

The Site-Specificity of Everyday Life  
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One of the most innovative books to enter recent discussions surrounding site-specific art, *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site* brings together a diverse collection of critical and creative essays, historical accounts, project documentations, and sound pieces (by way of an accompanying CD) that address what might be called the site-specificity of everyday life. *Surface Tension* is concerned with the permeable surfaces that delimit internal life from the external world of public encounter, exploring the imbricated realms of the public and the private, the physical and the phantasmic, the extraordinary and the everyday.

The anthology is edited by Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle, both artists and writers, who have each contributed essays, as well as a collaborative offering entitled "Public Space," which takes the form of several blank pages positioned midway through the book. The designation "public" suggests that the use of such a space is presumably to be determined by the reader, so I decided to make those pages the "site" of my review, scribbling notes as I flipped back and forth between the chapters. Of obviously greater significance than my own handwritten intervention was the blankness that preceded it, which implied that it was precisely the definition of "public" that was in question here. Indeed, the empty place at the center of the book holds in abeyance any fixed or fore-closed notion of what might constitute publicness, a position that remains consistent throughout the anthology, with its heterogeneous contributions and sometimes conflicting ideas. What emerges is a conception of the public, and of place, that is provisional, contingent, and open to contestation.

Acknowledging the varying iterations of "site" in art over the past three decades, the editors want to insist upon its continuing use value as a term and a category of artistic production. They describe site-specificity historically, as an oppositional practice, paying homage to its roots as a mode of production that, by anchoring itself to a particular place, aimed to defy the modernist idealism of the autonomous object as well as the logic of the market. Yet in *Surface Tension*, "the strictly oppositional gives way to modes of diversity, transforming dialectical formulations into dispersed, contested temporal positions" (19). Many of the projects featured in the book may thus be described as "discursively determined," to borrow Miwon Kwon's terminology for site-based practices that have evolved away from a grounding in physical permanence or institutional critique toward an engagement "with the outside world and everyday life ..." (1) This is not to suggest that in *Surface Tension* the physical location is always subordinate to its discursive framework. Site is emphasized as the place of artistic production as well as of its reception--the moment in which a work becomes public. But Ehrlich and LaBelle posit an "inherent plurality of site itself" (22) and admit that in selecting projects they favored diversity and disjunction, an approach they describe as "all over the place" (21). Indeed, "site" appears variously as: the city, the body, the built environment, automobiles, autobiography, a vacant lot, bathroom plumbing, "sociopolitical interventions," the history of site-specificity, and the book itself (with its aforementioned blank pages, shifting font sizes, and differently textured pages)--to name just a few. In the service of

providing an orientation for this sometimes disorienting collection, the book is organized into three categories: essays, project descriptions, and projects created specifically for the book, including the CD of sound works curated by Stephen Vitiello.

If the editors present site-specificity as a historical form, they see its legacy currently evidenced across disciplines, in contemporary art, architecture, performance, and design, among other spheres of production, noting the extent to which it has been broadly assimilated by contemporary culture, "beyond the overtly artistic framework" (20). Accordingly, many of the book's contributions are informed less by art-historical paradigms or contexts than by theories of radical geography and everyday life. Particularly influential is the work of theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, whose poetic sociology and eccentric Marxism (respectively) were concerned to articulate the practices of daily life, including its proscriptions for behavior, its possibilities for mobility and resistance, its architecture and topography. This methodology is stated explicitly in LaBelle's essay, which references a legacy of practices of everyday life from the wanderings of the nineteenth-century flaneur to the aleatory driftings of the Surrealists and Situationists and to de Certeau's and Lefebvre's philosophical analyses--all of this as a backdrop to LaBelle's meditations on the individual uses of space within an ever-expanding, global, institutional framework.

One of the most compelling of the featured interventions into everyday life is Michael Rakowitz's paraSITE, a work that provides new ways for rethinking site, in terms both practical and poetic. In fact, paraSITE might be seen to play upon, even to critique, recent notions of site as "functional," multiply located, or nomadic in nature, by contrasting these conditions with a very literal reading of "sitelessness" as the state of being homeless. (2) Rakowitz's paraSITES are temporary shelters made of temporary materials like plastic bags and packing tape that attach to the exterior ventilation ducts of urban buildings, and that the artist builds to the specifications of the homeless people with whom he consults and collaborates. Here Rakowitz can be seen as engaging in the de Certeauian action of poaching upon territory that belongs to others--those who de Certeau describes as occupying the place of the "proper" (read property). These paraSITES appear as bodily organs, wormy creatures, podlike growths that might proliferate. Rakowitz's paraSITES recall de Certeau's description of "an operational logic whose models may go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive ..." (3) Though these structures do not camouflage themselves (in fact their visual presence calls attention to homelessness), they nevertheless capture the logic of an organism that insinuates itself into a system, appropriating dominated spaces.

Quite a few other projects documented in *Surface Tension* employ a less overtly politicized model drawn (intentionally or not) from de Certeau, who emphasized everyday practices that appropriate spaces to ends other than those for which they were intended. The artist collective Dispute Resolution Services stages incongruous and frequently inexplicable interventions in public, aiming to "make a space for an unexpected response and the imagination of the passerby to emerge" (309). While it occurs to me that this sort of thing might instead elicit confusion or indifference, I was amused by DRS's creation of thirty-seven "black holes" on the sidewalk in front of

Mann's Chinese Theater in Los Angeles, involving "William Shatner and 36 unidentified stars, covered over with just enough pork lard to comfortably clench felt circles," a work that may remind us, as de Certeau did, that while the culture industry seems increasingly to dominate our lives, we are not merely passive consumers. Jennifer Gabrys makes rather perverse use of de Certeau's celebrated essay "Walking in the City" in her essay "Motor Chorus: Spatializing an Automotive City," to argue for a vision of boundless "automotive mobility," in which Angelenos might unleash the performative possibilities of their boxy metal prostheses. De Certeau positions the idiosyncratic meanderings of the walker against the instrumentalized urban plan, and it might have been more in keeping with the spirit of his essay to explore how those without a car navigate a city utterly dependent on the freeway system. As if in response, Kim Abeles sets out on foot from her studio in L.A. to try to get a clear view of a wedge of the San Gabriel Mountains, walking in their direction as the crow flies, cutting through yards and houses, climbing barbwire fences, passing under freeways. And Lize Mogel's project Public Green distributes information about city parks inside bus shelters around L.A., directing those who rely on public transportation to green spaces within the city--spaces that encourage public congregation, in contrast to the automobiles that transform their passengers into insulated spectators of the city.

The presence in the book of so many projects devoted to the disruption of daily life is complicated and problematized by the historical materials and critical essays that serve as crucial reminders of the historical inheritance these contemporary works carry. The inclusion of an important, early interview with Gordon Matta-Clark from 1976, for example, establishes that artist's work as a model for many of the later practices. Many follow his "choice of dealing with ... the urban environment in general, and building structures specifically" (44), though few embrace his concern for medium, expressed in a memorable line that speaks wryly to his distaste for functionalist architecture: "One of my favorite definitions of the difference between architecture and sculpture is whether there is plumbing or not" (43). The audio component of the book includes rare historical recordings such as Yoko Ono's Cough Piece (1961), Bruce Nauman's Rhythmic Stamping/Four Rhythms in Preparation for Video Tape Problems (1969), and Terry Fox's Lunar Rambles (1976), which remind us how much sounds can tell us about a site when those sounds emanate from the always spatially situated body.

Kathy Battista's "Domestic Crisis: Women Artists and Derelict Houses in South London, 1974-1998" provides a valuable historical account of the sites in which British women artists of the 1970s exhibited their work--abandoned buildings, makeshift women's centers, even the banks of the Thames River--as a means to circumvent the mainstream gallery system. Battista's narrative takes shape around the 1974 exhibition *A Woman's Place*, held in what was formerly a run-down house in southwest London--British feminism's answer to L.A.'s *Womanhouse*. That the participating artists opted for underground sites and the creation of ephemeral work means that they (perhaps inevitably) occupied a ghettoized space beyond the official modes of reception and distribution and were by and large lost to art history. By point of contrast, Battista invokes the 1990s practice of YBA Tracey Emin, whose work is deeply, if blindly, indebted to the 1970s revaluation of women's art and work. For Battista, contemporary

work like Emin's represents a shift whereby past practices that employed site-specific tactics precisely in order to avoid the market are euphorically reappropriated, their marginality commodified and divorced from their original historical and political contexts.

Just when you thought that you had read everything you'd ever wanted to read (perhaps more) on the infamous controversy surrounding the "destruction" of Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, Juli Carson's "Two Walls: 1989" provides an astute rereading of this chapter in history, from the extensive public hearings to subsequent publications such as *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, published by October Books/MIT Press in 1991. Carson argues that even as Tilted Arc aimed to negate the autonomy of the modernist object through an embrace of the materialist conditions of its site, it remained within a logic of transcendence, bound to the experience of the work's presence. And as Serra attempted to defend "presence" through his spoken testimony and written word, he unwittingly spawned Tilted Arc as a site of discourse. (Carson fittingly reminds us that Tilted Arc is an object that many of us know only through what we have read.) Ultimately, Carson wants to insist on the way in which Tilted Arc's site was already discursive, a point that is often lost in discussions of site-specificity that narrate too clean a break between an early model of the phenomenologically based site and latter-day discursive practices.

Many of Carson's themes--particularly the way in which the conditions surrounding a work's reception retroactively constitute its site--find resonance in Simon Leung's "Site-Specificity en abyme, or Notes on Warren Piece (in the 70s)," in which the artist revisits a project and a related essay from the early 1990s, a moment when many were questioning the claims to authenticity and criticality that site-based practices supposedly guaranteed. Leung productively engages the lag time between now and then to reflect upon the key question of whether a site-specific work is based in "an experiential encounter or in its restitution," which is to consider the discursivity of all site-based practices and the existence of the work in its "afterlives." Exhibited at P.S.1 in 1992-93, Warren Piece introduces a chain of shifting players, places, and temporalities: we move from Warren N., a P.S.1 employee, to P.S.1's first "site-specific" exhibition Rooms in 1976, to Vito Acconci's participation in that show, to the crisis of legitimation surrounding the Vietnam War--and back to Warren, who had deserted the American army during Vietnam. The components comprise a metonymic chain of sites and "simultaneous moments" that index a past for which Leung (and many of his viewers) were not present. What does it mean, Leung asks, to work site-specifically in a space such as P.S.1, a space already site-specifically framed by Rooms? Leung invokes the notion of the ruin, describing P.S.1 as a site that had long been ruined when he arrived. Here he echoes the sentiments of Craig Owens, who once characterized Robert Smithson's practice, and site-specificity more generally, as melancholic in nature. (4) For Owens, site is ruinous, impermanent, a memento mori, always already a lost object. Leung's logic moves beyond the "having-been-there-ness" of the artist's site to the ghostly traces of a work received belatedly.

Though works such as Carson's and Leung's remain inscribed within the field of art and its institutions, a good many of the book's contributions do not. As Ehrlich and LaBelle describe erosions between disciplines and site-specificity's absorption into the broader culture, I find myself questioning the meaningfulness of site-based work when the artistic framework is dispensed with entirely. For those artists working as activists within collective movements, the question of whether their work counts as art, is recognizable as art, is beside the point. When operating at the level of "tactics" and "ruses," it may be preferable to fly under the radar, both of the art world and of the "real world." But others, whose interventions into space are more ambiguously defined, whether in terms of artistic or political goals, might benefit from a reclamation of site that would signify more meaningfully and critically. I am thinking of Octavio Camargo's project *Pe com cabeça*, in which twenty-five people lay head to toe in a pedestrian street in Curitiba, Brazil, for two hours, not as an act of protest, but as a "free action," an act of "poetry," "resignifying space." (A photograph of the work appears on the book's cover.) Like the passersby who viewed this action, deprived of any context that would add significance to it, it's difficult for me to distinguish this poetic spectacle from the spectacle of consumer traffic within that commercial thoroughfare. In contemporary culture, which seems too often characterized by an oppressive sameness, we may need to ask how the differences and distinctions that produce legibility might be discovered again. As Matta-Clark remarked, "The determining factor is the degree to which my intervention can transform the structure into an act of communication."

It is *Surface Tension's* strength as an anthology that Matta-Clark's voice shares space with that of Camargo, putting them in a productively tension-filled dialogue. Ultimately, this heterogeneous collage of a book resembles something more like a magazine or journal than an academic anthology, and according to the publisher's Web site, the former is precisely what *Surface Tension* is destined to become. We can look forward to multiple afterlives of *Surface Tension* in the form of future installments of a journal.

(1.) Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 24.

(2.) See James Meyer, "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site-Specificity," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23-37; and Kwon, 157-60.

(3.) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984), xi.

(4.) Craig Owens, "Earthwords" and "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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