



## Claire Doherty

The New Situationists

Situations describes the conditions under which many contemporary artworks now come into being. By 'situated', we refer to those artistic practices for which the 'situation' or 'context' is often the starting point. This book does not approach 'context' as purely a discreet category of public art discourse, nor is it concerned with 'contextual practice' as an artistic genre. Rather, it is concerned with 'context' as an impetus, hindrance, inspiration and research subject for the process of making art, whether specified by a curator or commissioner or proposed by the artist. By way of an introduction, this text reflects on the analytical, dialogic and anecdotal evidence in this publication to draw out some of the tendencies and implications of the shift from studio to situation.

On 11 April 2002, 500 volunteers were supplied with shovels and asked to form a single line at the foot of a giant sand dune in Ventanilla, an area outside Lima in Peru. This 'human comb' pushed a quantity of sand a small distance, thereby moving a 16,00 foot long sand dune about four inches from its original position. The act constituted *When Faith Moves Mountains*, a project by artist Francis Alÿs, in collaboration with Rafael Ortega and Cuauhtémoc Medina. It was acclaimed in the international art press as a "biblical performance" and "one of the artistic highlights of 2002".<sup>1</sup> Subsequently the film of the event became an editioned artwork—a 34 minute long, three-channel video installation which was purchased for the Guggenheim Collection in New York later that year.

How do we come to judge such an event, and its documentation, as art? Where does the work start and end? Where does meaning reside—in its execution and/or documentation, in the fledgling idea or in the posthumous circulation of the anecdote? How does such a work operate in, what might be termed, its 'originating' context (Ventanilla) and subsequently its 'displaced' context (an American art collection or curated exhibition)?<sup>2</sup> And what is the difference between the experience of the work's first and second audiences—from the participants in the desert outside Lima to the museum visitors on Fifth Avenue? Furthermore, if this work is not exactly 'site-specific', why not? Though it can be removed from its original context or functional site, unlike Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970—one of its antecedents—it is, nevertheless, a work made in context, the product of a 'situated', rather than studio-based, artistic practice.<sup>3</sup>

Francis Alÿs describes *When Faith Moves Mountains* as "my attempt to de-romanticise Land art".

Here, we have attempted to create a kind of Land art for the land-less, and, with the help of hundreds of people and shovels, we created a social allegory. This story is not validated by any physical trace or addition to the landscape. We shall now leave the care of our story to oral tradition.... Only in its repetition and transmission is the work actualised.<sup>4</sup>

*When Faith Moves Mountains* was Alÿs' contribution to the third *Bienal Iberoamericana de Lima* (Ibero-American Biennale of Lima). Visiting the city for the first time in 2000 with curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, Alÿs was confronted with the turmoil and instability that preceded the collapse of the Fujimori dictatorship.<sup>5</sup>

I felt that it called for an 'epic response', a '*beau geste*' at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent. Insinuating a social allegory into those circumstances seemed to me more fitting than engaging in some sculptural exercise.<sup>6</sup>

Alÿs was called upon to make a work that would resonate in a highly charged local context and translate to a global biennale culture. He neither professed to reveal something new to the local inhabitants (his practice as a whole is 'complicit' rather than 'investigative'). Nor did he position his experience as outsider or tourist at the centre of the work.<sup>7</sup> The performance simply effected a near imperceptible "linear geological displacement". Yet, by establishing a shift in the status-quo, by creating a memorable and metaphorical act for (one hopes and imagines) the participants and certainly us, the secondary audience, Alÿs made a work that is embedded in the context of Ventanilla, but which is not simply about Ventanilla, Lima or Peru.

Alÿs is what Miwon Kwon, in her significant study *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, has identified as one of a burgeoning number of nomadic artists:

The increasing institutional interest in current site-orientated practices that mobilise the site as a discursive narrative is demanding an intensive physical mobilisation of the artist to create works in various cities throughout the cosmopolitan art world.<sup>8</sup>

And nowhere is this more evident than at the biennale. There are currently over 50 biennales of visual art world-wide including those in Lima, Berlin, Havana, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Gwangju, Liverpool, Lyon, Sydney and Venice, as well as *Manifesta*, the nomadic European biennale, not to mention *Documenta* and *Skulptur Projekte Münster*. This broad biennale culture has emerged from the integration of the festival model and scattered-site international exhibition over the past ten years, through which cultural activity has become allied with economic growth. The public's experience of the biennale phenomenon has developed from viewing to participation, giving rise to a marked shift, in some instances, in the role of the artist from object-maker to service provider.<sup>9</sup> The creative and operational workforce, within or outside existing art institutions in biennale cities, which initiates, produces and sustains this considerable level of artistic public output, have developed a diverse range of curatorial strategies to support the visiting artist, particularly in relation to the creation of new work. Concurrently, off-site commissioning and artist residency programmes have responded to the discernable emphasis on engagement in current artistic practice, by drawing upon the complex discourse of the relationship between artist and place, re-imagining place as a situation, a set of circumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda.

When Daniel Buren commented, in the winter of 1970-1971, that, "it is impossible... by definition, to see a work in its place", he was referring to the conventional appreciation of the studio as primary site of meaning, in isolation from the real world.<sup>10</sup> Since Buren first proposed to work *in situ*, we have witnessed the convergence of site-specific, installation, community and public

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Francis Alÿs, *Cuando la fé mueve montañas (When faith moves mountains)*, 2002, in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega. Performance view, Lima. Peru, 11 April 2002. Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

art, institutional critique and political activism. Miwon Kwon suggests, as artists and cultural theorists 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”.<sup>11</sup> Given this new mutable notion of site, practitioners, commissioners and critics have become dissatisfied with the expression ‘site-specific’, submitting a gamut of new terms to describe artworks and projects which deal with the complexities of context—amongst them context-specific, site-oriented, site-responsive and socially engaged.

What distinguishes the situated practices in this publication from the historical premise of site-specificity is the convergence of three key factors: firstly, if as Kwon suggests, “feeling out of place is the cultural symptom of late capitalism’s political and social reality”, then to be ‘situated’ is effectively to be displaced.<sup>12</sup> Hence, what emerges through the artworks discussed here is an emphasis on experience as a state of flux which acknowledges place as a shifting and fragmented entity; secondly, as Nicolas Bourriaud suggests in his “Berlin Letter about Relational Aesthetics”, a new vocabulary has emerged, “one analogous to Minimal Art and that takes the *socius* as its base”.<sup>13</sup> Bourriaud suggests that relational aesthetics operates to elude alienation, the division of labour and the commodification of space which characterises our new “network society”. And finally, as cultural experience has become recognised as a primary component of urban regeneration, so the roles of artists have become redefined as mediators, creative thinkers and agitators, leading to increased opportunities for longer-term engagement between an artist and a given group of people, design process or situation.

Despite increasingly sophisticated curatorial appraisals of what place might mean to artists and participants in projects which profess to ‘engage’, there is still considerable debate about whether projects can or should respond directly to a place, considering the itinerancy of most international artists and the consequential lack of sustained contact with the host city or context.<sup>14</sup> In his essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer”, Hal Foster warns that participants are often defined by their habitation of ‘elsewhere’, acting as the ‘other’ to the ‘ideological patron’ of the artist.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, even if the ethnographic mode of ‘rapport’ is to be avoided through either a process of complicity or genuine collective decision-making and shared responsibility, how does an artist begin such a process and what are the pitfalls? Given the social and cultural experience of being ‘out of place’, how is this state of being reflected in the process and final form(s) of works or curatorial activity which respond to given situations?

This publication presents a number of strategies set within a critical context, which by no means comprehensive, are representative of the broad tendencies

of situated practice—from the spectacular re-enactment, to the quiet intervention, from remedial collaboration to dialogic, open-ended process.

**The groundwork** Where to start? What emerges through the interviews and conversations here is a common process of resistance. Though this may not always reveal itself as a process of *dérive*, described by Guy Debord of the Situationist International as, “playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects” in which persons “drop their usual motives for movement and action... and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters that they find there”, all artists and collectives here maintain that their status as artists allows them to circumnavigate predictability.<sup>16</sup> Kathrin Böhm states, “As an artist you’re non-threatening, because no one expects you to have power”. Jeremy Deller suggests, “your role is far more fluid”, whilst Jimmie Durham proposes, “I’m not an outsider or an insider and I still have the great privilege to talk.” Contrary to Hal Foster’s cautionary note, many of these artists resist ethnographic processes of mapping, but rather, introduce themselves through a series of conversations (Böhm, Shaw, Deller), or merge into the daily activities of a city (Wentworth, Dant, Mejor Vida Corp.) or become residents themselves (Oda Projesi, Hirschhorn). They resist the ascribed role of witness, often choosing to research or observe the overlooked (Coley, Dickinson).

Irit Rogoff’s critical analysis of the distinction between fieldwork that is done “through a mode of *rapport* [of proximity and a sense of having rapport with the place] and fieldwork that is done through an understanding of one’s complicity with the work” is crucial to this process of enquiry. It proposes a strategy for preparing the ground.

When projects occur at the artist’s instigation within the context of their own practice, the idea—such as *The Battle of Orgreave* or *The Milgran Re-enactment*—is simple, though the period of research can stretch to years, involving the recruitment of participants, experts and skilled practitioners. In contrast, artists such as Minerva Cuevas or Adam Dant work almost virally within their home territory, using the mechanisms of the media to distribute their ‘products’ for free. Though *FURTHER Up in the Air* proposed a conventional residency relationship for the 18 invited artists, the groundwork, as Paul Domela observes here, was laid by the artist-organisers, Neville Gabie and Leo Fitzmaurice, who built up a relationship with the community over five years, recognising it as “an unstable transitional context”. Like Oda Projesi, Gabie and Fitzmaurice recognise the residents’ involvement as significant to the legacy of the project in the long-term.

**The engagement process** In many of these projects, process and outcome are marked by social engagement.<sup>17</sup> Maria Lind distinguishes the difference between aspects of participatory practice, using Vienna-based critic Christian

Kravagna's four models: 'working with others', interactive activities, collective action, and participatory practice. What seems to distinguish the types of engagement evident here is whether a dialogical relationship is established. In a significant text on Littoral art, Grant Kester has proposed this as, "that which breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, artwork and audience—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".<sup>18</sup> It is vital, when reviewing the stated aims and outcomes of such projects, to establish the distinction between those practices which, though they employ a process of complicit engagement, are clearly initiated and ultimately directed by the artist (Hirschhorn, Deller, Coley) and those which, though still often authored by the artist or team, are collaborative—in effect 'social sculpture' (Böhm, Oda Projesi, Shaw).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, where practices become peripatetic in the social fabric of a city, a distinction should be made between the strategies of the activist (Cuevas) and the trickster (Dant and Durham), though their intentions may be similar—namely to provoke social conscience. It is important to attempt to find a language for engagement, because the gaps between the current rhetoric of engagement and actual experience may lead to confusion about the aims and potential outcomes of a project.<sup>20</sup>

**The exhibition and curator** Given that these processes of engagement and intervention need interlocutors, as Bourriaud notes, the role of the curator or commissioner as mediator becomes vital. In many cases, such as the partnership between Kunstverein München and Kunstprojekte\_Reim for Oda Projesi or Gasworks in the case of Kathrin Böhm and public works, the role of the art institution to initiate, mediate and sustain relationships with participants beyond the project is crucial. Furthermore, as Catherine David explains, new exhibition models are addressing the implications of cross-cultural engagement and representation, many of which are cumulative in process, open-ended and dialogic. The biennale is a natural home for situated practice. It bears a resemblance to a 'circus blowing through town', flouting its propensity for transient encounters, and hence the festival context in which such projects occur lends itself to the situated work as performance, event, screening, re-enactment or workshop. But it is the capacity for the work to morph from one form to another that allows these artists to produce work for the biennale, the art institution and a local context. As practitioners, commissioners, participants and viewers, we need to understand the complex processes of initiation, development and mediation of this work. We need to make the distinctions between the types of engagement that are occurring and the promises that are made. We need to question what levels of support this work needs (information, time, technical resources, distribution mechanisms and personnel). And we need to find a critical language to unravel the implications of this work beyond the specifics of time and place.

<sup>1</sup> See Kate Bush in Lisa Liebmann, "Best of 2002", *Artforum*, December 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *When Faith Moves Mountains* was included in *Somewhere Better Than This Place: Alternative Social Experience in the Spaces of Contemporary Art*, at the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, 31 May-9 November 2003.

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral\\_jetty.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/spiral_jetty.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Alÿs, "A thousand words: Francis Alÿs talks about *When Faith Moves Mountains*", *Artforum*, Summer 2002, pp. 108-109.

<sup>5</sup> Alberto Kenyo Fujimori was president of Peru from 1990 to 17 November 2000, when he fled to Japan as allegations of far-reaching corruption in his administration began to emerge. He was subsequently removed from office by the Peruvian Congress.

<sup>6</sup> Alÿs, "A thousand words", p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Noticeably Alÿs describes the process and performance as collaborative, though he is primarily credited as the author of this work. His work often begins as simple actions performed by him or commissioned volunteers, which are recorded in photographs, film, and other means of documentation such as postcards.

<sup>8</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps best exemplified in *Utopia Station* at the 2003 *Venice Biennale*, curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Utopia Station* was promoted as "nothing more or nothing less than a way station, a place to stop, to look, to talk and refresh the route". See Scott Rothkopf, "Pictures of an exhibition" in *Artforum*, September 2003, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> See Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio" in this publication, pp. 15-28.

<sup>11</sup> Miwon Kwon, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Miwon Kwon, "The Wrong Place", in this publication, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, in this publication, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> See *Liverpool Biennial 2002* catalogue essays in particular, *International 2002*, Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer", *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Guy Debord, "Theory of Derive", *Situationist International Anthology*, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> This is a field of artistic practice complex in its manifestations and diverse in its pedagogy. The recent Arts Council of England *Interrupt* symposia began to unpick the nuances between the roles and processes of socially engaged art practice. See [www.interrupt-symposia.org](http://www.interrupt-symposia.org).

<sup>18</sup> Grant Kester's paper, "Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art", was delivered at the *Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy* conference held at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin in September 1998 and now forms the basis of a Socially Engaged Practice Forum on-line and a continuing series of responses in the print and on-line versions of *Variant*.

<sup>19</sup> Beuys proposed a notion of *Soziale Plastik* (social sculpture) as an interdisciplinary and participatory process in which thought, speech and discussion could be core 'materials'. See Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University at [www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/apm/social\\_sculpture](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/apm/social_sculpture). Other artists groups such as Superflex (Denmark), Oreste (Italy), Wochenklassur (Austria), Ala Plastica (Argentina) and Critical Art Ensemble (US) have used communicative action to develop a series of interventionist projects which allow participants to shape their own agendas.

<sup>20</sup> See my article, "The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism", *Engage 15*, *The art of encounter*, 2004, pp. 6-13.