Engineering Illusions ---Some thoughts on the work of Peter Vink
By Manuela Lietti

According to Henri Lefebvre, space is never absolute and neutral as it would seem at first sight. As the philosopher affirms, “an existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d'être which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one.” Space is also a social product, a complex construction based on values that reflect the meanings related to social practices and perceptions. Particular notions of space serve as tools for thought and action while being at the same time their reverberation.

On the basis of Lefebvre’s theory, when an artist approaches a certain space with a site-specific project, his/her task is complex and risky not just because he/she has to interpret the already existing nature of a certain space, with its intricate net of meanings and its socio-cultural “burden,” but also because he/she has to use his/her work to convey a new interpretation of the environment itself, adding value to what already exists and has its own specificity. In artistic terms, an artist still has to present a self-contained artwork. Only in the most successful cases, does the combination of a certain space and a certain artwork give birth to a new notion of spatiality, leading to a process of osmosis between site and work which doesn’t imply either the prevarication of one element over the other or the subsequent annihilation of one of the two elements.

The body of works of Peter Vink spans a period of almost ten years, during which the artist has painstakingly devoted himself to analyze the notion of space and to free himself from any kinds of preconceptions when facing a new environment. When Vink approaches a certain space, for him there are no ready-made solutions. Perhaps it is this openness that allowed him to operate in spaces other artists would consider too out of reach. The artist himself turns into a blank sheet of paper: through mastering technical and morphological issues he adapts to any spatial conditions, codifies the environment and releases its potential. It is as if Vink doesn’t create ex novo an environment, but through the accurate knowledge of a certain space acquired on site he offers to the viewer new tools to shed some light on those daily experiences that because are too near are often ignored. Vink’s tools happen to be his artworks that in his artistic venture act as stage props. They are a medium used to attract the attention of the viewer in the least intrusive way possible, but able to direct it resolutely towards the environment that becomes the actual site of the action.

The performance ROOK and the sound/light installation F6 specifically conceived for Beijing’s Liquor Factory are an example of Vink’s poetic and ability to redesign and at some extent direct space. The balloons patiently arranged into a chimney inside The Liquor Factory will fly away in the twinkling of an eye, the sounds and lights of the piece F6 will be soon turned off. Perhaps some people would even ask themselves if they have been confronted with an artwork. But, the spaces activated by Vink’s props/artworks will remain, apparently unchanged. Actually they will go on bearing the ethereal yet tangible traces of the unusual artistic process they underwent.

Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, Wiley- Blackwell Publishing, 1992.