

History of site-specificity in art Gillian McIver

In the latter part of the 20th century, some artists began to leave the established institutions to re-site their art works in public spaces. Although few things unite these artists in terms of similarity of works, most share a desire to explore the relationship of the idea of public space and local interaction.

Some of these artists have chosen, for different reasons, to interact directly with the locality - its history, topography and discourses, by siting their work in public or formerly public places. In this paper I will discuss how artists have responded to the particular circumstances in Europe from the early 1990s to the present.

In analysing some of these artists' interventions in urban space, I intend to discuss the issues of recuperation /reintegration of places of former social or infrastructural use which have been abandoned and forgotten, closed to the public. The interventions serve to highlight the discrepancy between current dis/use and former use.

The interventions also, possibly primarily, emphasize urban/community change, particularly historical flux in living and working patterns (e.g. projects in disused factories in area of current unemployment, in church/synagogue in area where community has disappeared, in a once-opulent theatre in now-deprived area and so on).

These art works challenge, by drawing public attention to, the roots of current disuse - bringing up notions of access, property, and questioning social and economic structures.

The history of site-responsive art is complex and is linked to the development of installation art, land art and the evolution of the idea of "public art." But one of the main aspects is the movement out of the gallery and museum into other sites for the purpose of exhibiting art. There were a number of completely different reasons for this development, which began in the 1950s and continues to this day. For some, it was a reaction to the sterility of "white space" galleries (themselves reactions to the ornate culturally-loaded exhibition salons such as the Royal Academy). For others, the "closed" nature of the art scene meant that getting any chance to show work in a gallery was difficult. And for others, working outside of the gallery represented an opportunity to address audiences outside of the accepted "art scene," particularly deprived and marginalized social groups. Still others reacted to the opportunity to work in unusually-textured, atmospheric, culturally-loaded spaces where traces of "what went before" and "what is happening now" could be played out as part of the art work.

Site-specific art came out of these sometimes-conflicting agendas. In Europe from the late 1980s it (along with other developments in art) can be seen as a distinct response to specific economic, social and political conditions. Artist Lennie Lee - who was associated with the ARC group and other East End London projects, as well as the formative years of Tacheles and Berlin avant-garde - says "I first heard the term "site-specific art" in the late 80's, applied to what I and my friends were doing. What we were doing, actually, was making art out of other people's waste: waste buildings, waste products, in waste neighbourhoods." Here there was a DIY and anti-authoritarian agenda that derived from the punk movement.

Site-specific and site-responsive art are movements that engage with the problem of the division between "art" and "everyday life" in modern bourgeois society. In his 1947 book, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre had attacked the passive consumption of material and cultural products and argued for a cultural life that was more active and creative. The Situationists (some of whom were his students) took up this idea and made it a part of their program of action against the "Society of the Spectacle." The Situationists, many of whom were artists, deeply opposed the institution of art as it existed, and they produced posters and

montages (directly inherited from dada, particularly Berlin dada) to be widely distributed and copied – not made into art-ifacts. (Of course, within a generation, like the Fluxus, their works - mostly journals - are now collected and exhibited in museums.) As Pierre Bourdieu writes:

Nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose the act of artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp, they are immediately converted into “artistic acts”, recorded as such and thus consecrated and celebrated by the makers of taste. Art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event.

(Bourdieu,. *The field of cultural production*)

Art & “Everyday Life”

The traditional division or split between “art” and “daily life” was first articulated by the German aesthetic philosophers, who compared the classical works of antiquity which they saw as timeless and universal examples of beauty, heroism etc. with the Flemish painters’ depiction of the humble realities of daily life. Schiller, for example, exhorted the artist to “Let him gaze upwards, to the dignity of his calling and the universal Law, not downwards towards Fortune and the needs of daily life.” (Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 57) Schiller and the other German writers wanted above all to differentiate art production from the production of the other commodities of the market. Hence art should be separate not only in its production but in its subject-matter. The argument for the autonomy of art sat badly with the realities of the modern bourgeois state: as the era of Church and aristocratic patronage declined the bourgeoisie naturally took their place as the principal acquirers of art. But since the vast majority of artists were - and are – scions of the bourgeoisie themselves, the problem of how to differentiate and make autonomous the production and values of art also becomes a problem of rebellion or rejection of one’s own birthright. This becomes one of the significant issues in Western art from the late 19th century: the desire to shock the bourgeoisie, while at the same time being deeply implicated in bourgeois values and culture¹ – and cultivating them as buyers and supporters of art.

Fortunately for artists, the human desire to create elites and the desire for acquisition (attributed to the bourgeoisie, but certainly not limited to them) meant that, however shocking and insulting the anti-bourgeois art (Duchamp’s “Fountain,” or Manzoni’s tinned faeces, for example), there will always be somebody ready to support it in order to claim super-elite status for himself as taste-leader, or to avoid being left out of the elite (see quote by Bourdieu, above).

Other artists have chosen to side-step the practice of shocking the bourgeoisie, and sought a mixed audience and different ideals. There have been two distinct strains at work here, both dating from the 1970’s. The movement towards “community art” particularly in the UK and USA, attempted to include groups which even though they were not in the minority (e.g. working class people, women) were for the most part shut out of the bourgeois locus for art consumption by the creation of an elitist atmosphere in galleries and art events. Inspired in part by the revolutionary Mexican mural painters, “community” artists initiated projects usually with local funding, to regenerate local areas in conjunction with local people working on the project.

The other strain takes its cue more from DADA and Fluxus “happenings” and seeks to create art as an inclusive “event”. The artist is still in control and the artist’s craft is still the focus of the project, but the “event” usually takes place outside of the museum and gallery. The creation of an atmosphere totally separate from the bourgeois gallery atmosphere leads audiences who would never go to a gallery, to attend the “event” and thus be exposed to the art. The aim is inclusiveness without compromising the art practice. The problem with working inside the institution is that the receptor of the work and ideas will be drawn from a very specific

subgroup. Even the radical Joseph Beuys, with his exhortations that “everyone is an artist,” found his audience mainly among those that habitually went to the major galleries and museums where his work and performances were presented.

One of the biggest problems with community art as it is practiced now is that, the way the funding works, initiatives often predefine who the “community” is, with very strict criteria as to who is “in” and who is “out.” In one London borough, “community” is defined as a single racial grouping, ignoring the many others living in the borough, and totally ignoring issues of class. The other huge problem is that in most cases there is seen a separation of “artists” and “the community.” This is an unfortunately widely-held perception. Artists are “invited into the community” – even though they are of course already part of the community: living, shopping, working and socialising there. In London boroughs with high concentration of artists such as Hackney and Tower Hamlets, this institutional division is even more acute, and therefore more ridiculous.²

While “community” art has its social uses, one has to question if they are also art uses. Community artists have understandably complained that their involvement in community projects cuts no ice whatsoever with the art establishment.³ The opposition of “high” art and “community” art is mutually antagonistic. “High” art is marked by the obscure, anti-retinal art, minimalism, self-reflexive art (“art about art”), and is judged by a small elite. “Community” art is considered to have a social rather than artistic purpose not concerned with aesthetics, nor striving for any kind of “excellence” and there is no workable criterion for judgment of it. While both of these views are not entirely correct, these perceptions are enough to show the vast gulf of purpose and comprehension between both forms of practice.

“Inclusive” art (for want of a better term) tries to bridge the gap, with varying degrees of success. “The community” is defined as “everyone who wants to come” and the presentation of the works, though not the works themselves, is intended to be accessible as part of “everyday life”. This type of exhibition can be either an event, as discussed, or an exhibition in a non-gallery public space such as a community centre, theatre, hospital, train station, or disused public building etc. Again, the artist has a difficult time being accepted into the “art establishment” (assuming this is what he/she wants) though the crossover to the gallery is much easier than for the “community” artist, since the artist can be portrayed as “underground,” “cutting edge” and so on.

Apart from all of this, artists are still getting on with the job of making art that is “relevant” to them, and as members of the community, is relevant to others as well. Site-responsive art is one form that is integrated into immediate concerns of the locality and community, but is very much about the development of an art practice. Site-responsive art is deeply implicated in the problem of “everyday life” as a locus for, and possibly subject for, art. The artist and the art work are making a direct response to the issues of space and time, taking the particular and extrapolating from it the universal — which is traditionally seen as the purpose of art. In this way, site-responsive art can be seen as a distant inheritor of the Flemish school (as criticized by the aestheticists), which sought to make a relationship between art and life: bringing images of “life” that spiritual universal quality, which the critics felt properly belonged to “uplifting” subjects such as religion, classical antiquity of history.

The choices made by artists to work outside of the gallery environment are as individual as the artist. To be sure, many artists initially show in non-art sites as they develop, with the aim of ultimately entering the gallery system. Some, as noted, come to art out of the punk/squatter/DIY scene and those that continue to practice as artists can be later taken up as examples of the “underground.” And others develop site-responsive practice intentionally as a specific art form.

Rebecca Horn

In still other cases, some established artists began over time to move into “non-art” spaces. Rebecca Horn was associated with “body art” in her early works which involved performances (by Horn or others) while wearing elaborate prosthetic or other devices, which emphasised or constricted areas of the body. From this she moved into film-making, a logical outcome of her Super-8 documentations of the performances/costumes. By the 1990’s however she began to move into

installation art. Initially sited in galleries and museums, by 1998's "Mirror of the Night" in Stommeln synagogue, she had begun to work in culturally-significant places. In 1999 she made perhaps her most emotionally charged work to date: "Concert for Buchenwald" in two sites in the town of Weimar. Even before this it was clear that Horn had become preoccupied by issues of living with history, living in history:

The escalation of events in Yugoslavia had already passed through the tragedy of a second winter in Sarajevo... Vienna's underground was populated by the refugees of the war. These abandoned people were hiding in doorways and subway tunnels. The energy of a special kind of music was present everywhere one went. These people somehow still needed to articulate themselves – no longer with a cry, nor in their language, all they had was their music. This was their only way of expressing their pain...before Hitler occupied Vienna, the city virtually became transit station, and suddenly this desperate exodus was happening all over again. As a counterbalance to this momentum of flight, I tried to establish a sense of stability within a space where these nameless people might rediscover their identity.

Near the flea market I constructed a "Tower of Violins" inside a building, A Yugoslav gypsy came every day and with his own violin-playing transformed the music performed by the mechanical violins, thus creating a new harmony out of disharmony.

(Rebecca Horn, 1994 in *Rebecca Horn*)

This dialectic expressed by Horn, of creating "a new harmony out of disharmony" is central to the type of site-specific practice that "Tower of the Nameless" exemplifies: art as a site *response*. Like Lennie Lee's "art out of waste products and waste places" the project came out of a direct encounter between the physical and social locale and the artist's own experience. Rather than simply being a novel, convenient or attractive place to site art, the site-response involves a dialectical relationship between artist and site. The artist mediates between the site's past and present, use and non-use, topography and location, and out of this dynamic comes the work.

Art as site-response sits uneasily within the "art world." In the work of Hans Haacke for example, site-response can mean uncovering and exposing dubious relations involved in the dealings of the site's managers. More affirmingly, his "Bevolkerung" installation for the new Reichstag sought to reaffirm the role of the "People" as opposed to the "Volk" (which has fascist, racist connotations) in post-1989 Germany.

Clearly social, political and economic concerns have done much to shape the development of site-responsive art, particularly in Europe. The reunification of Berlin and repopulation of vast areas of former "no-man's-land" in the city centre gave a "blank canvas" to the many artists who flocked there from the UK, other parts of east and West Germany and elsewhere. Likewise, abandoned industrial spaces in east London have hosted movements of site-responsive art, though in most cases there does not seem to have been any sustained development of practice.

Some very interesting works are beginning to emerge from Russia and the former Soviet Union. The Armenian artist Vazo (Vazgen Pahlavuni-Tadevossian) took over an abandoned industrial region of the partially destroyed (by earthquake) town of Gyumri, and made installations out of the remains. The video and performance group Blue Noses in Novosibirsk, Siberia locked themselves and some German artists in an abandoned bunker and filmed the series of actions that was the result of their incarceration. In the city of Nizhny Novgorod and other sites in the region between the Volga city and Moscow, the Nizhny-Moscow group

Dirizhable (Eugene Strelkov, Mikhail Pogarsky, Nikolai Olenikov, Olga Khan, Andrey Suzdalev, Mikhail Volokhov and Natalya Kulikova) have been creating a series of landscape and semi-urban interventions in areas of some significance.

Dirizhable's work is semi-urban because they are interested in exploring areas of habitation which are on the edge of the urban area: the frozen river Volga in winter, an abandoned generating plant visible from the city centre but difficult to access by road, the villages of Drakino near Moscow and Cheremas near Nizhny. As Eugene Strelkov, the founder of Dirizhable, writes:

The global categories of Time and Space shape themselves here into interrelationship of the Impermanent and the Local: the former interpreted as the basic perishability of the work of art (erosion and obliteration are the only ways in which it can evolve over time), and the latter being the basis for the very existence of this object. (Strelkov, Floodplain of Time)

In each of these cases, the artists are responding to specific situations in the locale they choose. Not only the physical situation (abandoned, derelict space) but the social situation: political change (in the case of the GDR and former Soviet Union) and economic change (decline of industry affecting the whole locale in social as well as topographical ways). In the case of Berlin, this was recognised in a global-art context when Christo and Jeanne Claude wrapped the Reichstag in 1995 in preparation for its rebuilding.

(Footnotes)

1 As Julian Stallabrass points out, the contemporary BritArt obsession with mass culture - always accompanied by irony - is equally implicated in this process: serving up the vilest excesses of mass culture with a cool, knowing, *faux-naïf* nod to the elite system which validates it as art. (Stallabrass, High Art Lite)

2 See Miwon Kwon *One Place After Another*, for an extended discussion of the problems of community art in the US context. pp. 100-155.

3 One London artist, who works in both community and "established" venues - her work is exhibited in the Saatchi collection - has said that although she has done many projects in schools and community centres, none of it can go on her CV since it will actually downgrade her cachet in the eyes of the art world!