MAPPING SITE-SPECIFICITY IN ART – KEY QUOTES

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1976   Robert Alloway, "Site Inspection", _Artforum_ October 1976, pp49-52.

"This is an article based on visits to the sites of earthworks in Arizona, Novada, Texas and Utah… The sculptures by Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer and Smithson that I visited are all site-specific, in that they have been located by artists in places that are unique to each work. **The form of the sculpture cannot be separated from the terrain it occupies (it has zero mobility), and the distances that have to be travelled are a part of the content also**. In what follows I shall have to indicate **the topography as part of the system of the sculpture**.

This monumental outdoor art requires survey procedures and construction techniques, "the artist experiences the development of the work as practical control and social co-operation", artists "realise it in terms of engineering".

The work of these artists are "highly responsive to the given terrain".

[my emphasis]

1996   Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer", sixth chapter in _The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century_, pp184-185.

"The Siting of Contemporary Art

The ethnographic turn in contemporary art is also driven by developments within the minimalist genealogy of art over the last thirty-five years. These developments constitute a sequence of investigations: first of the **materials constituents of the art medium**, then of its **spatial conditions of perception**, and them of **the corporeal bases of this perception** - shifts marked in minimalist art in the early 1960s through conceptual, performance, body, and site-specific art in the early 1970s. Soon the institution of art could no longer be described only in spatial terms (studio, gallery, museum, and so on); it was also **a discursive network of different practices and institutions**, **other subjectivities and communitie**s. Nor could the observer of art be delimited only in phenomenological terms; he or she was also a social subject defined in language and marked by difference (economic, ethnic, sexual, and so on). Of course the breakdown of restrictive definitions of art and artist, identity and community, was also pressured by social movements (civil rights, various feminism, queer politics, multi-culturalism) as well as theoretical developments (the convergence of feminism, psychoanalysis, and film theory; the recovery of Antonio Gramsci and the development of cultural studies in Britain; the applications of Louis Althusser, Lacan, and Foucault, especially in the British journal _Screen_; the develop of postcolonial discourse with Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and other; and so on). **Thus did art pass into the expanded filed of culture** that anthropology is thought to survey.
        These developments also constitute a series of shifts in the siting of art: from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from the institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites for art. …
        Mapping in recent art has tended toward the sociological and the anthropological, to the point where an ethnographic mapping of an institution or a community is a primary form of site-specific art today."

[my emphasis]

2005   Christopher Townson, "_Site, Nonsite: Heidegger, Turrell, Smithson_" (PhD thesis), pp-262-3

"The question of site-specificity now becomes not one that asks whether it is possible or true but, on the contrary, simply a matter of **what site is involved and whether it becomes explicitly thematized [revealed, uncovered] or not**. The site, according to Heidegger, is never something that is, or was, 'empty' and into which something is placed which relates to the attributes thereof. It is, on the contrary, some thing which is initiated and sustained, at the most fundamental ontological level, by the ekstatic, factical presencing of things as such."

The historical differentiation of artworks [HISTORY OF FORMS] as 'being site-specific' occurs not through the establishment of a relation to site as something new or novel, but as **the explicit thematization of the work's own topicality (or place-ness) as a form of resistance to its occlusion and dissemblance as a co-ordinate within abstract, a posteriori systems of conceptual enframing**."

[my emphasis]

NB: Townson **defines the site as '_that which things are about_',** and about is 'near', 'concerning', 'around', 'going towards' (p100-101).

"To help sort out some of the confusion of ambitions and practices, let me rough out some general working categories for public/site art, in terms of how we generally process (recognize, understand) them. ("Note: there are no value judgements interceded here, only distinctions.) Put simply, we can say that any given work falls into one of the following four categories:

1. *Site dominant*. This work embodies the classical tenets of permanence, transcendent and historical content, meaning, purpose: the art-object either rises out of, of is the occasion for, its 'ordinary' circumstances – monuments, historical figures, murals, etc. There 'works of art' are recognized, understood, and evaluated by referencing their content, purposed, placement, familiar form, materials, techniques, skills, etc. A Henry Moore would be an example of site-dominant art.

2. *Site adjusted*… Here consideration is given to adjustments of scale, appropriateness, placement, etc. But the 'work of art' is still either made or conceived in the studio and transported to, or assembled on, the site… a Mark di Suvero would be an example.

3. *Site specific*. Here the [work] is conceived with the site in mind; the site sets the parameters and is, in part, the reason for the [work[. This process takes the initial step towards [the work] being integrated into its surroundings. But our process of recognition and understanding of the 'work of art' is still keyed (referenced) to the oeuvre of the artist. Familiarity with his or her history, lineage, art intent, style , material, techniques, etc., are presupposed; thus, for example, a Richard Serra is always recognizable as, first and foremost, a Richard Serra.

4. *Site conditions/determined*. Here the [creative] response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process *to begin* with an intimate, hands-on reading of the site. This means sitting, watching, and walking through the site, the surrounding areas (where you will enter from and exit to), the city at large or the countryside. Here ***there are numerous things to consider; what is the site's relation to applied and implied schemes of organization and systems of order, relation, architecture, uses, distances, sense of scale?*** *... **What kind of natural events affect the site – snow, wind, sun angles, sunrise, water, etc.? What is the physical and people density? The sound and visual density (quiet, next-to-quiet, or busy)? What are the qualities of surface, sound, movement, light, etc? What are the qualities of detail, levels of finish, craft? What are the histories of prior and current uses, present desires, etc.?*** A quiet distillation of all of this – while directly experiencing the site – determines all the facets of the ['creative] response': aesthetic sensibility, levels and kinds of physicality, gesture, dimensions, materials, kind and level of finish, details, etc.; whether the responses should be monumental or ephemeral, aggressive or gentle, useful or useless, sculptural, architectural, or simply the planting of a tree, or maybe even doing nothing at all.

    Here, with this fourth category of site-conditioned art, the process of recognition and understanding breaks with the conventions of abstract referencing of content, historical lineage, oeuvre of the artist, style, etc., implicit in the other three categories, and ***crosses the conventional boundaries of art vis-à-vis architecture, landscape, city planning, utility***, and so forth… We now propose to follow the principles of phenomenal, conditional, and responsive art by placing the individual observer in context, at the crux of determining process, insisting that he or she use all the same (immediate) cues the artist used in forming the art-response [maker-response] to form his or her operative-response [participant/viewer/reader-response]…"

[my emphasis]