

Location, Location, Location.

This is an essay about the location of art in all the many senses of that word and records a series of thoughts and conversations that have taken place since Kirsten Lavers - director of the Taxi Gallery - approached me to write an essay about site specificity for the gallery web site.

It follows on from *more than a medley* written in 2003 for Live Culture at Tate Modern, for which I was asked to curate a series of videos documenting live works of a 'site specific' nature, one of which, *pyr(rh)ic solution*, was a piece by Lavers. The accompanying essay became a meditation on the ways in which, when used to categorise work, terms like 'site specific' can have the effect of eclipsing its 'specificity'. When I was asked to write this piece similar issues resurfaced, along with a concern about the easy and simplistic ways in which the term is often used.

I have referred throughout to an essay by Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity" (originally published in the journal *October*), using it to identify some of the histories and debates that pertain to contextualised practice; going on to reflect on my own practice and the activities of the Taxi Gallery.

Kwon's essay helpfully sets out a brief history of the emergence within Sixties art practice (and in particular minimalism) of site specificity in rejection of the self-contained Modernist art object. Kwon notes the stress placed by such practices on the formal indivisibility of work and site (writing in 1989 about the destruction of *Titled Arc* Richard Serra described the work as "*determined by the topography of the site*") and on the particular, bodily experience of the viewer; going on to discuss the discursive emphasis of much contemporary practice and the dematerialisation of both work and site that have accompanied this shift.

Michael Fried famously criticised minimalism for its 'theatricality', taking issue with its 'dependency on the beholder'. To a large extent current work in the field reflects and extends this legacy, being characteristically diffuse and dispersed, emphasising the performative (in both an actual as well as conceptual sense) over the formal.

The term site can no longer be taken to presuppose a physical place, but implies instead a range of intersecting, socio-cultural, actual and virtual spaces, which both offer a location for the work and with which it is discursively engaged.

" Which is to say that the site is now structured (inter) textually rather than spatially and its model is not a map but an itinerary. A fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces --"(Kwon)

The question of specificity becomes then a form of relational enquiry, between local and national, institutional and personal, historical and contemporary, marginal and central, or, as Kwon describes it between "*the site of action or intervention (physical) and the site of reception (discursive)*".

In my own work and teaching, the term context is one I have found more useful than site to encompass the heady mix of physical place, history, institutional and cultural politics, people, chance, imagination and logistics that 'locating' a work involves.

Locating not only in the sense of physically placing but also of arriving at and finding.

For me the ambition to create work that operates in a dialogic relationship with the context in which it is to be presented, usually necessitates an extended period of research; a search for clues - be it a photograph, a story told in the pub, or information about tidal patterns - that in some way reveals the work. It can be an unpredictable process, involving the capacity to function as a kind of mirror - reflecting circumstances back on themselves - and is one that places particular demands on the personality and creative processes of the artist.

Locating in the sense too of positioning.

Kwon's essay identifies institutional critique as one of the key drives of sited practices and my own work frequently makes reflexive address to the cultural circumstances of its production (funding structures, commissioning process, permissions, acquisition, marketing, institutional location). Much of the funding available to this kind of work is attached to different forms of social agenda and this can result in a complex and often contradictory relationship between artist and commissioner, whereby artists find themselves in danger of 'biting the hand that feeds them' and more problematically, as Kwon observes, of entering into the complicitous position of offering "*subversion for hire*" or "*criticism turned into spectacle*".

Anna Best, Nina Pope and I have recently established an occasional discussion group (as part of the Artquest - Forum series), made up of established artists whose practice incorporates a degree of contextual response. At our first meeting the issue of *location* arose as part of a discussion about the ways in which the multiple planes of operation of such practices can create a difficulty in pinpointing where the work might be said to reside. Given the way in which the methodologies used by those present, emphasise process over outcome and consciously problematise ideas of site and object, this question might seem surprising. I have found myself reflecting back on that conversation a number of times and in the context of writing this essay it has served to focus my thoughts about the challenges of maintaining a practice which is contextually engaged.

Many opportunities offered to artists to make context-related work operate with a relatively short time scale, (30 paid days to make a site-related work involving a range of different community groups is not uncommon) added to which the need to negotiate permissions and access can further accelerate the rapidity with which decisions about the work must be made. Such factors militate against an open ended, investigative, approach and the question as to '*where is the work?*' may become one that the artist finds themselves anxiously asking as deadlines loom.

The desire to make dialogue an actual, as well as conceptual, part of the working process can compound these challenges: forming relationships with people and institutions takes time, it demands substantial social skills and necessitates a form of public working that is radically different from the kinds of introspective reflection associated with studio-based practice. More conventional forms of public art, especially those whose brief is to provide visual enhancement, offer greater certainties in terms of form, function and aesthetic. Those which have come to be referred to as *new genre public art* or *socially engaged practice* rarely resolve themselves in the production of a singular tangible object. As a consequence, the artist may be called on, in a certain sense, to embody the work. No longer simply a maker the artist assumes instead a variety of roles and guises: educator, manager, apologist, entertainer, advocate, critic, curator.

The frequent alliance of this kind of work to initiatives such as regeneration compounds these pressures, creating expectations of the individual that it can be difficult to meet and resulting in a particular kind of commodification of the work. In the second part of her essay Kwon critiques the ways in which contextually related work may be co-opted as a means of *authoring* a place:

Just as the shifts in the structural reorganisation of cultural production alter the form of art commodity (to services) and the authority of the artist (to "appeared protagonist") values like originality, authenticity and singularity are reworked in site orientated art - *evacuated from the art-work and attributed to the site*

Of course the most interesting work in this area is concerned with subverting precisely these expectations. For Kwon, however, this is dangerous game: *"site-specific art can be mobilised to expedite the erasure of differences via the commodification and serialisation of places"*.

Such questions have implications for both the intentions of the work and the sustainability of the artist's practice, especially given the nomadic existence that such kind of work engenders.

Recently I have found myself debating how best to continue working as an artist in a climate that demands from art a particular kind of transparency and

accountability and in which the artist (especially if he or she works in the field of contextually related practice) is increasingly viewed as a kind of service provider.

My commitment to working in a manner which is both responsive and consciously problematises the role of art and artist remains, I have however become increasingly conscious recently of the need to sustain a place for processes and forms of enquiry which cannot be fully articulated or known and concerned about the ways in which the dependency of most site-related work upon public funding, militates against forms of articulacy that are other than verbal. During our discussions one of our Forum group members owned that at some point in a commission or residency he usually undertakes the ritual of stretching a canvas even though he hasn't worked as painter for some years. In a related sense I have found myself wondering recently about the place of materially based processes in my work and their role in supporting a kind of thinking that differs from that involved in proposal writing and project management.

The applications of descriptors such as 'site related', 'socially engaged' etc can work against the appreciation of work in aesthetic, formal or poetic terms, frustrating the capacity of the artist to critically reflect on their work.

A further problem exists: if the primary criteria for evaluating work relate to its accessibility or the extent to which it provides value for money, then how are we to differentiate between works that are imaginative, compelling and challenging and those that are generic and formulaic? Or to judge when the money might have been better spent on some other kind of scheme rather than on an artwork?

Publicly advertised commissioning opportunities can be problematic in other ways too. While their accessibility to all artists is to be applauded, the need to meet specific criteria can result in briefs that are overly prescriptive and close down the possibility of truly creative dialogue. Theme-led curation can have a similar effect. The benefits that gaining a commission offer to an artist both financially and in terms of securing a profile for their work are clear, but for many artists working to commission has become the mainstay of their practice - something that carries the risk over time, of inhibiting new developments in their work. Artists need opportunities to work in ways that allow them to experiment over time, without determined outcomes. Huge potential exists too in the possibility of a cultural shift towards a situation whereby; artists act more frequently as initiators in the commissioning of publicly funded art rather than always as respondents.

Tessa Jowell has recently published an essay *Government and the Value of Culture* arguing for art for art's sake. In a speech launching the document she stated, "*MPs are waking up to the fact that cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool are being brought to life by culture.*" The question of what art for art's sake might mean in this context is an interesting and much debated one.

I found myself joking recently with Kirsten about the impact on property values in her neighbourhood (a 1950's council estate) of the establishment of the Taxi Gallery - only to discover that local estate agents have been featuring it as a selling point. Location, Location, Location.

This is partly a matter of semantics - the word 'gallery', like 'art' has come to signify aspiration, economic growth, and gentrification. Kirsten's decision to use the word has little to do with the above; it might be thought of as tongue in cheek - more black cab than white cube - but it also represents a deliberate choice to define the activities of the Taxi Gallery as art.

Art for whose sake?

The motivation to establish the Taxi Gallery comes from Laver's long term interest in what might be called the intersection of art and everyday life - hers is a practice for which the context has been car boot sales, night shelters, churches and public libraries and the establishment of a gallery in her front garden (with intermittent forays in the scout hall next door) and reflects an interest in occasioning a dialogue with people who are first and foremost, her neighbours.

What is interesting, however, is that while some work by community groups has been shown in the space and some artists have pursued local connections, few have consciously chosen to work with this wider context. Instead, it is the taxi itself that has formed the common denominator.

Some have treated it as a kind of gallery space; for others it has functioned as a vitrine, while others still have used it as pedestal. Some have shown existing work, others have pursued an idea of site specificity sympathetic to the origins of the term, making and installing the work in a manner whereby it has become inseparable from its setting. A great many have made reference to the ways in which taxis function as icons or signifiers and a number have sought to trace connections with wider political, cultural and social contexts. Others have taken a time-based approach resisting any idea of closure and several have sought forms of engagement that position the viewer as co-author. A few have addressed themselves to particular communities of interest, while others have allowed the work to find its audience (or the audience to find the work!)

It is difficult then to draw any conclusions from such a range of work about the relationship of the artists involved to questions of site and context although an awareness of such issues is central to Kirsten's curatorial approach. The project can be said to have extended access to contemporary art - not to mention its impact on neighbouring property values. Most importantly however it has given a number of artists an opportunity to show work that has largely been made for its own sake, something that I am arguing in the current climate of economic auditing of the arts is to be celebrated. It is after all art that is intelligent,

provocative (in the best sense of that word), funny, seductive, poetic, political, imaginative, aesthetically strong, well crafted, unexplainable, that engages people, impacting on them in intangible ways that resist evaluation by a set of tick boxes.

Bibliography

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