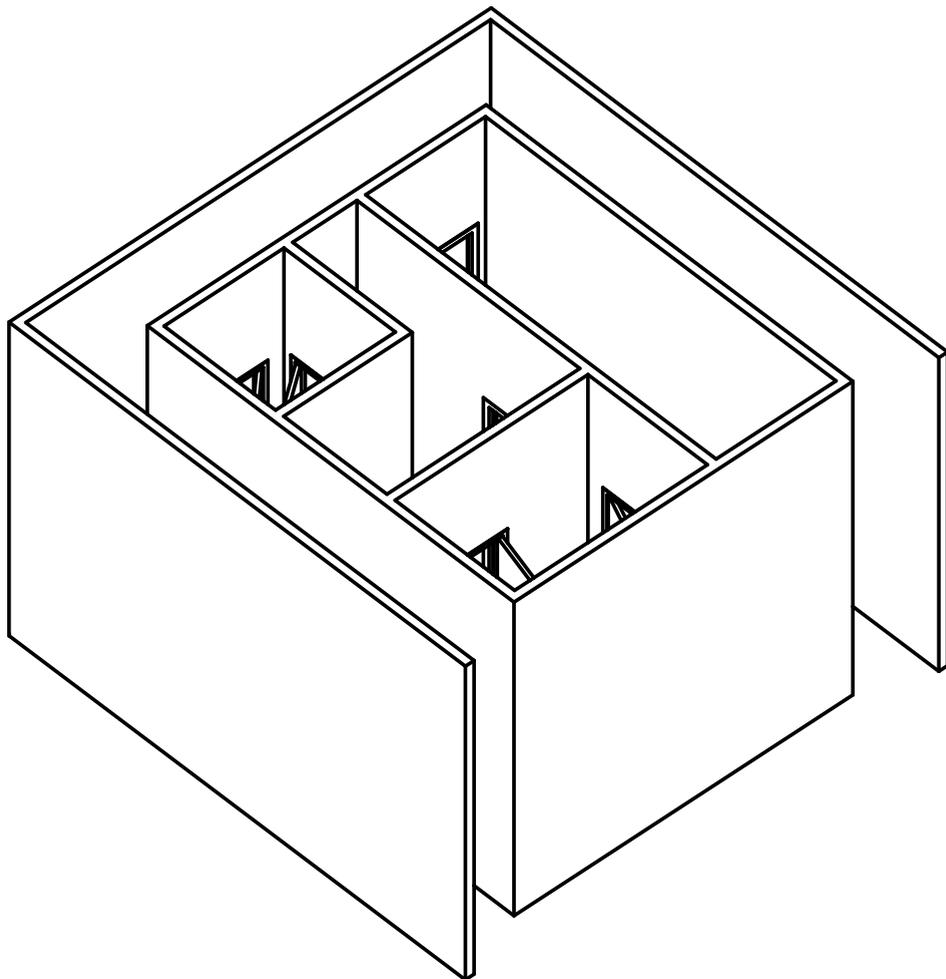
Site-specific installation

Mixed media, 625 x 450 x 350 cm

PREVIEW BERLIN, 2008



HANDICAP PRINCIPLE II
Site-specific installation
Mixed media, Ø 420 x 350 cm
ART FORUM BERLIN, 2009

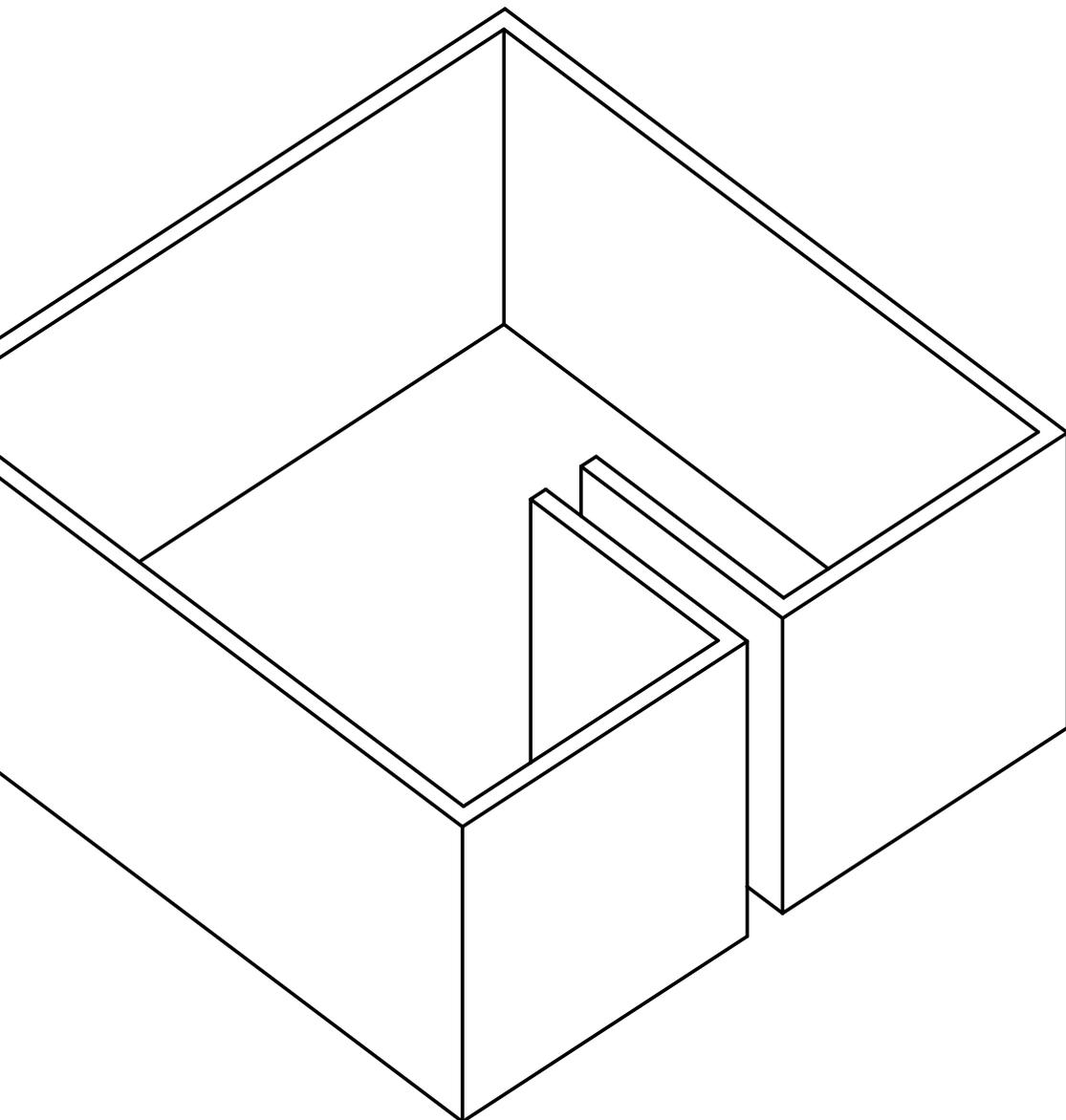


5 ROOMS

Site-specific installation

Mixed media, 500 x 500 x 350 cm

NADA MIAMI BEACH, 2009



35-II

Site-specific installation

Mixed media, 600 x 600 x 350 cm

ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH, 2010

remains a reference), but rather constructed in order to actually be able to carry out its intended function. Still, its outward appearance lured people to inspect it closely and then enter it. Once some people had entered the work they found themselves in a kind of mental vacuum, isolated from the rest of the world in a small space comparable to that of the work discussed above. When several people were inside the work, a somewhat awkward situation may have originated – what were they doing there, what was their relationship to each other? I would surmise that they were companions – whether they liked it or not – on a journey that could lead them inside themselves while they could also travel more literally by putting the cylinder in motion which caused it – and them – to turn around, a journey from nowhere to nowhere really. There is in my opinion some kind of morality here akin to that of the earlier work: in the art world people – and especially at an art fair – risk going round and round in circles without ever going anywhere. The art fair is an artificial world created for commercial purposes, where the artwork is primarily a commodity. By actually being in an artwork, people are forced to experience art from the inside, from the point of view of the artwork itself, so to speak, which can be manipulated and changed according to context and behaviour. Moreover, people outside (the art lovers, the people interested in buying and selling commodities) could indeed literally manipulate the people inside the work by making it rotate, possibly against the wishes or desires of the ‘prisoners’ who are forced to keep on moving in no direction at all at the whim of others. Food for thought and a layered experience connecting art, behaviour, active participation and an uncertain fate. Just like art often is a metaphor for (certain aspects of) human life, ‘real’ life has conversely become both a metaphor for art and how it is treated.

The work Niens produced for Nada Art Fair Miami Beach 2009 provided the visitor with the opportunity to enter five different rooms that were all connected to at least one other room. These rooms were empty, there was nothing to see. At an art fair we would expect to see artworks when we move from one room to another but again the artist managed to throw the usual expectations into disarray. So here once more the artwork consists of the interplay between empty space and the public. Then the work is about the spontaneous, improvised choreography of the people’s behaviour in space. And in keeping with his earlier work,

it's also about emptiness, about visual, conceptual and spiritual emptiness which drives home the idea that even at an art fair with large quantities of very diverse artworks, only the labyrinthic, subjective experience really counts. In this sense the work was also a statement about its own context and surroundings and their ambivalent relation - where just about 'everything' can be seen, 'nothing' acquires a polemical meaning: if one wants to see everything one is unable to focus on anything, there are only objects put side by side to form a row of colourful objects, to quote Lawrence Weiner's famous work. The emptiness - and the repetition of emptiness wherever one went in this work - of this work provided a counterpoint to that and in doing so added a question mark to familiar givens about art and human behaviour.

Niens' contribution to Art Basel Miami Beach 2010 continues the discourse along these lines but materially it's even simpler than the earlier works. It merely consists of a short and narrow corridor (35 centimetres wide and 2 metres long) leading from the art fair's avenues to West's stand where other artworks are presented. Associations with Nauman's claustrophobic corridors are unavoidable but there is an important difference - Nauman's corridors were autonomous spaces, so to speak, not passageways from one area to another. If anything, Niens' corridor is pre-eminently a passage, from the large grid of the total exhibition space to the more intimate scale of the gallery stand. It suggests that on the other end there will be something special while at the same time rendering access more difficult, thus enhancing the feeling of expectation. The space at the other end of the corridor isn't empty this time, it's 'a normal' gallery stand. So one doesn't really change areas of meaning while going through it - the visitor remains 'trapped' in the world of art presentation. In the corridor, however, there is nothing and the corridor itself is nothing. So here the empty space is a passage from nothing to nowhere and it's a difficult passage because it's so narrow - one has to sort of squeeze oneself through it and thus a physical element is added which is lacking in the other art spaces, be it the gallery stand or the rest of the art fair. It is in this transition phase that we are most ourselves in a kind of helpless way - it's the space between artworks and venues and also the space in an artwork. This empty 'in-betweenness', or this emptiness in between if you will, is a place for reflection and possibly transformation, like all passages are in a ritual sense.





4 Site-specific installations by Jasper Niens

- 6 DOORS
Preview Berlin, 2008
- HANDICAP PRINCIPLE II
Art Forum Berlin, 2009
- 5 ROOMS
Nada Art Fair Miami Beach, 2009
- 35-II
Art Basel Miami Beach, 2010

Text: Philip Peters

Philip Peters (1948) is an art historian and critic. He published internationally in art magazines, books and catalogues. He was the editor-in-chief of *Kunst & Museumjournaal*, an independent international magazine, published and funded by Dutch and Belgian museums for contemporary art. For twenty years he was the artistic director of the Hague Center for Contemporary Art (HCAK) where he organized numerous exhibitions (sometimes long-term projects unified by a central theme and accompanied by public discussions) while also publishing theoretical texts and artists' books by a variety of authors.

Currently he is primarily working as an author as well as teaching at DNA, the post-academic department of the Free Academy in Den Haag. Apart from that he also works as a coach for artists.

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