

# Art/Site An Introduction to Art as Site-Response

*Gillian McIver*

Art/Site is a means to exploring site-specific / site-responsive practice in contemporary art. This project brings together practitioners in different disciplines to explore how site resonates with artistic endeavour and the effects (if any) that art has on the locality spatially and psychologically.

Art/Site explores the artistic, social and cultural issues surrounding the “reclamation” of public space through art. The city becomes a zone of experimentation and perspective shift, encouraging the artist and the audience to see the landscape and objects within it in a new way. Questions about time, impermanence, memory, artifice and locality arise, providing raw materials for the artist and points of access for the audience.

History is not so much about facts as about perceptions of the world around us, and a sense that we belong to something that has existed before we did. That is why these forgotten places have the ability to hold such resonance.

Work site-responsively, the artist concerned with the experience of *being in* those spaces, in the inter-relationship of the past and present, imprints of history and current activity, the physical feel and texture of the space and with bringing those experiences out to the public. The work has the ability to make the audience think about where they are, to reintegrate the lost fragmented forgotten place back into their consciousness.

Art/Site also explores how these projects come about: how artists develop their ideas in response to sites, why they choose sites, how they go about making the thing happen.

In *Junkspace*, Hilary Powell posits the idea of “recycling” junk or abandoned spaces, a “temporary transformation of meaning”, citing Walter Benjamin’s concept of art as redemptive. She contrasts “public art” as critiqued by Koolhaas, with site-responsive “interventions” into the derelict urban landscape. Powell sees the art event as a “moment of rupture” in the narrative of development and capitalist progress. Powell goes on to discuss her project **fleeting** a site-responsive mixed media intervention into a squatted lido (swimming pool). **Fleeting** raises many questions about use and intended use of space: the lido was not “disused” but it was used transgressively, by the squatters, as living space. Powell notes how historical research into the public health movement of the 1930s when the London lidos were built informs the outcome of her work, and highlights the ongoing controversy of “what is public service” raised by the very existence of the art event.

Powell asks, by way of conclusion, given the interest of artist, developer and local community in the use of public space, “how can [these] site[s] be best “put to use”?”

Turning more specifically to the relationship between art, culture and history, historian Niko Rollmann looks at the way art was used to “reconsecrate” an important symbolic historical and political space. In *Wrapping the Reichstag*

Rollmann describes the fraught history of the building and its role in the fragile democracy of Germany, and the mentality in post-war Germany which made the wrapping such a shocking but necessary event. The Christos’ (Bulgarian artist Christo and Jeanne-Claude) wrapping of the Reichstag in 1995 was a sensitive, joyful art-action which drew attention to a crucially important, but hitherto marginalized and decrepit space. As Brian O’Docherty has said of the Christos’ projects:

Their projects are one of the very few successful attempts to press the rhetoric of much 20<sup>th</sup> century art to a conclusion... In doing so they measure the distance between art’s aspirations and society’s permissions... Far from being folly, the Christos’ projects are gigantic parables: subversive, beautiful, didactic.”<sup>1</sup>

In *On Interconnectivity*, Françoise Dupré discusses the idea of community and collective space as a site for art and describes how she shifts her practice between “approved” sites for art (galleries, museums, recognised art spaces) and “marginalised” sites (schools, community resources) and how she refuses to accept these demarcations. She discusses her work in **emplacements** a UK-St Petersburg art exchange that happened in 2000 and 2002, “between social and cultural zones.”

Dupré challenges the idea of “art” and “non art” and argues convincingly that “sites of learning” are important art sites, creating dialogues and exchanges with and between communities – communities of artists as well as the wider community of which artists are a part – in local and international contexts.

Moving away from the physical site, landscape architect and artist Kelty Miyoshi McKinnon introduces the idea of “the site” as fluid. Her current works including the one discussed in *Apocalyptic Pollinations*, **Ivy League**, deal with the perceived “threat” of the natural world (a “threat” which goes back to the Puritans – for example Cotton Mather’s essay *The Wonders of the Invisible World* where he states that the natural world is “the Devil’s territory”). The “threat” of water or “alien” plants “erupting” beyond their delimited boundaries is counter-pointed to current administration rhetoric about illegal immigrants and asylum seekers.

**Ivy League** is an Internet project that moves fluidly between real and virtual space. The work is about containment and restriction and about defying the boundaries. Focusing on the plant “English Ivy” – contentious as it has a tendency to spread and can grow in difficult conditions – the website uses the plant as a metaphor, but also offers a “portable pocket garden kit” which allows /exhorts the recipient to “wander the city” scattering the invasive plant’s seeds in the nooks and crannies of the city’s buildings and pavements: combining subversion with psychogeography.

These essays, together with discussions of specific works by different artists, give an introduction to current practices in site-responsive art. The range of practices, ideologies and aims serve to show that the movement of art out of culturally-demarcated space and into the fabric of human life, is unstoppable. The CD-Rom complements the book in providing a multimedia immersion into the sites and the works produced.

Gillian McIver, 2003

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> O’Doherty, B. *Inside The White Cube : The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. San Francisco: The Lapis Press. 1986 pp.104-105.