

# ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

## EVA RODRIGUEZ RIESTRA RETURN OF THE SITE: RELATIONAL SPATIALITY AND THE RECLAMATION OF PUBLIC SPACE.

*There is no there there* - Gertrude Stein *Everybody's Autobiography*

I became interested in site-specific art while researching current practice in public art policy and commissions. Two things provoked my curiosity. Firstly, as an architect/urban designer newly appointed to the role of public art program manager, I dutifully soaked up as much information as I could about best practice in commissioning and planning public art projects. This initial research revealed a generally unquestioning adherence by policy writers, commissioning bodies, critics and some artists to the desirability of site specificity in public art, without

however, any explanation or analysis of the term and its implications. Secondly, the preliminary research for what has become my thesis involved familiarising myself with the history of and current discourse on site-specific art. The historical account and critique of site specificity in art reads like a chronicle of the progressive deterritorialisation and dematerialisation of the physical site to the point where there seems to be no 'site' in 'site-specific' art.

Possibly because I am an architect and rather literal about these things, I was intrigued by the disappearing site from site-specific practice, or rather from the account of site-specific practice, as I was aware not only of the interest in site specificity on the part of public art curators and commissioners, but also of the work of many contemporary artists which is literally grounded in notions of place, locality and spatiality. This contradiction regarding site – the unquestioning acceptance of its importance in policy documents on the one hand, and its gradual evaporation from the literature on the other – has sown the seeds of my research. My paper aims to address this split and present some of my observations and introduce what I see as a new direction in site-specific art practice and a return to the physical site, albeit in an ephemeral and relational, twenty-first century kind of way.

### **Background**

The literature on site-specific art is surprisingly limited and primarily concerned with practices based in English-speaking countries and spanning just the last four decades. Part of my research is an attempt to look beyond this account and to locate site specificity within broader frameworks of social, spatial and urban theory; and also to lean on relatively new accounts of the relational, social, collaborative and dialogical in current art practice in order to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between site and site-driven artistic practice.

By way of background, I'm going to very briefly outline the established account of site-specificity in the literature. The precursor to articulating the relationship between a particular place and a situated intervention is the notion of *genius loci*, or the spirit of a place, which springs from the ancient Roman belief that every independent entity, including place, has a spirit that dwells within and determines the entity's character and essence. The idea that interventions should relate to and fit in with the physical and cultural characteristics of a place has come in and out of fashion in Western thought since these earliest of times, and has been resuscitated and repudiated periodically, each manifestation a counterpoint to the opposing view.<sup>1</sup>

According to this model, the incarnation of site-specific art practice which emerged in the wake of Minimalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a response to the Modernist paradigm, displacing the pure space of Modernism with the impure materiality of the every day; and replacing the visual hegemony of the

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<sup>1</sup> Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalised World (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2003). P 13

disembodied Cartesian eye with the presence of the embodied viewer moving around and through the work. Modernist sculpture absorbed its pedestal and severed its connection with the site, rendering itself autonomous, self-referential, and placeless.<sup>2</sup>

Much Minimalist art focused on the relationship between the work, the surrounding space and the presence of the viewer<sup>3</sup> and often based on a conscious and critical interaction between a physical object and a physical site, and where these are inextricably linked. In the 1970s, the massive Land Art projects demonstrated a context-specific development in site-specific art, and at the same time various forms of institutional critique and conceptual art developed different models of site-specificity that, according to Kwon, “implicitly challenged the innocence of space”.<sup>4</sup> Institutional critique is a form of systematic enquiry which in the case of these works served to investigate the relationship between an artwork and its place of display. The white, climate-controlled box of the gallery was perceived as an institutional disguise which disassociated the space of art from the real world.<sup>5</sup> An example is Michael Asher’s 1979 relocation of the 1788 George Washington monument from its original location outside the main entrance of the Art Institute to a gallery inside the building, thereby redefining the sculpture’s meaning in terms of its new context. This mode of site-specific art focused on decoding institutional conventions, and the site was conceived not only in physical and spatial terms but as a cultural framework.

From the early 1990s many artists turned away from the gallery in order to engage with the outside world and everyday life, instigating a critique of culture. The community-focused, issue-based, activist ‘new genre public art’ was based on engagement and dealing with social issues<sup>6</sup> and the site of the practice not a physical location but an audience, an issue or a community.<sup>7</sup>

A further development sees the artist as ethnographer or anthropologist<sup>8</sup> and the acts of collecting, preserving, collating and displaying transformed into processes of art production.<sup>9</sup> In this mode of site specificity, the actual location and the institutional frame are both subordinate to a discursively determined site presented as a field of knowledge or cultural debate, and this site is not necessarily preexisting, but can be generated by the work.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002). P 11

<sup>3</sup> Julie H. Reiss, From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1999). P 50-66

<sup>4</sup> Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. P13

<sup>5</sup> Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. P 13

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ed., Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). P19

<sup>7</sup> Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. P 109

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996). P171-203

<sup>9</sup> Martha Buskirk, The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2003). P186

<sup>10</sup> Kwon, One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity.

There are two further steps in this brief account of the disappearance of the physical site. First, a global culture of itinerancy caused by the unprecedented rise in mobility, communications and globalisation has led to the rise of the nomadic artist, and influenced the terms of production itself, where biennales see similar or the same versions of site-specific works recreated in different locations. Second, galleries and museums have absorbed the forms of institutional critique.<sup>11</sup> The relocation and re-creation of site-specific works has seen retrospective exhibitions of “unrepeatable” works become commonplace, particularly seminal works from the 1960s and 1970s. By these acts, the spatial and temporal specificity of the site is rendered irrelevant.

### **Return of the Site**

The principal theoretical point of departure for this paper is the final chapter of Miwon Kwon’s 2002 book on site specificity, *One Space After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. The book provides a comprehensive effort to construct a history of site specific art. Following an overview which details the genealogy of site-specific art briefly outlined earlier, Kwon problematises contemporary site-specific art practice as she seeks to make it reflect the deterritorialised, nomadic and fragmented context of modern experience by introducing and interrogating two possibilities for site-specific practice in this context. Firstly the “retrieval and resuscitation of a lost sense of place”<sup>12</sup> best exemplified by Lucy Lippard in *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multi-centered Society*. While this approach naturally addresses issues of alienation and homogenization, it can, according to Kwon, easily fall into nostalgia and irrelevance.<sup>13</sup> The second approach celebrates the nomadic by embracing instability, impermanence and ambiguity as desired attributes of artistic practice. The ‘site’ in this framework is positioned as “predominantly an intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation”<sup>14</sup> While the fluidity afforded by this approach is a powerful tool for dismantling traditional orthodoxies, Kwon is rightly suspicious of the seduction and vulnerability of this nomadic state.

In response to these unsatisfactory solutions, Kwon proposes an approach to site specificity which is located between the nostalgic and nomadic possibilities and argues that “the phantom of a site as an actual place remains, and our psychic, habitual attachment to places regularly returns, as it continues to inform our sense of identity”.<sup>15</sup> Kwon proposes the demarcation of a relational specificity that in her view “can hold in dialectical tension the distant poles of spatial experience”<sup>16</sup> of the owners of space and of the dispossessed. For Kwon this practice would

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<sup>11</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork," *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). P230

<sup>12</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P158

<sup>13</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P159

<sup>14</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P160

<sup>15</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P166

<sup>16</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P166

involve addressing the uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances “*between* one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment *next* to another, rather than invoking equivalences via one thing *after* another.”<sup>17</sup>

I agree with Kwon’s analysis but disagree with her proposal on two counts: firstly the grudging acknowledgement of the persistence of the “lingering” presence of the physical site seems to be based solely on the notion of place as generator of self-identity, which to me seems, at the very least, an incomplete assessment. Secondly, there is not much difference - beyond eliminating an implied hierarchy in the sequential relationship – between the notion of things “next” to each other and the notion of things “after” one another. Kwon’s proposed approach is relational only insofar as it provides opportunity for the examination of adjacencies and relationships, but it does not allow for the creation of new ones and remains unsatisfactorily abstract and removed from both the relational and the spatial.

An alternative approach to locating meaningful site-oriented art practice could be developed by observing the many practitioners who have returned to the site: not to a discursive, functional site, nor to a nostalgic or a phenomenological reading of place, and not exclusively in the search for identity; but to an engagement with the particularities of a location and to the creation of different types of relationships between people and between people and places. These practices can be identified as site-specific, however they also reflect a number of parallel developments in thought and practice. The first of these is the idea of relational aesthetics, initially articulated by Nicolas Bourriaud in his influential book of the same name. Bourriaud identifies a number of contemporary artists whose work is focused on inter-human relationships and the invention of new forms of sociability,<sup>18</sup> and argues for a new way for critics to engage with this work. It is of interest to me that Bourriaud’s work is almost completely devoid of a sense of spatiality. He argues that relational art has evolved due to global urbanization, but his view of the city is temporal rather than spatial,<sup>19</sup> and while many of the terms he uses are spatially charged – conviviality, encounters, dialogue, clusters, collaborations, even cohabitations and co-existence – the implied spatiality is isolated or ignored.

I would like to touch on the era of the spatial turn announced by Foucault in the late 1980s which he saw as the epoch of simultaneity, juxtaposition, the near and far, the side by side and the dispersed,<sup>20</sup> and which we are experiencing today. It is interesting to note that Foucault conceived the term ‘site’ as the contemporary replacement for the modern notion of ‘extension’ introduced by Galileo, which in turn had replaced the hierarchical ‘emplacement’ of Medieval times.<sup>21</sup> Foucault’s

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<sup>17</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. P166

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: les presses du reel, 1998). P28

<sup>19</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. P15

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986). P22

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." P23

categories call to mind Henri Lefebvre's influential trilogy of spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation, as well as Soja's "socio-spatial dialectic". The ubiquitousness of the spatial turn is evidenced not only by the myriad discourses relating to the matter in geography, anthropology, psychology, architecture, urban theory, economics and many other fields, but also by the mobility and google-earthness of our everyday lives. In the art world, many practitioners have engaged with spatial themes – migration, gentrification, globalization – or used spatial tools – mapping, walking, border crossing, locative media – or made spatial moves - juxtapositions, adjacencies, simultaneities - and can also be said to form part of the 'spatial turn'

### **Relational Spatiality**

Within this context of the spatial, however, are practices which are specific in their spatiality (ie they relate to a particular place) and which I see as a return to the site. The works demonstrate different types of engagements and relationships with place. A study of these works is becoming the backbone of my thesis, but for the purpose of this paper I will briefly introduce them. The practitioners range from the very established to the emerging and the left of field, the practices vary greatly in media, process and intent, but they all in some way create a closer relationship with a particular site.

Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) is an audio walk which takes the listener on a winding journey through Central Park, retracing the steps of a mysterious dark-haired woman. Aided by photographs and fragments of music, the viewer/listener/walker has an enhanced experience of the park, involving all the senses plus memory and imagination. The work interweaves the experience of the site with local history and fictional accounts, creating an immersive experience of place.<sup>22</sup>

Another project is Alex Villar's *Temporary Occupations* (2001), a video work depicting the artist briefly occupying private spaces adjacent to the public domain, articulating their spatial continuity while subverting their boundaries.<sup>23</sup> By documenting the action of ignoring the city's spatial codes, Villar establishes a relationship of equivalence between the depicted and actual spaces and between the body of the artist and the viewer.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the practices I'm investigating generally occupy the more convivial aspects of relational aesthetics as presented by Bourriaud, but some reflect Claire Bishop's argument that the relational be permitted to extend to the antagonistic

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<sup>22</sup> Mirjam Schaub, Janet Cardiff. *The Walk Book* (Vienna: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Company, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> *Temporary Occupations* | Alex Villar, Available: <http://www.de-tour.org/projects/2001/12/temporary-occupations.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Nato Thompson and Greg Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (North Adams: MASS MoCA, 2004). P67

and challenging<sup>25</sup> and the relationships formed are from the challenging end of the relational spectrum. Wojciech Gilewicz's *Revitalisations* (2007) project in Sanok, Poland, while consisting of relatively harmless interventions which see the artist mirroring the gentrification of his home town with small paintings that repair the most squalid and neglected fragments of the urban tissue, were often the focus of harassment to the artist and destruction of the works.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the projects can be described as nomadic while still focusing on a particular place. In *Loneliness in the City* (1999-2000) Alicia Framis travelled to five European cities, using each city's specific culture and the possibilities it provided to find a way out of loneliness in that particular place. She used a specially designed tent for workshops, lectures, parties and other activities. Framis' ambition was that the project would live on after she and the tent pavilion had moved on. In this way, she launched an idea and a framework in which other artists and administrators could continue to operate.<sup>27</sup> In some works the artist is a stranger that moves in to a new place and the every day social engagements form the centre of the work. Maria Papadimitriou's ongoing work in Alviza, Greece *TAMA – Temporary Autonomous Museum for All* started in 1998.<sup>28</sup>

In Francis Alys' work *Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic*, which he carried out in Jerusalem in 2005, the artist walked the pre-1967 border between West and East Jerusalem while dripping green paint from a tin. Along his journey he meets Palestinian children, Israeli soldiers, Orthodox Jews... The line echoes the green line drawn on a map by Moshe Dayan to mark the original armistice boundary.

In *Alt-Terats*, the all-female artist collective Rotorrr forged a series of routes through the roof terraces of Barcelona in order to obtain "passage rights" from the owners. These roof terraces were mapped creating a new interconnected layer of public space high above the streets. The relationships forged with the inhabitants and amongst the new users of the space were further enhanced by a series of events such as sporting contests which took place on the terraces.<sup>29</sup>

A final example is *Gathering Ground*, a community-based performance and multimedia work at The Block in Redfern Sydney. Organised by Tracey Duncan, Karen Therese and the residents of The Block, it took the form of a guided tour, inviting an audience into Gadigal land and what is perceived by many

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<sup>25</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall 2004 (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Agata Sulikowska-Dejena, *Wojciech Gilewicz's Revitalisations*, Available: <http://www.gilewicz.net/en/rewitalizacje.html>, December 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Lilet Breddels, ed., *Alicia Framis: Works 1995-2003* (Amsterdam: Artimo, 2003). P4-21

<sup>28</sup> Maria Papadimitriou, *T.A.M.A. Temporary Autonomous Museum for All*, 2006, Available: <http://www.tama.gr/index.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Rotorrr, *Alt Terats*, 2006, Available: <http://rotorrr.org/terrats/index.html>.

Sydneysiders as a no-go area. It is part ceremony, part history walk, part tourist attraction and part protest, and a re-presenting of this contested place.<sup>30</sup>

These works, and many others like them, could be seen as expressions of the spatial turn mentioned above, or simply described as examples of relational art. However I feel that their lineage is within site-specific art, and they represent a new direction which is intrinsically both localized and social, signaling a return to the site and a relational and spatial engagement with place and people.

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<sup>30</sup> Gathering Ground, 2008, Available: <http://www.gatheringground.org/>.



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