

# Plug In

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## **Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft**

'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft' ('Maria Eichhorn Public Limited Company'), the work of German artist Maria Eichhorn (1962), is exhibited in this room. Eichhorn developed it for the Documenta II exhibition in Kassel in 2002 and it has recently become part of the collection in the Van Abbemuseum. The current presentation is not exactly as it was in Kassel; the format and the layout of the room differ, various documents have been added to the original arrangement and a second bench has been added. The work itself is actually intangible – a public limited company has no physical manifestation.

The establishment of Maria Eichhorn's public limited company went according to the customary procedures. There was a share capital of € 50,000. A supervisory board was formed. A memorandum of association was drawn up by a civil-law notary. The company was registered. The only deviation from the procedure is that Eichhorn was the sole shareholder, and that she transferred the shares to the company. The objective of the company – which had thus become the owner of its own shares – is to manage and preserve its equity capital. It was stipulated during the establishment that the capital must neither increase nor flow back into the macroeconomic circulation of money. As a result of these limitations, the company's objective is diametrically opposed to that of a normal business that is geared to making profit. 'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft' is designed to question the principles of the capitalist system, which is pre-eminently represented by the public limited company. Our society is becoming increasingly controlled by this kind of system, in which economic values and interests seem to take precedence over social values and are often used as socio-political power tools. With the incorporation of 'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft', Eichhorn is eroding the capitalist principle from the inside out, as it were. The work takes the form of a plc but is the antithesis in terms of its objective.

Alongside the political, social and economic discussions that the work arouses, it also raises questions about its artistic meaning. Can a public limited company be a work of art? How can a fundamentally formless phenomenon be exhibited? What does the museum actually possess when it has such a piece in its collection? Is a museum the appropriate place to raise political and social questions? The last question can be affirmatively answered from the viewpoint that museums are places where cultural heritage is maintained, displayed and clarified. 'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft' is a work that reflects on the society in which we live and, as such, falls under cultural heritage. The question as to whether or not it is art is a more difficult one to answer. But why would it not be? In the second half of the 20th century, all sorts of artistic forms emerged that defied the idea that a work of art needed to be definitive and tangible. This new outlook on art is typically born out

of the anticapitalist desire for the intangible; for an experience that is not necessarily linked to a fixed manifestation. Although the meaning of a tangible work of art, too, tends to be inspired by the thought behind it or its aura, art forms such as performance art, land art or conceptual art emphasise the relativity of the artwork as an object.

'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft' exists in different capacities. As previously mentioned, a public limited company takes no physical form as such but it can be taken cognisance of via documents that have a bearing on it. The original documents are located in the Commercial Register in Berlin and are accessible to anyone interested. In addition to this, there is the artwork 'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft', which is made up of a presentation of copies of incorporation documents, the start-up capital and documents containing information about the company's progress, accompanied by a publication and presented in a userfriendly fashion. The documents are exhibited in an orderly and legible manner, the publication is in both Dutch and English and contains an explanation by the artist. There is a bench on which the visitor can read the information. The beech furniture with inlaid green linoleum was chosen by Eichhorn because it is also used in courts of law and official offices, and therefore creates a 'natural' environment for such documents, creating a visual space corresponding to the content of the work. By purchasing this work, the Van Abbemuseum owns the attributes that are part of this visual space and the right to show the work on specific conditions. It is also possible to take note of the work through a more succinct form of presentation: the publication. Whoever buys it becomes the owner of this manifestation of 'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft'. In the publication, Maria Eichhorn raises questions about the relationship between the economic and the artistic value of art: how does the economic value of an artwork relate to its aesthetic or art-historical value? Do public institutions exhibit works from art dealers, private collections and institutions to bring them into the public domain or to capitalise on them? Can works be unmarketable because they are site-specific, because they have the nature of a process, because their author is anonymous or because they are not protected by copyright?

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'Maria Eichhorn Aktiengesellschaft' has a paradoxical character. The plc of that name falls outside the capitalist domain, but the artwork does not. This could increase in value. By explicitly showing the value of € 50,000, attention is drawn to what the piece is worth, whereas, in terms of art, monetary value should not be the first concern. Questions regarding tangible and intangible values are raised via this work and no unequivocal answer is forthcoming, only the invitation to reflect and discuss.

Marjon de Groot

#### **Plug In**

In April 2006 the first 'episodes' of Plug In were shown – a new series of collection displays put together by guest curators, including artists. Each museum space has its own independent, themed display as well as its own time span. By sequentially changing the spaces, fresh narratives, surprising links and revealing contrasts are constantly being invoked.

Plug In has been realised in part by a contribution by the Mondriaan Stichting.

#### **Cicerone?**

For more detailed questions you can go to one of the museum cicerones, a 'walking encyclopaedia' who is happy to take the time to answer personally your more in-depth questions about exhibitions, art works and architecture. Cicerones can be recognised by a badge with a question mark.

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