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Scale: New Strategies in Site-Specific Art

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Abstract

Today, one of the crucial issues for discussions on site-specific art is scale. The journey of site-specific art, starting with a quite minimal insertion into an empty gallery space is now institutionalised according to utterly different aims, sometimes involving enormous dimensions. However, to discuss the subject of 'site-specific art' only with regard to high-budget projects of major institutions would mean ignoring the large group of artists who work outside these controversial circumstances, employ physical features of a site as a tool to convey their artistic approaches, and do not make compromises in the face of institutional pressure. This study analyses new alternatives regarding site-specific art today and reviews these examples through the recent popular issue of scale, considering the necessity for artists to make compromises in line with the demands of institutions or viewers. The data were collected via questionnaires and interviews, with artists who live and work in Berlin.

Keywords: Site-specific art, scale, public art.

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1. Introduction

Site-specific art originally appeared in the 1950s as a reaction to the institutional structures of gallery spaces and museums. In the 1950s and 1960s, art galleries and museums did not support experimental works and performances as they were not seen as commercially viable. The changes emerging as a reaction to these institutional structures in that period were aimed at the sense and interpretation of art, and were the turning point for questioning the function of a work of art. Consequently, new alternative artistic practises were performed in the gallery space, and instead of site being a part of artistic practice, the opinion that site creates a starting point for art and is placed at the centre of production started to be adopted (Greenberg, 2005; Wu, 2002).

The definition of 'site-specific' also appeared in the late 1960s as an outcome of this reaction (O'Doherty, 1999). However, this movement continues to evolve and is used for different purposes by artists. The relation between art and site has been formally and conceptually transformed (Frock, 2015). With this transformation, the galleries and museums that were previously criticised became platforms for artists who produced works for which site is important. In addition to these institutions, many site-specific art projects are made in public spaces. The fact that site-specific works have such a crucial role and effect within current art has necessitated the definition of concepts and forms of production regarding this approach.

Although this text is limited to artistic framework, many artists adopting such an approach inevitably act in an interdisciplinary space, where hybrid results occur. The site where the work is placed is a starting point for the artists mentioned in the text, and areas such as architecture, geography and social environment are effectively used by these artists. The different disciplines used introduce a quite complex structure regarding the variety of production forms and spaces, the classification of art based on site and the explanation of its concepts.

From this point of view, it is possible to review many examples within the text under various classifications or titles. However, in order to examine this hybrid structure, the experiences belonging to the artists who contribute to the study via questionnaires and interviews have been evaluated through trending subject of 'scale' that current art communities often handle and discuss.

The examples of artists in this study reflect the data of a research project carried out in Germany. Most of the examples have been formed in light of the data obtained through face-to-face meetings and dialogues. Therefore, one of the most important features of this study is that it is based on the experiences and opinions of primary sources in Germany.

Germany, especially Berlin, is one of the locations with the highest number of artists working in this field (Ernst, 2012). One of the most important reasons for this situation is the existence of funds allocated by the government for this kind of artwork. Programmes such as the Public Art Programme (Kunst im Stadtraum) and Percent-for-Art (Kunst am Bau) subsidise artists to produce spatial works in both public and alternative spaces.

We have recently been confronted with the subject of the effects of art institutions on the scale of works, whether or not commissioning systems have a binding influence on the end result of the artwork, the relationship between concept and medium, the hybridisation of disciplines, and in what context a work of art should be evaluated (site-specific, intervention, architecture based, performance, etc.). In considering all these angles, this article is a kind of experiment which tries to reach current conclusions regarding the subject of 'scale', benefiting from the artists' own experiences and the cases they themselves witness.

2. Scale: New Strategies In Site-Specific Art

In site-specific art, one of the crucial issues recently under discussion is scale. We encounter many different opinions. For example, art critic Foster (2011) points out the issue of the 'spatial sublime'

both in architecture and art by referring to examples of artists such as Olafur Eliasson, James Turrell or Richard Serra, and institutions such as the Guggenheim or Tate Modern. Claiming that the relationship between painting, sculpture and video arts and architecture depends on the influence of museums, Foster (2011) emphasises that governments, companies and art centres have turned towards such works of art in order to encourage business investment and the branding of cities. The institutions that target such large investors and audiences have started to support large-scale works, which exceed the usual gallery or museum sizes.

One of the biggest concerns about scale is related to the necessity for artists to make compromises in their artistic approach in line with the demands of institutions. In the 1950s, site-specific art involved minimal interventions within the site. Some artists such as Yves Klein, Michael Asher, Lawrence Weiner and William Anastasi strove to insert minimal additions into the existing data of gallery sites, thus developing an institutional criticism which uses the institutions themselves. In contrast to this situation, today, in site-specific art, the scale of existing architecture or a broader public space is a determining factor within artist's production as a matter of course. Moreover, thanks to technological developments, it is quite a natural desire to be 'visible' on an architectural and public space scale within an environment where limitless possibilities exist in terms of both methodology of practice and material alternatives. For example, Inges Idee (Hans Hemmert, Axel Lieber, Thomas A. Schmidt and Georg Zey) works as an artistic collective in public spaces. The artists' decision about scale is always related to the scale of elements existing in the spaces they work with. Georg Zey, one of the members of the group, states that the idea of 'big is good' has become common with the expansion in the economic market; however, the value of an artwork cannot be measured by scale.¹ Known mostly for their projects performed in open public spaces, Inges Idee produces works that focus on the key word of 'visibility' and enter into a dialogue with the given spatial scale. For instance, the work entitled *Zauberlehrling*, which has the size of an original 35-m tall electricity pylon, takes its dimensional references from other pylons situated around it.

A similar situation can be observed in the projects of msk7 (Mona Babl, Kati Gausmann, Ricarda Mieth, Anja Sonnenburg), who are also active as an artistic collective. In the case of their work entitled *Blumerant*, even though the group was invited to propose a project for the interior space of a church, as a result of their historical and social analysis of the space they proposed a work to be situated in the area around the building. Since this decision of working in an open space inevitably and naturally suggests the idea of working on a large scale, they did not simply enlarge something that should normally fit in a smaller space. *Sfumato*, another project by the artists, may be considered as a relatively large-scale artwork considering the area it occupies. As the work consists of fog which fills the street, it tries to achieve the maximum effect in terms of scale with minimal material.



Figure 1. msk7, *Blumerant*, Temporary Installation on Gendarmenmarkt, Berlin, Germany 2007. Photo: © Jürgen Hohmuth/Zeitort.de

As can be seen in these examples, both site-specific works consisting of a situation where the artwork and its location cannot be evaluated separately, and interventional works performed in open spaces find their meaning within the spatial and atmospheric structures surrounding them. As Georg Zey emphasises, from this point we certainly cannot infer that the value of the message belonging to a work of art is directly proportionate to its scale.

Today, many artists continue to produce site-based works consisting of relatively small-scale interventions, additions or structures. However, another component to be considered here is the 'viewer' factor. No matter how small the artistic intervention, the actual dimension of the work depends on the perspective of the viewer. Viewers who experience such an artwork by walking around or through it create a direct or active relationship to this art form.

In considering the notion that the primary function of works in all sites and public spaces is for the use of the audience, the participation of the audience is required for artworks to complete themselves as a total work. Particularly in the case of works in public buildings and spaces, the audience is not only the spectator – it is also a part of the work. Briefly, the totality of a site-specific work finally acquires meaning when its audience is present. Therefore, the extent of determining the work's dimension through the artwork itself and the structural and historical data surrounding it differs according to the experiential processes of the viewer. (If we take the example of an installation within a building: all structural dimensions of the building, the yard or garden around the building, and the city which contains it in a more historical context.) No matter what their context is (physical, conceptual or historical), the works of art with spatial and environmental elements allow the viewer to re-conceive their environment and, in a broad sense, the world surrounding them from a different perspective (Frock, 2015).

Andreas Schmid, who gets his inspiration from the space he works with, determines the mediums (light, rope, string, tape) depending on physical information about the site. Considering the relationship between space and the human body, he tries to provide situations in which the audience experiences the work from differing viewpoints. With reference to this idea, Schmid states that as long as the artwork communicates to the viewers without any advance written or oral information, its scale does not matter.



Figure 2. Andreas Schmid, Driftwood, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2004

Christian Hasucha's works correspond to Schmid's ideas. An interventional work which the artist performed within the project, RumBulTurGeo, consists of a table which is penetrated by a seaside cliff. At first glance, the work might be understood as a model of the cliff on the table. However, the location of the artwork with its dimensions and spatial placing may change depending on the observer's viewpoint, since it is also possible to include the cliff, the sea and the atmosphere around the table into the artwork.

After considering the experiences of artists who employ site-specific art practices in order to independently express their own artistic approach, it is possible to state that this structure enables many new alternatives. It provides an experimental field for artists to carry out these projects and so ensures the continuity of this art form's production.

There are different comments by art critics and historians about current data regarding aims, structural forms, which concepts to question and most importantly under what conditions 'site' is involved within artistic practice. However, learning of the artists' experiences through a first-hand, direct communication in order to determine the common conditions, problems and strategies which artists share fundamentally allows more realistic data to be gathered. According to this data, instead of 'space' being a tool for institutional criticism, it has become an important component in a total artwork through the efforts of artists who have placed it in the centre of their artistic production. As is also understood from the examples mentioned, 'site' has become the artwork itself with all its physical, conceptual, historical, atmospheric and functional attributes, rather than being simply a location or installation space for the artwork.

In comparison with traditional art production (painting, sculpture, etc.), which are exhibited under gallery or museum conditions, the artists who adopt artistic approaches such as site-specific art, public art or intervention and have a relatively more complex and risky position in terms of financial issues. Many museums and public institutions have recently exhibited current artworks through commissioning works for both indoors and in public spaces. These institutions provide financial support for artists and include placement or site-specific art in their programmes through such commissions (Manco, ²014). Without this financial support, it is now almost impossible to produce artworks reaching architectural dimensions and occupying large areas in public spaces. When it comes to site-specific art, it should be considered that any financial support required depends on the physical conditions of the work. Thanks to the funds provided by institutions, restraints regarding the dimension of the works are eliminated, and adapting or relocating the work to different places becomes possible. By this means, artists have the opportunity to meet a wider audience.

We should also consider the fact that site-specific works, which rarely sell, are financially unviable for art galleries and this situation increases the need for different financial support systems. Most of the artists in the study do not have a written contract with any art gallery. They generally realise their projects with financial support obtained through competitions

Although art, architecture or public art competitions lead to some rule-bound restraints, research indicates that artists somehow manage to find solutions for these restraints within their own production practices. As with any rule and decision-bound system, this structure has some problematic issues, too. The points which artists find problematic regarding this system centre especially on subjects such as time management, selection of the jury members, the responsibilities placed on the artists, insufficient financial support and insurance. It can be stated that these problems restrict particularly the artists who produce public space projects. Nevertheless, the constraints mentioned are not at a level that changes the forms of production artists use or the messages they would like to convey. Therefore, it would not be right to regard this situation as entirely negative by suggesting that these organisations 'oppress' artists working on such projects. Consequently, no matter which scale (architectural, public space or human body) artists deal with, they point out that they do not make a decision which is opposite / contradictory to their own artistic production in terms of the works' dimensions.

Notes

1. Interview, Berlin, Germany, 5 November 2015.
2. Interview, Berlin, Germany, 20 October 2015.
3. Interview, Berlin, Germany, 5 November 2015.
4. Interview, Berlin, Germany, 21 October 2015.
5. Interview, Berlin, Germany, 21 October 2015.

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