

situations

Published essays

Claire Doherty

Public Art as Situation: Towards an Aesthetics of the Wrong Place in Contemporary Art Practice and Commissioning

Citation: Doherty, C. 2008. Public Art as Situation: Towards an Aesthetics of the Wrong Place in Contemporary Art Practice and Commissioning *In*. Jan Debbaut. 2008 (forthcoming) *Out of the Studio! Art and Public Space*. Hasselt: Z33.

Public Art as Situation: Towards an Aesthetics of the Wrong Place in Contemporary Art Practice and Commissioning

The serendipitous twinning of the front covers of *Artforum* and *Frieze* magazines this autumn should not have come as a surprise. The fervent anticipation of the 'celestial convergence' of the Venice Biennale, Art Basel, Documenta 12 and Sculpture Projects Muenster converged it would seem in the axis of Bruce Nauman's *Square Depression*. This image presented itself as an ideal cipher for the culmination of the Grand Tour — the moment at which the experience of being in the presence of the 'authentic' work of art was performed for the camera. It even seemed to epitomise the somewhat reactionary curatorial stance of Robert Storr, who, in his assertion to experience 'Art in the Present Tense', maintained:

"[Biennials] are places in which virtually anyone within reach can restore the aura that some have feared art has lost forever but which those who are alert can still summon for themselves in the presence of a unique image or form."

Some 30 years in waiting, Nauman's work offers a space in which the performance of discovery can be enacted. *I am standing in the Bruce Nauman! I have arrived!* Not surprisingly, the magazines' editorial teams chose the press photograph, in which the subjects at the axis of the work are in the process of being photographed. What is surprising about the image is how it decontextualises and displaces the work from public space, how it seems somehow out of place, from Muenster, and more broadly out of time, from the messiness, the unresolved quality of living in the present tense.

The full press photograph taken by Thorsten Arendt on 5 June 2007, some 10 days before the opening weekend, records the final moments of preparation as turf is laid around the work. But neither this distributed shot, nor the cropped magazine cover shot, reveal the rather non-descript architecture in which *Square Depression* is actually sited. Standing on or rather *in* the square, it's impossible not to be aware of the conditions of that place: the University precinct, the late 60s architectural façades of the Centre for Natural Sciences, your fellow art pilgrims and passers-by.

Yet this image not only misrepresents the experience of the work, in perhaps the way in which any circulated press image reduces the multi-layered situation of an artwork to an iconic image, but perhaps more importantly, misrepresents the actual experience of Sculpture Projects Muenster this year. The city offered few other moments of resolution such as this precisely because emergent forms of contemporary art practice seem

more closely aligned to the contemporaneity described recently by art historian Terry Smith as,

“the constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world... the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities... the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.” (Smith, 2006)

More often than not the experience of SP07 was one of delightful, frustrated intrigue (the inability to witness a work such as Dora Garcia’s *The Beggar’s Opera*¹), dislocation and interruption (Pawel Althamer’s *Path* leading nowhere) and displacement (Gustav Metzger’s *Aequivalenz- Shattered Stones* or Annette Wehrmann’s *Aaspa* or Martha Rosler’s *Unsettling the Fragments*). These projects emerged from the invitation to respond to the context of Muenster. Their newness was predicated on the ability of the artist to bring to bear their particular set of skills, time and imagination on the city. But what constitutes the city to which they were responding? Is it not a place of fictions itself – rebuilt in the 50s to resemble a medieval town, shaped through a series of interventions and contemporary art works over the past four decades.

The curators identify this tension between the artists’ complicity and resistance to the city’s image in their catalogue introduction:

„Even if due to its success, the exhibition has long become a key element in the city’s marketing image, it should be able to assert itself in difference to this official identity and the staging strategies employed to promote it.”(Franzen, Koenig et al. 2007)

Clearly this relates to a key issue for place-based art commissioning – namely how invited artists might address the instrumentalisation or use of their work for cultural tourism. But in my view, the answer is not simply a matter of subversion or resistance in a literal sense, more importantly it is about whether our notion of place to which we are inviting artists to respond is out-of-date.

Tim Griffin’s consideration of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s work *Roman de Münster* comes close in identifying the characteristics of a truly critical place-based work of art, which acknowledges the quixotic nature of place:

¹ <http://www.thebeggarsopera.org/>

„...a fiction that announces itself as such. Like Documenta, it too, is a dense constellation of objects gathered from across space and time; but it does not present itself as dilating outward to contain, or even merely to reflect, our moment and world. Rather, it draws attention to the images, the copies, the conceptions already in our heads, marking the distance between memory and history – paradoxically, even, since it conjures travel by allowing one to stand entirely still – and making apparent the implicit risk of confounding the two.“

We might also identify that Pawel Althamer's *Path*, which offered a riposte to the 1960s conceptualism of Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, but the artist also astutely recognised the conditions under which the viewer would encounter this work, namely on the SP07 itinerary. He leads the visitor off the prescribed route on a pointless pilgrimage, perhaps made all the more ingenious by the adjacent siting of Guillaume Bijl's *Archaeological Site (A Sorry Installation)* which seems, to my mind, to fold back into itself as a work which collapses into its own touristic referentiality.

But why should we concern ourselves with the disquieting nature of works on display in the city of Muenster, when considering the potentialities for a public art programme in Hasselt? I believe that Muenster offered the clearest example yet of the inherent contradictions of place-based art commissioning. Firstly, in my opinion, Muenster can no longer be experienced as a cohesive exhibition of art in public space due to the multiple temporal and discursive layers through which artists are now working, except perhaps by the residents of Muenster. It can, however, be experienced as a cumulative engagement between artists and the city and this raises questions about the promotion and analysis of curatorial projects such as this according as exhibitions and especially within the context of the Grand Tour.

Furthermore, it was possible to discern that the most successful works were those which seemed to offer some resistance to a nostalgic or literal representation of the city and in turn reflected a complicit relationship between the curator and artist effecting a kind of sense of “being in the wrong place”, a sense of dislocation, or displacement.

The rhetoric of ‘place’ has become the primary motivating force for the commissioning of contemporary art. In 2004, the ‘International’ component of the ‘Liverpool Biennial’ professed to “address and empower place as having value” (Biggs, 2004); Donostia-San Sebastian was conceived as “a privileged social site and catalytic trigger” for

'Manifesta 5', whilst in 2006, the 'Gwangju Biennale' purported to provide "an impetus to the city of Gwangju to be reborn as a geographical metaphor".² Most notable of recent place-based curatorial assertions was Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun's opening gambit for the 9th Istanbul Biennial in 2005, in which they proposed "an exhibition structure that folds out of and reveals its context – the city of Istanbul", by commissioning artists to respond both to the "urban location and the imaginative charge that this city represents for the world".³

Esche and Kortun's biennial signalled a pervasive shift in curatorial practice away from, what Declan McGonagle has termed, "wide and shallow [engagement] rather than narrow and deep – sightseeing rather than insight".⁴ 'Istanbul' emerged through a discursive process of short-term residencies and projects which sought to embed visiting artists and artworks within the city. It created intersections between local and international, and eschewed locations which might endorse a nostalgic or exotic view of the city. Furthermore, with the integration of critical platforms within the resulting exhibition – comprising the now ubiquitous biennial reading zones, workshops, talks series and home-grown journals – the curators established active participation as a key component of the public manifestation of the biennial, not just part of the research process.

Esche and Kortun's concept can be seen as a retort to the accusation that biennials operate merely as stopovers on the international circuit for the frequent-flyer tribe of artists and art *cognoscenti*; that biennials have little or no lasting impact on the inhabitants or cultural life of their host cities. Instead the co-curators of 'Istanbul' posited engagement with the city as the primary motivating force for their exhibition (albeit still within the signifying system of the global art economy). Realising the geopolitical ambitions of any biennial, the curator of this year's Istanbul Biennial, Hou Hanru, has described his exhibition as, "a non-stop machine for production of new urban life... an endless urban maze..."⁵ It is intriguing that Hanru asserts the notion of the exhibition as producing place, as opposed to representing or reflecting place.

² "Manifesta 5 Press Release." *Manifesta*. 29 March 2004.

<<http://www.manifesta.es/eng/prensa/notasdeprensa/manifesta5launchesitsprogram.htm>>; "Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Concept." *E-Flux*. 8 August 2005. <http://www.e-flux.com/displayshow.php?file=message_1123518772.txt>.

³ Istanbul Biennial Press Release. October 2004. <<http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/>>.

⁴ McGonagle, Declan. "Terrible Beauty." *International 04*. Ed. Paul Domela. Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2004.

⁵ <http://www.iksv.org/bienal10/english/detail.asp?cid=3&ac=conceptual>

The biennial is just one model in an expanding range of place-based commissioning models which emerge from a history of engagements between the international and local – international site-specific projects which preceded the recent swell of biennials, governed by the organising principle of place such as *TSWA Four Cities Project*, UK, 1990; the *Firminy Project* at Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation 1993, *Places With a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston*, 1992; *Antwerp 93: On taking a normal situation*, 1993;⁶ commissioning agencies and programmes (Locus+, Casco, Artangel); residency programmes with their concentration on engagement, process and encounter and urban regeneration programmes which recognise the contribution contemporary artists can make to place identity.

Over ten years ago, Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne identified the harnessing of this curatorial strategy for a region's economic and political gain in their article "Mapping International Exhibitions",

"The locale of an exhibition is embraced in its title as a rhetorical manoeuvre to appropriate cultural status, the meanings and the myths that attend the collective imagination attached to the city, region or country named..."⁷

(Ferguson, Greenberg et al. 1997)

So in Istanbul in 2005, we have not an artist's work nor the artists' names to market the biennial but the city itself. At the first press conference for SP07 we have, not the artists' work nor a logo as the backdrop, but a bird's eye view of the city.

But if we understand Istanbul or Muenster to be the primary motivating force for these exhibitions, where and how does artistic engagement with those places begin? Do the curatorial systems, refined over the last twenty years, to support artistic engagement with place truly acknowledge the conflicting nature of place itself? Considering the progressive notions of place advanced by geographers such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey in the early 1990s, how can curators support artistic engagements with places which can be seen to be "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations" rather than a fixed location (Massey 2005), or as geographer Tim Cresswell

⁶ Curated by Declan McGonagle and James Lingwood, Yves Aupetitallot. Mary Jane Jacob, Yves Aupetitallot, Iwona Blazwick and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev respectively.

⁷ This article was originally published in *On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present*. Antwerp: MUKHA, 1993: 135-152. A revised version was published in Harding, Anna. *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*. London: Art & Design, 1997.

has so usefully suggested, “[place as] an event marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence...in a constant sense of becoming through practice and practical knowledge”? (Cresswell et al 2002: 25-26)

One of the most useful and cogently argued new theorisations of place in relation to the commissioning and production of contemporary art is Miwon Kwon’s *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Kwon’s study is particularly pertinent for a consideration of curatorial responsibility in place. She raises significant questions about the motivating factors for participatory projects, critiquing the essentialising of site and community in context-specific projects.

Speculating on the impact of theories of deterritorialization and nomadism, Kwon argues that with increased pressure to conceive projects which engage locally but speak globally, comes a tendency to essentialize potential ‘communities’ and to confine art to a set agenda. Kwon suggests that community-based art might be approached as a “projective enterprise”, rather than a descriptive one and that projects should “unsettle”, “activate” and “raise questions”. (Kwon, 1998: 168) One might theorise the avant-garde struggle, she suggests, as a kind of spatial politics, “to pressure the definition and legitimation of art by locating it elsewhere, in places other than where it belongs”. (Kwon, 2002: 165) Hence, the intention to uncover lost histories, to reveal what is unknown to a city’s inhabitants, is essentially negated. Being situated, being embedded, to feel that you belong or at least ‘know’ a place, she suggests, is not necessarily of artistic merit.

It is Kwon’s assertion of an aesthetics of the wrong place that most interests me here and what this means for what Isabelle Graw has described as the “deep entanglement between artists and institutions and the degree to which institutions have determined the shape or direction of works especially made for or about them.” (Isabelle Graw, 2006) Essentially, even if the curatorial enterprise is to legitimate place identity, if we understand place to be an unstable, shifting set of political, social, economic and material relations – surely the works which connect and engage with a real sense of place will be those that engender a sense of dislocation – that enable the passer-by, the art pilgrim, the participant to see the city, place anew?

Fixed sites, itineraries which offer up works as points on a map and targeted constituencies are becoming redundant for the commissioning of place-based artworks because these formats no longer acknowledge the nature of place as an event-in-

progress. And yet, contemporary art criticism has yet to explore this dimension of situation-specificity, having concerned itself with ethics of artistic process over the past five years – which is particularly evident in the multiple misreadings of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (published in English in 2002), and subsequently through Claire Bishop's 2006 *Artforum* article, *The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents* (Bishop 2006) and her ongoing discussion with Grant Kester in the pages of *Artforum*.⁸

The symposium organised to promote Sculpture Projects Muenster held two months prior to the opening of Sculpture Projects in Muenster was entitled *Contemporary Sculpture and the Social Turn*. If we compare SP07 with the 1997 manifestation of the project, it is remarkable how few of the openly collaborative, collective practices have been incorporated this year, save for Maria Pask's resolutely utopian *Beautiful City*. The exhibition was less representative of participatory forms of practice, and more directly about an unfolding project of artistic engagements with urban space, place and history.

Though the ethical debate on social engagement has to some extent, extrapolated and qualified the terms by which such projects are brought into being, are researched, enacted and produced, I have found the conclusions unhelpful in regard to the analysis of place-based commissions, as critical evaluations of them on the basis of ethics versus aesthetics tend to decontextualise the works out of place and out of time.

For example, if we consider for a moment Javier Tellez' remarkable project *One Flew Over the Void*, 2005 simply on the basis of the process by which Tellez brought the event into being through his relationship with the patients of the Baja California Mental Health Center in Mexicali, we would surely miss the way in which this work was manifested on site where the Mexico/US international border fence disappears into the sea between Playas de Tijuana and Border Field State Park as part of the inSITE_05 interventions series of programmes and projects. As an artwork, *One Flew Over the Void* effectively destabilises power relations and mocks the parameter of the border. That it is still authored by the artist rather credited as a collaborative enterprise, has less to say about the nature of collaboration and more to say about the nature of Tellez' engagement with the San Diego/Tijuana borderzone as one of inSITE_05's visiting artists.

⁸ See (Kester 2006)

Furthermore, to consider Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains* or Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* purely as a forms of participatory practice and to ignore their subsequent manifestations, would be to miss the relationships in the works between the flow of capital and situatedness of communities, the nature of protest (at once impotent and potent) and the quixotic nature of collective memory.⁹

As works of art in public space, these projects are uniquely time-based and yet continue to circulate in art economy. They are performed and participatory yet clearly authored; place-based or place-responsive, yet communicate beyond the specifics of location. What brings these three projects together is their interest in exploring sites of conflict through the performing of a destabilisation of place – in Alÿs' work through a geological displacement; in Deller's work through re-enactment; in Tellez' through a spectacular, ironic event. All three are monumental; they are commemorations. But if we were to adhere to the current separation of collective versus studio-based practice, we would not see what connects these to other significant situation-specific works as diverse as Doris Salcedo's now infamous *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern, Roman Ondak's *Good Feelings in Good Times* or Maurizio Cattelan's *Hollywood*.

All these works produce an 'aesthetics of the wrong place' as proposed by art historian Miwon Kwon. Adapting and developing remarkably different artistic strategies from Situationist interruptions to collective action, environmental displacement to re-enactment, contemporary artists are unsettling the definition and legitimation of place-specific art by "locating it elsewhere, in places other than where it belongs" (Kwon, 2002: 165).

It seems to me that we could define a number of tendencies or approaches that have begun to emerge within contemporary practices which might be considered to affect a sense of the wrong place, which overlap and intersect across projects. One might characterise these as: displacement, interruption, protest, possession and intrusion.

⁹ 'The Battle of Orgreave' was a re-enactment of one of the most violent confrontations of the miners' strike in 1984, which took place on 17 June 2001. Francis Alÿs, 'Cuando la fé mueve montañas (When faith moves mountains)', 2002, in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega, Lima. Peru took place on 11 April 2002. 'One Flew Over the Void' a collaboration between Javier Tellez, the Baja California Mental Health Center in Mexico and human cannon ball David Smith took place in August 2005 as part of Insite_05. Smith was fired across the US-Mexican border – from Tijuana to a Border Field State Park in San Diego.

There is not enough space here to begin to unpick the disparate approaches to these tendencies, but we might begin with analysis of how displacement is differentiated between Javier Tellez's *One Flew Over the Void*, 2005, San Diego/Tijuana, Francis Alÿs' *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, Lima, Peru and Maurizio Cattelan's *Hollywood*, 2001, Palermo, Sicily for example. And how interruption is employed and unannounced in Pawel Althamer's *Film*, 2000, Ljubljana, 2004, Pittsburgh, and 2007, London; Roman Ondák's *Good Feelings in Good Times*, 2003, Cologne, 2005, London and 2008, Wellington, NZ and Ivan and Heather Morison's *I Lost Her Near Fantasy Island. Life has not been the same*, 2006, Bristol.

And in terms of intervention or intrusion: how might we begin to understand Elmgreen and Dragset's permanent work *Prada Marfa*, Texas, alongside Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over*, 2006 Liverpool or Gelitin's *The B Thing* on the World Trade Center in 2000?

And might we consider how the nature of protest moves from the spectacle of Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001 to the subliminal in Ruth Ewan's recent work *Did you kiss the foot that kicked you?* for London buskers?

And finally, what of permanency? In the Land Foundation, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Park Fiction in Hamburg and Amy Balkin's *This is the Public Domain*, Tehachapi, California, place is literally occupied by the artist or collective and becomes a permanent work of art in progress.

So what does this mean for the place-based commissioner? What does this mean for Hasselt?

We might speculate that if place is the motivating force behind a project, it is imperative for commissioners and curators to encourage an artist's engagement with place as a mutable concept (an intersection of mapped location, urban mythology, power dynamics and social interaction), and that this may occur through a variety of different modes of exchange – long-term residencies and short-term visits, interdisciplinary collaborations, urban interventions and critical platforms. What may distinguish 'successful' projects from the more literal or spectacular projects is the curator's capacity to allow projects to emerge over time in different guises and the artist's ability to understand how to move beyond a mere confirmation of existing aspects of place identity.

I've begun to test out different kinds of models of commissioning such as the One-Day Sculpture series in New Zealand, a new commission for a site of urban renewal that will construct a fiction for that site and a set of unannounced shelters for impending climatic disasters in Bristol by artists Ivan and Heather Morison. These models respond to the multifaceted, temporary and durational art practices that interest me. I recognise the most interesting practices in public space as experiential and highly visual; interdisciplinary involving not only other art-forms, but other fields of knowledge and lastly, spectacularly engaging.

These projects effect a sense of the wrong place by shifting the status quo, by intervening in the bordered, prescribed spaces of location and consequently, these temporary projects also have the opportunity to operate beyond time and place of the originating context.

Daniel Buren once said that all his work proceeded from the extinction of the studio. If, we understand the studio as a space of imagination, rather than the locus of creative activity prior to the presentation of the work, then perhaps we should not be encouraging the artist to exit the studio, but rather that the studio is immersed in the situation of place. For me the most effecting and remarkable projects in public space emerge through an engagement (be it fleeting, or long-term) which recognises the instability of our deterritorialised, but bordered world, of contemporaneity, as Terry Smith has suggested. The experience of art is not one in my opinion that necessarily restores a sense of belonging or offers up a moment of resolution, but if truly place-responsive, situation-specific and contemporary that work of art will shatter the fictions of a stable sense of place, will intervene in the status quo and literally shift the ground beneath your feet.

© Claire Doherty and Z33, Hasselt. The person using the research resource online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation given on the front page of this paper.

References

- BIGGS, L., 2004. Foreword. In: Ed. Paul Domela. *International 04*. Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial.
- BISHOP, C., 2006. The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents *Artforum*, (February), pp. 178-183.
- BUSH, K., September 2007. Provisional Authority. *Artforum*, (February), pp. 419-423.
- CRESSWELL, T., VERSTRAETE, G. Eds., 2002. *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility. The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*. Amsterdam/New York, NY.
- DE CERTEAU, M. Ed., 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- FERGUSON, B.W., GREENBERG, R. and NAIRNE, S., 1997. Mapping International Exhibitions. *Art & Design*, No.52, pp. 30-37.
- FRANZEN, B., KOENIG, K. and PLATH, C., 2007. Preface. *Sculpture Projects Muenster 07*. Cologne: Walther Koenig.
- GRASSKAMP, W., 1997. Art and the City. *Contemporary Sculpture: Projects in Münster*. Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz.
- GRAW, Isabelle., Beyond Institutional Critique. John C. Welchman (ed.) *Institutional Critique and After*. Zurich. JRP / Ringier.
- HANRU, H., 2005. Towards a New Locality: Biennials and 'Global Art'. In: B. VANDERLINDEN and E. FILIPOVIC, eds, *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press.
- KWON, Miwon. 1998. Public Art and Urban Identities. *Public Art Strategies: Public Art and Public Space*. Ed. Cheryl Younger. New York: New York University.
- KWON, Miwon. 2002. *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- MASSEY, D., 2005. *For Space*. London. Sage
- RENDELL, J., 2006. *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. New York. I.B. Tauris & Co.
- SMITH, T. 2006. Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity. *Critical Inquiry*. 32:4, pp. 681-707.
- VERWOERT, J., 2007. Looking Forward: Sculpture Projects Muenster 2007. *Frieze*. January. Issue 104. pp. 144-145