

SITUATIONS

Location, Location

Claire Doherty

First published in: *Art Monthly* (London: 2004)

The biennial may just have come of age: when the curators of the 9th Istanbul Biennial 2005 were announced in September (Van Abbemuseum Director Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, Director of Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Centre, Istanbul), their curatorial gambit was marked by a cautious and considered methodology. They propose to work together 'on 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'. There will be fewer artists, longer-term residencies and the inclusion of existing works which provide, 'a conscious estrangement from the surrounding reality'. Esche and Kortun's 'Istanbul' proposition signals 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 and that they have little or no lasting impact on the inhabitants or on the cultural life of their host cities. Instead the co-curators posit engagement with the context of Istanbul as the primary motivating force of their exhibition (albeit within the signifying system of the global art economy).

This strategy is of course a descendent of a long line of scattered-site international exhibitions over the past two decades, preceding the swell of biennials, which were governed by the organising principle of place (from 'Tyne International' and 'TSWA' in the UK to 'Sculpture Projects in Münster' and the public art projects of Mary Jane Jacob in Charleston, Chicago and Atlanta). What distinguishes 'Istanbul' (and its peer group of context-specific biennials) from these earlier projects, however, is the emergence of a new terminology which acknowledges place as a shifting and fragmented entity, and furthermore a complicity with that unstable location as the defining mode of artistic engagement. The biennial bears a resemblance to a circus blowing through town, flouting its propensity for transient encounters. It's a natural home, then, for the new paradigms of artistic practice which have emerged concurrently with this new theorisation of place and engagement.

Francesco Bonami's 'Dreams and Conflicts' aside (which might be theorised as an engagement with the transience of the biennale rather than the location of Venice), a cursory perusal of recent biennial literature reveals how dominant the rhetoric of context and engagement has become. The International 04, Liverpool, professes to 'address and empower place as having value'; Manifesta 5, Donostia-San Sebastian, is 'a project that interweaves itself into the fabric of the city' and Berlin Biennale 3 'investigates developments and specifics of Berlin's cityscape'. The creative and operational workforce in biennial cities, which initiates, produces and sustains this considerable level of activity, has developed a complex range of strategies to support the visiting artist, drawing on the precedent of the residency and commissioning agency model to reimagine place as a situation, a set of circumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda to which the artist might respond.

One of the most useful and cogently argued new theorisations of site is Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, in which she traces a genealogy of site-specificity through the 70s and 80s to what James Meyer has termed 'the functional site'. Kwon suggests that as artists and curators have become informed by a broader range of disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, natural and cultural histories, architecture and urbanism, political theory and philosophy), 'so our understanding of site has shifted from a fixed, physical location to somewhere or something constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes'. Consequently the term 'site-specific' has been superseded by a range of alternative idioms such as 'context-specific', 'site-oriented', 'site-responsive' and 'socially engaged'.

Though it seems that the infrastructure and critical language is in place to support the commissioning of context-specific or responsive projects within a biennial framework, there are still unanswered questions about the relevance of that vision and the efficacy of that process for an itinerant artist; about the points of entry into a context – whose city is promoted and investigated; about the ability of the artist to transcend a prescriptive brief to make work that might signify beyond an interpretative or ethnographic response to place; about the privileging of certain research or process-based practices over studio-based work and, finally, about the art experience itself. Does the biennial as event-exhibition (albeit in a scattered-site, mutable form rather than a conventional presentation) offer the best possible conditions under which an audience might encounter the results of the artist's engagement with place?

In his characterisation of the role of International 04, Lewis Biggs proposes that, 'visitors from around the world see art that, by definition, cannot be seen anywhere else'. Hence, all 48 artists selected by the four 'International' researchers were invited to make new work. Biggs is astute enough to realise that many of these works will enter the art economy, and that they will already have begun to signify beyond the originating context of Liverpool, but what he is indicating is that the convergence of these negotiations and propositions within and through the city has already established a new cultural context, has shifted the identity of the city itself and the experiences of its inhabitants.

Cultural anthropologist James Clifford has suggested 'Location isn't a prison. It's comprised of material, but unfinished, maps and histories.' Yet while the location-specific biennial may acknowledge open-endedness and hybridity within the final exhibition form, the emphasis on the city as research subject, interlocutor, social context and physical site can lead to an exhibition which is too resolutely interpretative, too quasi-anthropological in character.

It seems we may be caught between the biennial as representation of what Jonathan Raban once called the soft city – 'a city made from a complex network of human relationships and individual experiences, a city built around the physical and psychological terrains mapped out by its inhabitants' – and the internationally astute biennial characterised by what Declan McGonagle has termed, 'wide and

shallow [engagement] rather than narrow and deep – sightseeing rather than insight’.

Hal Foster’s critique of the artist as ethnographer in *Return of the Real*, 1996, and Kwon’s recent investigation of the nomadic condition offer positions from which to interrogate both modes of engagement – one of anthropological investigation and one of fleeting encounter. Foster argues that according to the pseudo-anthropological intent of the first approach, ‘the artist is typically an outsider who has the institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locale in the production of their (self-) representation’, and warns, ‘[such] mapping may thus confirm rather than contest the authority of mapper over site in a way that reduces the desired exchange of dialogical fieldwork’. Writing in the mid 90s, Foster submits artists such as Clegg & Guttmann and curatorial projects such as ‘Culture in Action’, but we might well consider recent biennial projects as Martha Rosler’s city bus tour *Liverpool Delving and Driving*, Esko Männikkö’s portraits of the residents of Altbridge Park, Liverpool or Bojan Sarcevic’s *Workers’ Favourite Clothes Worn While S/he Worked*, 1999-2000, an experiment in Berlin which gauged the behaviour of workers on and off duty.

By contrast, Kwon’s proposition of the ‘wrong place’ argues that one might theorise the avant-garde struggle 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”’. Hence, the intention to uncover lost histories, to reveal what is unknown to a city’s inhabitants, is essentially negated. Being situated, embedded, to feel that you belong or at least know a place is not necessarily of artistic merit. This ‘aesthetics of the wrong place’ is close to the playful, psycho-geographical nature of the Situationist *dérive* and revealed in biennial projects such as *The Office of Alternative Urban Planning* in San Sebastian, Jill Magid’s CCTV-controlled meanderings through Liverpool city centre, and Rubens Mano’s plastic glasses which reduced the spaces and figures of the museum in Sydney to flickering ambient light movements. These are the quiet gestures and imperceptible interventions, remedial actions and shifts in the status quo, which resist the representative tendency of much biennial-specific art.

Irit Rogoff uses the work of anthropologist George Marcus to analyse this mode of engagement. Marcus distinguished between fieldwork that is done through a mode of rapport from that which is done through an understanding of one’s complicity with the work. Rogoff proposes in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* that ‘in rapport we have all kinds of conceits ... We have a notion of insight. Site-specific art seems to me to function in the model of rapport. It goes into something that is apparently located and specific and it works at uncovering and unveiling and revealing hidden mechanisms and assumptions ... Complicity is an understanding that all work is undertaken in the form of a collusion’.

So, using Marcus' definition of the complicit encounter, one might contrast Rosler's bus tour with Francis Alÿs's paseos, typified this summer at the 14th Biennale of Sydney by his performative work *Untitled*, the sculpture that nobody wanted. Alÿs has described his practice as 'a fable for contemporary living'. While both artists engage their viewers through witty, paradoxical narratives, Alÿs's could be said to be in collusion with the institutions, with his curators and furthermore, with us as willing participants and itinerants, whereas Rosler clearly establishes herself as the arbiter of new knowledge, making visible underground elements of Liverpool's history.

Participant, viewer, collaborator and client become key roles for the first and second audiences of the biennial. But despite social engagement being a discourse complex in its manifestations and diverse in its pedagogy, there is little about the viewer in the biennial's rhetoric of engagement. This is partly because curators are cautious about predicting forms of experience. The year-long *Interrupt* series of symposia, organised by the Arts Council of England (www.interrupt-symposia.org) last year, testified to the impossibility of a prescribed methodology for participation; there are no rules of engagement here, though one might say that there are models of good practice: definitions are beginning to emerge: Viennese critic, Christian Kravagna suggests four models: working with others, interactive activities, collective action, and participatory practice. Such distinctions allow us to articulate the ambition and intent of works which involve others through collaboration or participation, but the basic distinction to be made in relation to the biennial is whether a dialogical relationship is established. In a significant text on Littoral art, Grant Kester defined this as 'a relationship that allows the viewer to "speak back" to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself'. This characterisation provides a vocabulary with which to distinguish those artists who invite participation, often through a complicit engagement with their subject, but who essentially remain the signatories of their work (for example, Thomas Hirschhorn), or those who embed themselves within the social fabric of a city through intervention (Alÿs or Minerva Cuevas) from those who work collaboratively effecting a kind of 'social sculpture' (Javier Tellez, Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg).

The burgeoning number of discursive projects and research centres such as Situations (University of the West of England Bristol), Social Sculpture Research Unit (Oxford Brookes University), INTERFACE (led by Declan McGonagle at the University of Ulster) and Relational (a Devon-based visual arts projects agency) testifies to the currency of such dilemmas and the demand for a new critical language to deal with the specifics of engagement. If the biennial has come of age, it is perhaps solely in its sophisticated understanding of the modes of engagement and the new theorisation of place. What remains relatively undeveloped, however – absurdly so for curatorial practice – is the mode of distribution: how works are manifested, or processes represented, juxtaposed, installed and interpreted. Works need to have their 'own autonomous significations and modes of experiences' (as Peter Osborne indicates in his text for *Manifesta 5*) but also are required to function within the logic of the exhibition. It is in the presentation of

material evidence that a biennial may fail. If the experience of the exhibition does little to harness the dynamism and energy of those first encounters between artist and situation, artist and site, artist and first audience, no amount of good intentions on behalf of the curator will sustain the attention of the biennial's broad and increasingly sophisticated audience.

© Claire Doherty and Art Monthly. Published by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 2004.

The person using this paper 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, including author, attribution, date, article title and the URL www.situations.org.uk.

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.