

It is autumn 2007 and the frenzy of the summer's contemporary art Grand Tour in Europe (Venice, Basel, Kassel, Münster) has given way to eagerness for a critical verdict. *Artforum* and *frieze*, arguably two of the most commercially successful Euro-American art magazines, are poised to run their autumn editions and by chance, an identical image is selected for both front covers. It is an aerial shot of two men in the process of being photographed at the axis of Bruce Nauman's *Square Depression* in Münster. Cropped so as to decontextualize the 50 square metres of white concrete from its surroundings, the image presents itself as an ideal representation of the climax of the Grand Tour – the moment at which the end of the journey in search of the 'authentic' work of art is performed for the camera; epitomising the somewhat reactionary curatorial stance of Robert Storr, who, in his assertion of experiencing 'Art in the Present Tense' in Venice that summer, 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.'

Storr appears to be self-consciously channelling Walter Benjamin here, who asserted 'the here and now of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity'.² The authenticity of the fixed and knowable site is promoted in that duplicated cover image by the lines of *Square Depression's* axis which lead one to a defined point of destination, affording the art pilgrim the opportunity to declare '*I am standing in the Bruce Nauman! I have arrived! I am here!*'

Though *Square Depression* was critically celebrated as 'a template for Rosalind Krauss' diagram of sculpture in the expanded field: (not-) landscape / sculpture / (not-) architecture',³ Münster offered the visitor few other locatable points of resolution that summer. The experience was closer to what Jane Rendell has referred to as the explosion of Krauss' expanded field of sculpture.⁴ More often than not the search for the authentic site of a work was frustrated, characterized by dislocation and displacement. Site was dispersed across location and time. Works were *situational* rather than site-specific, bearing a closer affinity with Michael Asher's historically cumulative intervention *Installation Münster (Caravan)* (the placement of an ordinary 'recognizably West German trailer' in a different location each week for the duration of each edition of Sculpture Projects Münster since 1977)⁵ than to the iconic enactment of the site-specific in Nauman's long-awaited commission.

The four manifestations of Sculpture Projects Münster, from the *Platzsuche* ('a search for place') of 1977 to the *Location Narratives* of 1987, and the conviviality and public services that characterized the 1997 edition, might represent a genealogy of site-specificity, but by 2007, the impetus of place, locality, time, context and space, rather than a fixed, physical notion of site, seemed more urgent a set of co-ordinates for the majority of the commissioned artists. Many chose to reflect upon their complicit relationship with the touristic aspirations of the exhibition and more broadly the Grand Tour. In doing so, they contested and frustrated the expectations of the art tourist, producing what we might term situation-specific, rather than site-specific projects.

Such works and processes share the situational characteristics of contemporaneity, defined recently by Terry Smith as 'prioritizing the moment over time, direct experience of multiplicitous complexity over the singular simplicity of distanced reflection'.⁶ These properties are displayed by a complex network of artworks, projects, events, interventions, happenings, small gestures and spectacular intrusions over time, from the constructed situations of the Situationist International to contemporary performative acts such as Ligna's *Radio Ballet*, and over place, from Javier Téllez's *One Flew over the Void*, across the San Diego/Tijuana border, to Francis Alÿs' geological displacement in the sand dunes outside Lima, Peru, in *When Faith Moves Mountains*. Often temporary and interventionist, invariably now performed by individuals other than the artist, mobilizing and demanding different kinds of public engagement, such works often result from a commission, as part of broader, place-based, scattered-site exhibitions. Yet such situation-producing works contest a literal reading of the specifics of place as fixed and stable, causing a destabilizing effect theorized by art historian Miwon Kwon as being in 'the wrong place'.⁷

This volume is an attempt to consider the genesis of 'situation', as a convergence of theorizations of site, non-site, place, non-place, locality, public space, context and time, and as a means of rethinking the ways in which contemporary artists respond to, produce and destabilize place and locality.

Two key principles guide the book's selection and form. Firstly, this is not a chronological survey of situation-specificity, though I have drawn upon the canonical genealogy of site-specificity to establish the terms on which site has been proposed, revised and rejected historically. Groupings of specific approaches and ideas have been gathered together, punctuated by contemporary artists' texts and interdisciplinary considerations, but the key ideas of the specifics of site and location, contemporaneity, engagement and interruption, public space and publicness, and place as an event-in-progress, appear throughout all five thematic sections, with cross-referencing occurring across time and space.

Secondly, the volume is underpinned by a curatorial perspective. The

collection seeks to review the motivations and assumptions of the place-based commissioning which has come to dominate large-scale exhibitions and public art programmes internationally. We might ask, if place-making and the production of new localities are increasingly one of the primary motivations for curators and commissioners, how and where does artistic engagement with place begin? How might we understand or describe the potential for artistic agency in specific places? Do the curatorial systems, refined over the last twenty years, to support artistic engagement with specific places, and in particular public space, truly acknowledge the conflictual and changing nature of public space and place itself, and if so, might the term situation (a set of conditions in time and place) offer an alternative to the exhausted notion of site?

The Limits of Site. The first section begins with Jane Rendell's consideration of the situated critic – a vital prologue to a book of documents such as this, and provoking me to register my own European/North American bias from the outset. There follows an extensive section which revisits canonical texts beginning with the displacement of attention from 'work to frame'. Robert Morris' trilogy of texts considers the shift from 'self-important object' to spatial situation, positing the binary opposition of contained space/open field-type situation. Here the gallery wall is introduced as literal and metaphorical limit of phenomenological experience. Brian O'Doherty asserts that 'the wall becomes a membrane through which aesthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange'. Michael Asher's sandblasting of the wall (Galleria Toselli, Milan, 1973) exposes the gallery as signifying container – such actions eventually taken to the extreme with the displacement of the white cube in its entirety to public space by Elmgreen and Dragset some 25 years later.

At this point, this volume might have taken a very different direction – towards the contestations of institutional critique and its curatorial assimilation in the form of New Institutionalism – but instead, my primary focus has been the consideration and theorizations of the world outside the 'stage door' (Kaprow), the social and political context of the street or urban environment (Matta-Clark, Buren) or, in Robert Smithson's words, the open limits or edge, rather than the closed limits or centre of the gallery.

Smithson's indexical theorization of site (non-gallery) and nonsite (gallery-based) operates as a focal point for several texts that grapple with what James Meyer refers to as the 'vectored and discursive notion of "place"' to which the book continually returns. At the same time, we see the emergence of what Allan Kaprow calls 'situational models' in the urban environment,⁸ which acknowledge the impossibility of escaping critical limits imposed upon art and artists (Buren) or overthrowing the economy (Burgin) but which seek out new relationships with it. Gordon Matta-Clark and Caroline Gooden's *Food* store at the corner of Prince

and Wooster, SoHo, New York, in the early 1970s, and some ten years later and a few blocks north, Group Material's store on East 13th Street are primary examples of what Nikos Papastergiadis has recently called 'small gestures in specific places' which act as 'circuit breakers in the closed system of habitual equivalence between signs', where the politics of the practice is situational.⁹

Just as the self-initiated activities of Group Material and their New York contemporaries (e.g. Fashion Moda and Colab) were being established in the early 1980s,¹⁰ so Richard Serra's site-dominant *Tilted Arc* was being installed in Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. Whilst these situational works might be considered to be similarly interventionist, they are fundamentally distinct in their modes of engagement, in their treatment of potential publics, authorship and the temporality of the work itself. And here emerges one of the most critical questions in the consideration of art practices which engage directly with the world outside, namely the ethics of engagement with the everyday, and the potential (as Mark Hutchinson proposes in the following section) for transformative practice. This preoccupation with modes of interaction forms the basis of Robert Irwin's typology of site-related art practices and Peter Weibel's mid 1990s attempt to formulate a new genre of 'context art'. But if we consider the practices of Weibel's coterie of contextual artists – in particular Christian Philipp Müller's border crossings, alongside the neo-conceptualism of British artists such as Adam Chodzko and Jonathan Monk, and the narrative audio works of artists such as Paul Rooney and Janet Cardiff – we might identify that artists have become just as interested in the points at which a single site fractures, through the production or invocation of what Foucault termed 'heterotopias', as they have in the processes of interaction with a predefined location. The limits of site are finally transgressed here in the summoning of the viewer/visitor to an apparently singular space which opens up into multiple spaces and places. As Robert Smithson suggests: '... once you get there, there's no destination ... the site is evading you all the while it's directing you to it.'

Fieldwork. Tony Smith's infamous recounting of his night-time journey to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike has become a talisman for conceptual art. But what if we recontextualize this statement by considering it alongside a series of artist testimonies about the journey beyond the limits of the familiar? Like those of Tacita Dean, Adam Chodzko and Langlands and Bell, Smith's statement is recounted as anecdote, in this case some 15 years or so after the event.¹¹ As the territories become increasingly contested and remote through this series of texts, so the question of the reliability of the witness becomes tantamount. The documentary impulse of fieldwork is particularly prevalent in the comparison of the activities of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) and the fictional Beirut Al-Hadath Archive. As the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has asserted:

'whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.'

Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' is central to the discourse which has arisen around the ethics of artists' fieldwork and engagement with quasi-anthropologically predetermined communities. Considered here alongside Kwon's identification of the institutional systems which produce the itinerant artist and Deleuze and Guattari's identification of the nomadic condition, Foster's text problematizes the artist as participant-observer, invited to work 'on location', a phenomenon that can be seen to have arisen specifically in the mid 1990s. This problematic has led to a dynamic series of critical exchanges on the dialectical conditions of social engagement over the past five years.¹² But what might a consideration of situation contribute to this ongoing dilemma for the artist as fieldworker? We might consider two distinct effects of deterritorialization: firstly, we should remember that the mobilization of the artist is socially, culturally and politically determined (as Bone and Steiner, and later Doreen Massey will attest). Secondly, the mode of complicit engagement, as proposed by anthropologist George Marcus, might provide us with a more sophisticated understanding of fieldwork as a relational, self-reflexive process, one which necessarily implicates an *elsewhere* as well as a *there*, as Jon Bywater and Jan Verwoert also discuss.

This consideration of complicity is by no means new, as the documents of the Artist Placement Group (APG), now held in the Tate Archive in London, prove. One of the artists who participated in the APG programmes, Ian Breakwell, writing in *Art Monthly* in 1980 on his DHSS placement in Broadmoor Special Hospital suggested: '[T]he success of a placement cannot be measured merely by the degree of mutual backslapping between the host organization and the artist ... In a placement the "artwork" is not the end product but the whole process.'¹³ Jon Bywater's description of the *poowhiri*, the Maori welcome ceremony in New Zealand, offers a reconsideration of the conditions of exchange, and as Mark Hutchinson suggests, this mode of interaction ultimately determines the possibilities for transformative practice and artistic agency.

Action and Public Space. The third section intersects with two other volumes in this series (*Participation* and *The Everyday*), yet here the activities of the Situationist International and New York happenings are reconsidered specifically within the historically bounded categories of public art and public space. For Hannah Arendt, the public sphere operates in distinct contrast to private space and provides a *common world* for potential political action; for Michel de Certeau, public space 'is a practiced place'; for Rosalyn Deutsche, it is a contested zone and site of spatial struggle, and for Simon Sheikh, it is 'fragmented, consisting of a number of spaces and/or formations that sometimes connect, sometimes close off, and that are in conflictual and contradictory relations to each other'.

The intersection between artistic actions and these fragmented, contested spaces results in what curator Nato Thompson has termed 'tactical practices'.¹⁴ What connects Guy Debord's and Allan Kaprow's somewhat playful tactics, Julius Köller's anti-happenings, Cildo Meireles' insertions, Ligna's choreographed performances and Etoy's digital hijacking is a desire to engage critically and performatively with multiple public spaces often through unannounced activities. As Adrian Piper proposes, they seek to avoid the production of 'an audience-versus-performer separation' which occurs in the announcement of an event. They expose the public domain as Joshua Decker has referred to it, as 'a readymade domain: over-regulated, patrolled, increasingly securitized and surveyed, a placeholder for the eventual arrival, or appearance of what might be described as "public art"'.¹⁵ But the potential agency of such art practices in public space must now be called into question compared to the effectiveness of emergent forms of self-organized cultural activity such as flash mobbing.

What might distinguish such tactical art practices from these stunts is their potential to be critical within a pervasive agonistic public sphere, defined by Chantal Mouffe as 'the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation'.¹⁶ We might understand them as critical spatial practices, a term defined by Jane Rendell to supersede the term 'public art', or 'illocutionary acts' as defined by John L. Austin as acts which are clearly performed and which involve an affirmation or promise, a threat, a warning or command, and for which the public is continuously reformed and readdressed.¹⁷

Works as diverse as Amy Balkin's *This is the Public Domain*, Pawel Althamer's *Real-Time Movie* (a scripted moment of real time at Borough Market, London, promoted through a film trailer on YouTube and across cinemas) and Téllez's *One Flew Over the Void*, are all capable of operating through the dispersed media of collective public spaces identified by Seth Price, but occur as critical spatial practices, or illocutionary acts, to disrupt Mouffe's agonistic public sphere.

Place and Locality. The fourth section moves from space to a progressive notion of place in a period of what geographer David Harvey has referred to as unparalleled 'time-space compression'. Doreen Massey's 'A Global Sense of Place' is central here to an understanding of place as 'a constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus'. This notion of place in a 'constant sense of becoming through practice and practical knowledge'¹⁸ is bound to the production of localities and is the contextual counterpoint to the debates surrounding the encounter between outsider and insider in the fieldwork section.

What emerges from the conjunction of writings by Appadurai, Kapur and Lippard with the work of Allora and Calzadilla, Jacir and Tiravanija (along with other collectives such as RAQS Media Collective and Multiplicity, and the

curatorial initiatives of Ursula Biemann) is the emergence of a new mobilities paradigm where local identities once located in particular places are now increasingly seen as 'hybrid', 'diasporic' or 'trans-national'.¹⁹ This is evidenced in the call-centre construction of local knowledge in RAQS Media Collective's 2003 work *A/S/L* and more recently in Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. *The Land* in Chiang Mai and *Park Fiction* in Hamburg operate as activations of the intersection between place and mobility through cumulative art programmes in a specific location over time, corresponding to geographer Tim Cresswell's assertion that 'place is constituted through reiterative social practice'.²⁰

In the UK, the contribution of contemporary art to the establishment of place identity is calibrated by government funding bodies through its potential impact on economic, environmental and social regeneration, as outlined in a report prepared for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in 2004.²⁵ Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne identified the harnessing of curatorial strategies for a region's economic and political gain in their influential article 'Mapping International Exhibitions', originally itself published on the occasion of the European Capital of Culture in 1993: '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 ...'²¹

The Curatorial Imperative. Today this curatorial manoeuvre is repeated across the globe, where the rhetoric of place-making has led to the dominance of place-based event-exhibitions and public art initiatives. The rise to prominence of such curatorial ventures can be traced to the early 1970s, from *Sonsbeek 71*, Arnhem, and the first Sculpture Projects Münster in 1977, through the mid 1990s with *Project Unité*, Firminy (1991) and *Places with a Past: New Site-specific Art*, Charleston (1992) to the contemporary proliferation of place-based biennial or triennial exhibitions. But as Jan Verwoert suggests, there is a noticeable shift in these curatorial propositions, from a responsive to a productive mode, in the performance of the local by the international and the international by the local.

The relationship between the duplicated front cover images of *Artforum* and *frieze* and the cover image for this volume offers one potential way of viewing the future for productive curatorial models in relation to situational, critical spatial art practices. If we understand place as an unstable, shifting set of political, social, economic and material relations, and locality as produced and contested through a set of conditions that we might describe as situation, our experience of works which truly produce remarkable engagements with place will be a sense of *dislocation* – encouraging us no longer to look with the eyes of a tourist, but to become implicated in the jostling contingency of mobilities and relations that constitute contemporaneity.

- 1 Robert Storr, *Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007). [for works cited by title only below please see bibliography]
- 2 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 214–15.
- 3 Polly Staple, 'Expanded Fields', *frieze*, issue 109 (September 2007).
- 4 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, 43.
- 5 See Michael Asher, 'July 3–November 13, 1977, Skulptur, Westfälischer Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, West Germany', in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ed., *Michael Asher: Writings, 1973–1983, on Works, 1969–1979*, 166–71.
- 6 Terry Smith, et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 8.
- 7 Miwon Kwon, 'The Wrong Place', 32–43.
- 8 Allan Kaprow, 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part III', 131–3.
- 9 Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Spatial Aesthetics: Rethinking the Contemporary' in Terry Smith, op cit., 363–81.
- 10 See Julie Ault, *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 11 The New Jersey Turnpike was constructed between 1950 and 1952.
- 12 See articles by Claire Bishop and Grant Kester in *Artforum* (February–May 2006).
- 13 Ian Breakwell, 'From the Inside: A Personal History of Work on Placement with the Department of Health and related work, 1976–1980', *Art Monthly*, no. 40 (1980), 3–4.
- 14 Nato Thompson, *The Interventionists*.
- 15 Joshua Decker, 'Transitory Agencies and Situational Engagements: The Artist as Public Interlocutor?' in Osvaldo Sanchez, et al., eds, *InSite_05: Situational Public*, 294.
- 16 Chantal Mouffe, 'Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces', *Art & Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 2007, available at <<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>>
- 17 See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962).
- 18 Tim Cresswell, 'Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World', 26.
- 19 Cresswell, op cit.
- 20 Ibid., 26.
- 21 Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne, 'Mapping International Exhibitions', 135–152.