

■ Situation

Alex Coles

Situation, Documents of Contemporary Art series, ed Claire Doherty, MIT Press, Whitechapel Gallery, 240pp, £24.95, 978 0 2625130 5 0.

In the learned introduction to *Situations*, Claire Doherty maps out the terrain of site-specificity in terms of the trajectory of Sculpture Projects Münster: from what she terms 'the *Platzsuche* ("a search for place") of 1977' to 'the *Location Narratives* of 1987'; and from the 'conviviality and public services that characterised the 1997 edition' to 'the impetus of place, locality, time, context and space', that was the premise in 2007. According to Doherty, in 2007 artists 'contested and frustrated the expectations of the art tourist, producing what we might term situation-specific, rather than site-specific projects'.

To organise the essays, position papers, interviews and statements on this development from site to situation, Doherty divides the volume into five sections, each of which traverses multiple disciplinary fields and time periods: The Limits of Site, Fieldwork, Action and Public Space, Place and Locality, and The Curatorial Imperative. But with the notable exception of the curatorial imperative – Doherty's own particular optic through which she views the subject – the territory these titles announce was charted in the 1990s by the pioneering journal *Documents*, founded and edited by Miwon Kwon and Helen Molesworth. At first glance, it appears that all Doherty has done is re-present this work and bring it up to date. Confirming this impression is the inclusion of Kwon's landmark 'One Place After Another', 1997, and a substantial number of essays by her intellectual peer group, many of whom contributed to the journal, including: Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer', 1996, James Meyer's 'The Functional Site, or, The Transformation of Site-Specificity', 1995, Douglas Crimp's 'Redefining Site-Specificity', 1993, and Rosalyn Deutsche's 'Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City', 1988. As you spend more time with the

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book, however, it becomes clear that a slightly different project is under way.

It starts with how Doherty places Robert Morris's 'Blank Form', 1961, as her point of chronological departure in the volume. Here Morris states: 'So long as the form (in the broadest possible sense: situation) is not reduced beyond perception ... the subject reacts to it in many particular ways when I call it art ... Art is primarily a situation in which one assumes an attitude of reacting to some of one's awareness as art.'

Beginning with Morris's 'Blank Form', instead of Robert Smithson's 'Dialectic of Site and Nonsite', 1972, as Kwon et al would do, generates a fresh trajectory that is entirely engaging. But before the reader can set off on this trajectory – 'Blank Form' is positioned as the second article in the volume – there first comes Jane Rendell's 'Site Writing', 2005. Herein Rendell argues for a performative mode of writing that insists on its own condition as a form of spatially situated practice – something she refers to as 'site writing'. Writing certainly can be this: Julia Kristeva and Mieke Bal have proven how. But to scale the heights reached by them – to weave a theoretically tight yet fully textured meta-textual framework – is very difficult. Beginning with Rendell certainly establishes Doherty's project as a fresh and more speculative approach to the subject. But had the first text been Bal's instead, then Doherty's presentation of this aspect of the debate would have been as convincing as the other ones. 'Site Writing' simply does not assume as important a place as Bal's 'Fragmented Bodies', from her 2001 book *Louise Bourgeois, Spider: The Architecture of Art-writing* (or Morris's essays for that matter) in the discourse on the subject.

Quickly following Morris's 'Blank Form' is his 'Notes on Sculpture, Part II', 1966, and 'The Present Tense of Space', 1978 – three texts by the same author in one anthology, no less – which just goes to prove how Morris is unquestionably the starting point of the trajectory Doherty strives to chart. 'Blank Form' leads indirectly to the inclusion of Francis Alÿs's 'On When Faith Moves Mountains', 2002, and Adam Chodzko's 'Out of Place', 2000, both of which would no doubt be excluded from the canons of the above-mentioned North American academics.

Theoretically broadening the subject out in other sections beyond Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962, that specialists on site and place such as Deutsche often insist on (though an excerpt is oddly absent here), to include Hannah Arendt's 'The Public Realm', 1958, Arjun Appadurai's 'The Production of Locality', 1996, Michael de Certeau's "'Spaces" and "Places"', 1980, and Giorgio Agamben's 'The Witness and the Archive', 1999, further animates the theoretical basis of the enquiry. Each one of these essays provide groundwork for more recent developments, including Jan Verwoert's timely 'Forget the National: Perform the International in the Key of the Local (and vice versa)', 2007, and Hou Hanru's 'Towards a New Locality', 2006. This further opening out in editorial strategy only goes to prove that, of the Documents of Contemporary Art series produced by the Whitechapel Gallery in collaboration with MIT Press, *Situation* now surely supersedes Claire Bishop's *Participation*, 2006, as the most important volume so far. ■

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