A Stage Presence

Michael Kirby’s Embedded Sculptures

Alexander Streitberger

We are very pleased and proud to have this essay detailing some of Michael Kirby’s artistic work. Kirby (1931–1997) was TDR’s editor from 1971 to 1986. He championed detailed descriptions of performances and, insofar as possible, he wanted authors to avoid making “value judgments.” Throughout his time as TDR editor, and after, Kirby was an influential scholar, an inspiring professor, and a practicing artist.
— Richard Schechner, Editor

Figure 1. Michael Kirby, Pont Neuf: The localization of a tetrahedron in space (folded cube), 1969 (in Goodman 1970). (Photo by Jean-Pierre Bouquet; courtesy Musée L, Musée universitaire de Louvain)
In 1965, Michael Kirby produced the first of his “embedded sculptures.” By adding to the two hanging lights—metal-shaded bulbs—illuminating his living room, an identical, but nonfunctional “ghost light” painted in the same white color as the ceiling and the walls of the room, Kirby created a situation where the boundary between functional unit and aesthetic object, between autonomous work and meaning-generating context, were blurred. The aesthetic content of the piece, noted Kirby in his essay “Embedded Sculpture,” “depended upon its relationship to the particular things around it. It was ‘embedded’ in its immediate environment” (1969:218). Shortly after, Kirby used photography for the first time, when he inserted a positive transparency of a photograph between a mirror and a protective glass panel.¹ As the photograph represented exactly the same view of the room as the one reflected by the mirror, the viewer could observe the actual environment, looking through its photographic representation situated in the past. Kirby has written about this piece: “A photograph fixes and preserves a moment of time; changes in the room reflected in the mirror made it clear that, in addition to the purely spatial comparisons involved, it was that past moment that was being compared to the present” (219). It becomes clear that Kirby conceived his embedded sculptures as both objects and situational displays. As such, they would challenge diverging spatial, temporal, and aesthetic spheres, superposing past and present moments, dynamic structures (mirror reflections) and fixed representations (photographs), transparency (they are “looking at the space”), and reflexivity (the work “looks back on itself”) (221).

The complexity of these photographic sculptures makes it difficult to situate them within a specific artistic context or tendency. In fact, Kirby’s embedded sculptures were shown in major exhibitions of conceptual art, such as the 1969 show Konzeption—Conception at the Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen, Germany; and Artists and Photographs in 1970 at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. Further, they have to be situated in the context of Kirby’s activities as a performer and creator of Happenings during the 1960s. And, finally, the way Kirby employed the term “sculpture” and linked it to the concepts of “situation” and “gestalt” places them clearly within a specific historical debate opposing the phenomenological approach of minimalism to the modernist tradition of the autonomous artwork.

Kirby’s embedded sculptures are a form of artistic experience at the intersection of conceptual art, minimalism, Happenings, and theatre. Mingling various discursive fields and art forms, they are what Dick Higgins has described as “intermedia,” that is, a “conceptual fusion” of different media (1984:16). As such, they were not conceived of as individual, autonomous works, but as dialogical, environmental structures that fit perfectly with the concept of situational aesthetics developed by Kirby in his essay “The Art of Time: Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde” (1969:17–62).

¹. Kirby is not precise about the title or date of this piece. Most likely, he created it in 1965. This can be deduced from its mention in the essay “Embedded Sculpture” where Kirby gives 1965 as the year of his first embedded sculptures, then describes this first photographic piece, before beginning a new paragraph with the words “In 1966 I began to work in metal” (1969:217–20).
The Dematerialization of the Object

As mentioned above, the embedded sculptures were displayed around 1970 in major exhibitions of conceptual art. Kirby’s “A Statement, May 10, 1969” accompanied his contribution to the Artists and Photographs exhibition (Multiples Gallery, New York, 1970): “The sculpture is a machine or instrument to be used by the conceptual mind rather than a mass or shape merely to be looked at” (1970:n.p.). This is, of course, a paraphrasing of Sol LeWitt’s famous “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” from 1967, where he states: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” ([1967] 1999:12). Lucy Lippard and John Chandler described this highlighting of the immaterial idea at the expense of the physical object as a process of dematerialization, observable since the 1960s with the emergence of minimal art and conceptual art. In their influential essay, “The Dematerialization of Art,” published in Art International in 1968, they wrote:

The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s becoming wholly obsolete. (Lippard and Chandler 1968:31)

It is well known that Lippard and Chandler’s thesis was controversially discussed at the time of its publication, and today it is largely agreed upon that conceptual art does not refer to a purely immaterial, mental art project, but usually has a physical component, the “conceptual” often referring to “the all-important questions of scale and sizing” (Witkovsky 2012:21). In his foreword to Robert Morgan’s Conceptual Art: An American Perspective, Kirby actually pointed retrospectively to this crux of conceptual art when he stated cautiously: “One might define Conceptual Art as art that strives toward the absence of physicality while it knows that this is impossible” (in Morgan 1994:ix). Regardless, in the late 1960s and early 1970s Kirby’s photograph-sculptural work was largely perceived by art critics such as Lucy Lippard as part of this tendency towards immateriality. It is thus hardly surprising that his photographic cube, Pont Neuf: the localization of a tetrahedron in space, together with the already quoted statement, found their way into Lippard’s published anthology Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ([1973] 2001:141–43).

The consequences for the use of photography were clearly defined in Lawrence Alloway’s introduction to the Artists and Photographs catalog, produced in conjunction with the exhibition at Marian Goodman in New York. Oscillating between documentation and art, photography is, according to Alloway, both “a sample of information transmitted” and “a tool with which to initiate ideas” (1970:3–4).

Kirby’s contribution to the catalogue for the landmark exhibition Konzeption—Conception, displayed in 1969 at the Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen, Germany, confirms his affinity with conceptual art. In his introductory essay to the catalogue, Rolf Wedewer writes that conceptual art, rather than being a hermetic form, is defined by its methodic potential as an open process inviting the beholder to complete the work in his or her imagination (1969:n.p.). The work instructions Kirby contributed to the catalogue fit perfectly with this definition. Shadow Piece, for example, is based on a photograph showing the window of the room where the piece was to be installed, and the view outside if it. A full-sized transparency of the photograph was then to be mounted on the window. As a result, the light entering the room through the window would project the shadows of the window and the transparency on the opposite wall, where they would move from one side to the other following the course of the sun. According to the instructions, after dividing the shadow’s trajectory across the wall into five units, photographs were to be taken of the five wall units, and full-sized enlargements were to be attached exactly where the real shadows were cast on the wall, so that “its progress during the day [could] be compared to its position on the day the photographs were taken” (in Wedewer 1969:n.p.).

Systematic, processual, and requiring the beholder’s comparison, Shadow Piece corresponds perfectly to Wedewer’s definition of conceptual art. The use of photography as a means of
providing information and a tool to make visible an immaterial process further inscribes the work in the practice of photo-conceptualism. Yet, as I will argue, Kirby’s use of photography was not at all catalyzed by the myth of photographic transparency, as is the case with the work of many conceptual artists such as Ed Ruscha, who states regarding the photographs used in his artist’s books: “they are technical data like industrial photography” (in Lippard [1973] 2001:xiv).

With his embedded sculptures, Kirby shifted the focus from photography as a mere representation of objects to photography as sculpture and experience. The notions of “situational aesthetics” and “theatrical experience” play a significant role in this process.

Situational Aesthetics and the Theatre

In “The Art of Time: Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde,” Kirby introduced the concept of “situational aesthetics” to describe the subjective and context-bound character of avantgarde art:

[A]n object seen as a work of art is psychologically placed in a cultural-historical context that determines the characteristics of the experience. Traditional aesthetics asks that the perception of a work of art exist “out of time,” as it were. Situational or historical aesthetics sees the work in the context of time where the trans-sensory elements are of fundamental importance. (1969:45–46)

By “trans-sensory elements” Kirby was referring to aspects that are essential for the experience of art without being characteristics of the object itself. As a consequence, the artwork and its aesthetic experience rely on what Kirby called “trans-sensory comparison factors,” that is, information exterior to the art object that is given by the historical, social, spatiotemporal, and psychological context (1969:42, n. 21).

With this position, Kirby obviously was taking a stand against the critical writing delineating a tradition of modernism, led at the beginning of the 20th century by Roger Fry and Clive Bell and reaching its apex with Clement Greenberg’s formalist criticism, which had a profound influence within the art world at the time. Kirby quoted Bell explicitly as a spokesman for traditional aesthetics based on the idea of the hermetic experience of art and its detachment from everyday life (1969:37). In his 1914 book *Art*, Bell states that “the one quality common to all works of visual art” would be “significant form” (1914:8). According to Bell, pure aesthetic emotions are provoked exclusively by relations, quantities, and qualities of forms and colors. He concludes: “Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world” (37). Kirby, in contrast, related the significance of art to factors that are outside of the work itself when he defined “significance as a quality of perception” (1969:26) and insisted on the fact that “significance depends upon what is referred to as ‘the relationship of art to reality’” (50). In the preface to *Art of Time* Kirby is even more explicit. The works reunited in the book, he writes, may be understood in contrast to “Greenbergian” ideas of formal purity and autonomy (13).

With this anti-Greenbergian position, Kirby situates himself within the broader horizon of a new tendency in avantgarde art since the 1960s, contrasting the traditional concept of the autonomous artwork with the idea of art as a complex of decision-making, given conditions, and perceptual attitudes. It is thus not surprising, though highly notable, that in the very same year that Kirby’s *Art of Time* came out, British artist and writer Victor Burgin published his essay “Situational Aesthetics” in the journal *Studio International*. In his essay Burgin emphasizes the spatiotemporal, perceptual, and psychical conditions as pivotal components of the work:

[T]he specific nature of any object formed is largely contingent upon the details of the situation for which it is designed; through attention to time, objects formed are intentionally located partly in real, exterior, space and partly in psychological, interior, space. (Burgin 1969:119)
This coincidence of Kirby's and Burgin's independently developed theoretical positions is even more striking if one remembers that Burgin's photographic work of the time deals with similar preoccupations as Kirby's embedded sculptures. Take Photopath (1967), a piece consisting of 21 photographs constituting a path along the floor. Printed to actual size, the images represent exactly what they hide: the floor on which they are placed. In perfect congruency with their objects, the photographs refer to the spatial context on which they depend. In “Situational Aesthetics,” Burgin describes Photopath as “an immaterial object [...] which is solely a function of perceptual behaviour but yet which inducts attributes of physicality from its material setting” (1969:119). Likewise, this could be said of Window Piece, one of the embedded sculptures Kirby exhibited in the 1967 group show Schemata 7 at Finch College Museum in New York.

Window Piece is a combination of two types of embedded sculptures, the “mirror-photographs” and the “window-photographs” (Battcock [1968] 1995:367). Placed in front of a window, the central element of the work consists of a square divided by aluminum tubing into four equilateral triangles. The upper and the lower triangles frame parts of the real space, inasmuch as the top one is equipped with a mirror reflecting the opposite part of the room, while the bottom holds transparent glass enabling the beholder to see what is behind the piece and beyond the window. The two photographs mounted in the left and the right triangles, in contrast, show the very same views captured in the past: the view outside the window and a part of the interior situated behind the viewer. The work is an ostentatious example of situational aesthetics according to which the object is determined by its spatial context and by the viewer's mental capacity to establish a link between the real object and the space of representation. Kirby explained in his essay “Sculpture as a Visual Instrument”: “Although the piece was physically two-dimensional, this intangible—but no less real—aspect made it essentially three-dimensional” (1968a:37). Indeed, the piece reflects and represents its own spatial conditions to which it is unescapably subjected. To move the square only a few centimeters from its spot would unavoidably destroy the congruence between reality and representation. The piece wouldn’t work anymore. “The information in the photographs relates to its real counterparts, ‘embedding’ the work so that they cannot be moved from its
exact location without destroying its psychological and esthetic content” (Kirby 1970:n.p.). Yet, Kirby’s embedded sculptures inscribe themselves not only in space but also in time. The photographs of Window Piece do not represent the present situation of the spatial environment but they show a place at a specific moment situated in the past—the moment when the photographs were taken. This means that the piece implies an increasing delay between the moment embalmed by the photographs and the beholder’s real-time experience.

Far from being a sole photosensitive surface making visible absent objects, Kirby’s situational photo-sculpture establishes a direct link between the represented and the real object by endorsing the function of what modernist critic Michael Fried calls a “stage presence” ([1967] 1998:155). In his polemical essay “Art and Objecthood,” Fried degrades minimal or “literalist” art as non-art, as a kind of theatre that involves real space and includes the experience of the beholder. His conception of minimalism as a theatrical event “capable of achieving remarkable effects of ‘presence’ [...] deploy[ing] and isolat[ing] objects and persons in ‘situations,’” could also be read as a description of the way Kirby’s embedded sculptures function (171). But whereas Fried blames minimalism for replacing sculpture with the theatrical experience of a situation, Kirby suggests expanding the field of art with an intermedia approach that merges sculpture, theatre, performance art, and photography, as per Higgins in a “conceptual fusion.” In “The New Theatre,” published in his special issue of the Tulane Drama Review on Happenings and Fluxus in 1965, the year he produced his first embedded sculptures, Kirby emphasized the close relationship between theatre “as a continuum blending into other arts” and sculpture (and painting) acting as “performers” (1965:23–24).

**Art as Experience**

**Embedded Sculpture and Happenings**

The theatrical character of Kirby’s photo-sculptures has to be understood against the backdrop of his preoccupation with the history and the practice of Happenings and what was to be named “performance art” as avantgarde art forms.
The comparison with Kirby’s *Room 706*, performed twice, on 4 and 5 March 1966, at Saint Francis College in Brooklyn (where Kirby taught), will show to what extent the embedded sculptures were conceived of in close relation to Kirby’s theatrical pieces. *Room 706* was performed in a Saint Francis lecture hall—hence the work’s title. In a rectangular room the chairs for the audience were arranged in three blocks. The first row of each block constituted one of the three sides of an equilateral triangle, with a small table at each of the three vertices of the triangle. Behind each of these tables were a projection screen and a tape recorder. In the triangular center space formed by the rows of chairs were three more tables, set with different kinds of projectors. From these, images were projected onto the three screens. The performance itself was divided into 22 parts, alternating prerecorded events diffused via tape recorders and projectors with events performed on the spot. The first scene, consisting of a dialogue among three recorded voices, discussed the enactment of the performance, ending with Kirby’s suggestion: “OK. We’ll be doing the same thing that we’re doing right now” (Kirby 1968b:143). The overlapping of past recording and present action corresponds perfectly with the relationship between the photographs and the objects in the embedded sculptures.

This correspondence is even more evident in part eight. Two men using slide projectors move negative photographs of various parts of the room along the walls and ceiling in order to match the image to its equivalent portion in reality. The similarity to *Shadow Piece* is blatant. In both cases, the image doubles the real object while revealing the complex relationship of past and present, reality and representation. In both pieces duration, change, and experience are introduced by active agents—the two men in *Room 706*, the sunlight in *Shadow Piece*—in order to convey “pure experimental qualities” (Kirby 1969:196). Kirby confirmed this parallel: “another aspect of *Room 706* was its explicit relationship to the particular space where it was performed. In this sense, it was quite similar to my ‘embedded’ sculpture, and many of the same comments apply for both” (197). In both cases, photography is employed to detour the beholder’s attention from the object to the subjective experience of a complex spatiotemporal situation. The perception of the photographic images depends further, in both cases, on mental effort and physical movement, which are indispensable for revealing completely the work’s dynamic, relational character. Kirby’s remark that his “embedded pieces ‘look at’ whatever is there to be seen” (223) leaves no doubt: the photographic sculptures function like actors of theatre pieces—they have a “stage presence.”

In an interview with Elaine Varian on the occasion of the *Schemata 7* exhibition, Kirby confirmed the direct relationship between his embedded sculptures and his performances. He insisted on the cubistic character of his performances “looking at the material from unusual angles and points of view” (in Varian [1968] 1995:364). This kind of spatial and temporal
fragmentation, which offers various ways to look at the work, is indeed a significant feature of the embedded sculptures displayed in *Schemata 7*. *Window Piece* alone suggests four different views: the view of the object itself, the view through the transparent glass on what is situated behind the object, the view of the space behind the viewer reflected in the mirror, and, finally, the view of the photographs representing the same spatial constellation in a past moment. In combination with the other pieces created for *Schemata 7*, namely *Floor Piece* and the *Collection Frames*, *Window Piece* constitutes a complex spatiotemporal situation that, as one can read in the *Village Voice*’s review, “shatters the psychological space of the room neo-Cubistically” (Perreault 1967:15).

This cubistic strategy, employed by Kirby to emphasize “the subjective aspects of experience rather than [...] the thing experienced” (Kirby 1969:23), situates the embedded sculptures clearly in the tradition of John Dewey’s aesthetic theory and Allan Kaprow’s application of Dewey’s theory in his ideas about Happenings and performance. In his major writing on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes: “there is a difference between the art product (statue, painting or whatever), and the work of art. The first is physical and potential; the latter is active and experienced” ([1934] 2008:167). From Dewey’s anti-essentialist viewpoint, aesthetic experience may be considered in terms of relation, interaction, and situation. This idea to privilege the process over the result profoundly influenced the work and teaching of John Cage at Black Mountain College, where he organized in 1952, together with Merce Cunningham, the multimedia event entitled *Event Theatre Piece No. 1*, later considered a milestone in the history of performance art and Happenings. Kirby was fully aware of the importance of this event in relation to the development of Happenings, for its “purposeful investigation of audience performance relationship” (Kirby 1966:31). It is then hardly surprising that the arrangement of the chairs of *Room 706* is obviously like that of *Event Theatre Piece No. 1*. The reconstructed seating plan of the event was actually published in *TDR* in 1965, accompanying an interview Kirby and Richard Schechner conducted with John Cage about theatre (see Kirby and Schechner 1965:52).

In this respect, it is interesting to note that Kaprow, one of Kirby’s major references as a writer and originator-performer of Happenings, attended a class on experimental music John Cage began to teach at New School for Social Research in 1957 (Kelley 2004:15). Already circa 1949, Kaprow discovered Dewey’s *Art as Experience* and covered the margins of his edition with commentaries such as “art not separate from experience” and “environment is a process of interaction” (in Kelley [1993] 2003:xi and xxi). Kirby’s performances and embedded sculptures are clearly in the tradition of Dewey’s concept of art as experience as it was discussed at Black Mountain College and internalized by Kaprow and other performance artists. In accordance with Kaprow’s definition of the Happening as a “collage of events” (1966:198), Kirby conceived his performances and embedded sculptures as cubistic constellations confronting various points of view in order to offer a dynamic experience of different spatial and temporal realities.

**Gestalt and Minimalism**

Although the embedded sculptures have a theatrical and performative dimension, they are explicitly related to the conceptual and historical context of sculpture. In his essay “Sculpture as Visual Instrument,” Kirby insisted on “the fact that these constructions have a physical shape and mass in space which is definitely sculptural in the traditional sense” (1969:231). He further qualified a work by a minimalist artist such as Larry Bell or Robert Morris as an “instrument for seeing rather than merely an object” (226). Rather than an object independent from its surrounding, sculpture is described as a tool that makes the beholder aware of the situation in which he encounters the work. It’s an instrument for visual comparisons involving the relationship between object and environment, interior and exterior space, fixed and changeable images, reality and representation (230). This definition of sculpture as a visual instrument that includes environmental references and questions of perception coincides substantially with the theoretical reflections of minimalist artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris developed around 1965.
In opposition to the traditional aesthetic concepts of composition, purity, and autonomy, Judd rejected sculpture as a representational composition in favor of the specific object as an anti-illusionistic, three-dimensional “real space” unity (1965:78). Morris, for his part, went even further when he described, in his influential three-part essay “Notes on Sculpture,” the work of art as an interaction of the object, its spatial context, and the beholder’s subjective perception: “The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision” ([1966] 1995:232). Elsewhere, in the same text, Morris describes the work as “a term in the expanded situation” that has to be subjected to control in order to coordinate the variables of object, light, space, and body (234). The theoretical notion on which Morris builds his relational concept of art is that of gestalt. He argues that the simpler a geometric form is, the better it can be visualized and experienced as a unified whole, a gestalt. Only when the gestalt is established as a constant mental form, can one be “both free of the shape and bound to it” (228). That means that the gestalt of a simple (regular or irregular) form makes one aware of the way one perceives the object within a given situation.

This shift from object to perception is crucial for Kirby’s situational aesthetics. Based on the insight of the “relativity of perception,” Kirby focused his attention on the relationship between a constant gestalt and the variability of its experience (Kirby 1969:27, 31). To demonstrate that the perception of a work depends essentially on trans-sensorial factors, he referred to a scientific experiment conducted by the American ophthalmologist Adelbert Ames, which became famous as the “Ames Room.” In 1946, Ames constructed a distorted, trapezoidal-shaped room based on an effect of optical illusion. Looking through a peephole installed in a wall separating the interior of the room from the observer’s position, the observer has the impression of seeing an ordinary rectangular room while a person walking from one corner to the other appears to grow or shrink. In his “The Art of Time,” Kirby’s conclusions match precisely with Morris’s:

The gestalt or retinal configuration or pattern—in this case the false perspective lines of the [Ames] room—may still be thought of as sensory material, but the meaning of the particular gestalt is shown to be dependent upon additional factors. It is these additional, trans-sensorial elements that become of major significance in the perception of art. (1969:33)

Pont Neuf: the localization of a tetrahedron in space (1970), Kirby’s contribution to the Artists and Photographs show, illustrates perfectly the experimental and perceptual issues at stake both in his writings and in his photo-sculptures. The work consists of four photographic cubes that “mentally place four points in space, forming the vertices of a four-sided ‘solid’ with triangular surfaces” (Kirby 1970:n.p.). While the four points at the famous bridge in Paris from which the photographs for the single cube were taken are supposed to constitute a virtual tetrahedron, the six sides of each cube show the respective views from the camera’s perspective: the lateral images point to the four cardinal directions, the upper and the lower photographs represent the sky and the ground of the spot. In accordance with the principles of conceptual art, the subjects of the photographs have not been chosen for their aesthetic qualities. Rather, they result from a preexisting protocol that excludes largely formal and compositional considerations, determining entirely the position and the orientation of the camera. “The piece selects its own images,” Kirby wrote in his accompanying statement (1970:n.p.). But this conceptual aspect of the work doesn’t mean that Pont Neuf is part of the apparently irreversible tendency towards a dematerialization of the object, as claimed by Lippard and Chandler. There is obviously more at stake:

If a photograph and its subject are both presented to consciousness, a connection exists between them. Since the photographs in my embedded sculpture are “aimed” at their subjects, I conceptualize the relation as a straight line or a ray (somewhat like the invisible beam of an infrared searchlight) joining the two. To me the physical structure of the piece is composed of these mental elements; its shape is, in part, intangible. (Kirby 1970:n.p.)
This declaration clearly implies that the object inscribes itself in a specific temporal and spatial context, and that its meaning is constituted by both the psychological and the physical experience of the beholder. Admittedly, Kirby insisted on the mental character of the work and the fact that its form is, in part, intangible. But “in part” also means “not entirely,” and when Kirby evoked the sculptural quality and the physical structure of his work he admitted that the conceptual and the physical components cannot be separated but are closely intertwined. The Pont Neuf cube templates themselves provide the best evidence for this. Once folded, they imitate the form and the size of the paving stones at the place where the photographs were taken. On the one hand, they are psychical objects situated in mental space and pointing to a visually present but physically absent space-time environment. On the other hand, they are three-dimensional sculptures physically related to both the reality of the photographs and that of the beholder. Yet, the transformation of the photographic model into a haptic cube demands a physical effort. It is the beholder’s action that relates the visual experience of the images to the physical experience of the situation where the photographs have been taken. Another much more time-consuming activity would, of course, be necessary to complete the work by reinstalling it at its place of origin. Only then would it be possible—as in the case of the other embedded sculptures—to apprehend fully the temporal, spatial, and perceptual relationships established between the sculpture as visual instrument and the environment in which it is embedded.

To conclude, it is clear that Kirby’s embedded sculptures are dynamic, highly complex structures that, in a historical perspective, combine three different attempts to get out of the one-way street of the hermetic, formalist approach of modernism. With conceptual art they share an emphasis on the work as a tool for mental operations; their dependence on the spatial conditions and the position of the beholder corresponds to the phenomenological approach of mini-

Figure 5. Michael Kirby, Pont Neuf: the localization of a tetrahedron in space (template), 1969 (in Goodman 1970). (Photo by Jean-Pierre Bougnet; courtesy Musée L, Musée universitaire de Louvain)
mal art; and their conception as physical and psychical experiences, finally, is in line with issues related to the context of performance art and Happenings. Kirby’s photographic sculptures function as both traces (of past situations) and present agents—or actors—of a “situation,” understood in its common definition as “things that are happening and the conditions that exist at a particular time and place.” It is precisely in this sense that Kirby’s embedded pieces “look at’ whatever is there to be seen” (Kirby 1969:223).

References


