

Talk given by Delpha Hudson at Site-specificity - an introduction

Delpha Hudson

By way of introducing site-specificity I am going to briefly look at expanded notions of site, its definitions, and its problematisations, in order to examine how and why site is a significant issue in art, and more importantly how and why we can put 'site' to good use in art projects in the SW.

The expansion of the understanding of art means every work of art has a notion of site; paintings for a gallery, installations in a home, sculpture for landscape or the city, performance for an audience (audience as site), work about the body (the body as 'site'), community projects for inhabitants (community as site), internet sites - (virtual site), video (technology as site).....

Ah, definitions - we need them but how often do they exceed and often contradict themselves, until at best they are meaningless, or at worst useless.

Originally site-specific work was work dependent on qualities or meanings produced in specific relationships between 'object' or 'event' and a position it occupies. I would like to 'site' site-specific art within contemporary and conceptual art structures; Referring to Osbourne's definitions of conceptual art, I have made a list which places site-specificity as an important feature of contemporary and conceptual art modes.

1. As intervention into structures of everyday life - citing work beyond the gallery and its exclusiveness to become part of everyday life:

- (i) Jenny Holzer, Survival 1983-5, Picadilly circus
- (ii) Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hartford wash, Maintenance 1973

2. Providing alternative ideological positions; citing work to provide alternative ideas about politics and ideology:

- (iii) Judy Chicago, The dinner Party, 1974-79
- (iv) Huan Zhang, to raise the water level of a fish pond, Beijing, 1997

3. Works that direct attention to power relations in institutions - ie. art galleries

- (v) Broodthaers, Musee d'art Moderne,
- (vi) Claus Oldenberg's 'Hole', Central Park, 1967?

4. Negation of material objectivity

- (vii) Janine Antoni 'to draw a line', 2003 Gallery performance New York
- (viii) Andre Stitt, 'God is sexy' street work, 1997

I have used examples, many of which could fit into each category as given, none of the work is exclusive and most are examples of work operating on many different levels.

Site and place:

So let's backtrack a little from expanded notions of site just to look at its most common use as it relates to 'place'. The implications of 'place' can be political, social, cultural, historical,

philosophical, poetic, psychic....Lippard names it as 'intersections of nature, culture and ideology' place is where,

'time and space coalesce in place in deeper metaphoric, symbolic meanings beyond surface appearance'.

The place where art happens (the site) gives it meaning and life. The 'event' of art relates to notions of uniqueness as 'events' do not happen unless they happen somewhere, and this is firmly part of post-enlightenment idea that something cannot be in two places at once.

The historical connection between art and context seemed indissoluble. For example: cave paintings, church stained glass windows,until you came to objects displayed in white cubes. Modern art objects were specifically sited in increasingly ubiquitous, anonymous spaces, sites where the value was in the object and not in its relation to anything but market forces, and refined formalist tastes. In this way it could be re-sited and moved around anywhere in the world, anywhere that had a good gallery space. As a reaction to this, artists of the 60s and 70s, worked beyond the gallery systems; they returned to, invested and investigated different meanings and form, from the particular locations where work was installed. (ie Oldenburg's 'hole', other 'environment & land art')

Lucy Lippard in her critique 'Dematerialisation of the Object' reports that:

'Nelson Rockefeller supposedly once told Franz Kline ("jokingly") that the only reason collectors bought art was to keep artists from being revolutionaries. for a while in the 60s this strategy stopped working'

Two problematizations:

The problem is one of 'sited' works (ones that are made in/or for a particular site) which once removed - do they lose their function as art? In the case of Richard Serra's (much cited!) *Tilted Arc*, he was very clear that once this work was moved, it ceased to exist as 'art', and was destroyed.*image 9.

Other artists do not feel the same about re-siting works. There are many examples of specifically sited work from the 60s and 70s being re-created, and re-sited, often in gallery spaces. The question remains of how they function without the specifics of place and site and the meanings invested in them: have artists sold out to indiscrimination, market forces, empowered gallery/institutional networks....?

It is common to now re-site works like Hatoum's *Light sentence* (1992) image 10* originally made for a site near a prison in the US but re-shown around the world including Newlyn Art Gallery, 1997. Still a powerful piece the question for me when I saw it was, did it matter that it had lost its relation to the original site, what meaning still remained...? - I was glad that I could experience this 'event' in the flesh, but it does raise serious questions.....

Lippard has said: 'history created and recreated is the mothercode of tourism'. As well as asking questions about what it means to re-site, 'sited' works, we need to ask questions about other current trends in artists as tourists, a kind of 'culture surfing',... globe trotting artists, guests, tourists, adventurers, temporary in-house critics, pseudo-ethnographers, 'experts'/exotic visitors - creating discomposure between artists and 'place', working in places they do not belong, possibly working in or with sites (including 'communities', audiences,) they do not understand. We need as artists to ask questions about this current trend and to be aware of the problems and contradictions that it creates in our practices.

Critics and theorists, among them Thierry Le Dure, have noted the universalization and homogenization of a modern world 'trying to reconstruct the notion of site having acknowledged its disappearance'. A world globalised, fragmented, fluid, nomadic, alienated, placelessness, deterritorialized with a secret, persistent longing for 'place', and of artists 'yoking together the myth of originality and the unique identity of places which exposes the sense of loss and vacancy of both...'

Well, whether you agree or disagree with this notion, there are certainly art works which produce this kind of anxiety. What is required is a new co-ordination of art and site as an 'open-ended predicament' and new models of 'belonging-in -transience'. Wodidzko's 'homelessness vehicle'. Image 11*

Inter-textuality, Time and Documentation

The presence of the artist (as text, context, 'site') has become a prerequisite for site-orientated works - 'performance' in some way of the artist mediating space/place/site through subjective experience. In this way notions of 'site' owe something to deconstructive tendencies, revealing how meaning changes with the reader (audience), and time and context.

'Land is a natural phenomenon, 'landscape' is a cultural construct. Places exist external and independent to our thinking about them, but the concepts we use to organise and interpret the place are inventions and interventions of human thought'.

Liz Wells

Artists use texts (sites: body, culture, social issues, time, audience) that interact creating intertextuality and multiple histories. A term for this is 'syncretic' that which mixes/juxtaposes multiple cultural references and ideas. 'Time' is an important part of this. Victor Burgin said,

'Locations are fixed by definition but the actual spaces to which they refer are in continual flux and so impossible to separate from time'.

Eleanor Antin's '100 boots' project, 1971-3, image 14*

The boots (objects) perform, photographs reconstruct the historical event, they are indexical to site, outside gallery. using sites as temporary, permeable, fragmentary, subjective, nomadic....they place with time, space, place and perception.

So, here, now, in this site, today at Hypatia trust, we are sitting underneath an archive. Looking for histories of site-specific performances that have already taken place in Penwith, there are histories, many fragmented, constructed, some lost. This brings us to questions of 'counter-memory', veracity, documentation of place and event. I use as an example from the archive, Alistair Maclennan's 'Rein, Rain, Reign', 'a work alluding to life in Cornwall' at Newlyn Gallery 1994. (images, flyers and comments book available from archive). What remains of this 'event'? What impressions can we get of the meaning...from the comments book? Images? I'm sure further research would reveal more but what remains here of the sites of this performance, what kind of representation of site remains, even here at the site of the archive?

Jean-Paul Martinon asks these questions (in 'Art, Lies, videotape, exposing performance'.) of 'posing images as questions' and the 'mystery of the event', as in performance if we miss the primary 'event', we can only rely on the secondary sources, the documentation or the 'specter' of the event. Derrida's idea of what we imagined happened.

The performances today (have had the potential to) change and reveal past and future histories of 'sited/place' art in this area. This is a place with a very rich cultural lode, of Art Schools (Newlyn and St Ives), ceramics, fishing, tourism, to name a few,... To produce art that is other than marketable, object-based is really significant. To produce work which countenances and works with notions of 'culture surfing', artistic tourism, and intertextuality, as well as producing.. effective documentary remains are all things that we should be thinking about in our work as artists in this area. We should all be looking at things differently: eg Refer to Wrights & Sites book, Stephen Hodge and Exeter Misguide.

I want to leave you with two things:

Foster says art is a social sign, entangled with other signs in systems productive of value, power, and prestige. Artists use public space, social representation and artistic language - we should use site ' as both a target and weapon'.

I hope that some of my comments have provoked new ideas and thoughts although I know 'naming the parts doesn't make the gun go off'..(Linda Hutcheon), that is up to you...