Introduction: On Installation and Site Specificity

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On the horizon, then, at the furthest edge of the possible, it is a matter of producing the space of the human species—the collective (generic) work of the species—on the model of what used to be called "art"; indeed, it is still so called, but art no longer has any meaning at the level of an "object" isolated by and for the individual.

—Henri Lefebvre, "Openings and Conclusions"

Location and point of view are constantly shifting at the apex of time’s flow. Language, memory, reflection, and fantasy may or may not accompany the experience. Shift to recall of the spatial experience: objects and static views flash in the mind’s space. A series of stills replaces the filmic real-time experience. Shift the focus from the exterior environment to that of the self in a spatial situation, and a parallel, qualitative break in experience between the real-time "I" and the reconstituting "me" prevails. As there are two types of selves known to the self, the "I" and the "me," there are two fundamental types of perception: that of temporal space and that of static, immediately present objects. The "I," which is essentially imageless, corresponds with the perception of space unfolding in the continuous present. The "me," a retrospective constituent, parallels the mode of object perception. Objects are obviously experienced in memory as well as in the present... the constitution of culture involves the burdening of the "me" with objects. It is the mode of the relatively clear past tense. Space in this scheme has been thought of mainly as the distance between two objects. The aim of this narrative is to make space less transparent, to attempt to grasp its perceived nature ahead of those habitual cultural transformations that "know" always in the static mode of the "me."

—Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space"

The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct as possible.

—Allan Kaprow, "The Event"
To suggest what might be included in a history of an art form is to postulate an archive that denies closure and scatters labels, an eccentric assembly that seeks to collect and inquire simultaneously. Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art intends to chart the terms of discussion and debate that have surrounded installation and site-specific practices and to provide new critical frameworks that encourage a rethinking of their history. This examination takes place specifically in relation to various contexts in which this work has been experienced—art history, target communities, and art institutions—and in relation to viewers and makers addressing the question of how the medium offers theoretical and conceptual challenges to institutional, historical, and conceptual assumptions in art discourse.

I have invited practicing artists, writers, art historians, and hybrids of all of those disciplines to address some of the issues at stake in installation and site-specific art. This volume seeks to examine critically and explore the situation of these works within divergent and varied spheres of meaning, including community space, corporate space, architectural hybrids, multimedia, cyberspace, environmental action, public and private ritual, political activism, governmental and private patronage systems, and the compelling and problematized intersections created by all of these sites.

In this zone of maximum hybridity, definitions fall flat. It is only at the intersection of practices located both self-consciously historically and within contemporary frameworks of debate that a definition can be tentatively constructed to address installation activity in Europe, Japan, and the Americas. Thus, we could begin by saying that installation is informed by a multitude of activities, including architecture douce (soft architecture), set design, the Zen garden, happenings, bricolage, son et lumière, spectacles, world's fairs, vernacular architecture, multimedia projections, urban gardens, shrines, land art, earthworks, trade shows, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century panoramas, Arte Povera, follies, and the visionary environments of "folk" artists. Collectively the work of installation and site specificity engages the aural, spatial, visual, and environmental planes of perception and interpretation. This work grows out of the collapse of medium specificity and the boundaries that had defined disciplines within the visual arts beginning in the 1960s.

In 1973, Lucy Lippard would postulate the dematerialization of the object of art: "for lack of a better term I have continued to refer to a process of dematerialization, or a de-emphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)." Installation art as genre, term, medium, and practice acts as the assimilator of a rich succession of influences. In installation the object has been rearranged or gathered, synthesized, expanded, and de-materialized. Daniel Buren has declared that site-specific as a term "has become hackneyed and meaningless through use and abuse." Hal Foster, speaking of Richard Serra, says "for sculpture to harden into a thing-category would be for sculpture to become monumental again—for its structure to be fetishized, its viewer frozen, its site forgotten, again. In this light to deconstruct sculpture is to serve its 'internal necessity': to extend sculpture in relation to process, embodiment, and site is to remain within it." This volume hopes to counteract and complicate these paradigms and assertions by examining the definitions and legacies of site specificity and installation while articulating a broad range of theoretical, material, and conceptual practices.

**Toward Definition**

A more rigorously analytical reading of the history of modernist sculpture would have to acknowledge that most of its seemingly eternal paradigms, which had been valid to some extent in late nineteenth-century sculpture (i.e., the representation of individual, anthropomorphic, wholistic bodies in space, made of inert, but lasting, if not eternal matter and imbued with illusionary spurious life), had been definitely abolated by 1913. Tatlin's corner-counter relief and his subsequent "Monument for the Third International" and Duchamp's readymades, both springing off the height of synthetic Cubism, constitute the extremes of an axis on which sculpture has been restlessly ever since (knowingly or not): the dialectics of sculpture between its function as a model for the aesthetic production of reality (e.g., its transition into architecture and design) or serving as a model investigating and contemplating the reality of aesthetic production (the readymade, the allegory). Or, more precisely: architecture on the one hand and epistemological model on the other are the two poles toward which relevant sculpture since then has tended to develop, both implying the eventual dissolution of its own discourse as sculpture.

—Benjamin Buchloh.

*Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture*

We find ourselves presently at the tail end of an intriguing and sometimes baffling series of moments, movements, and gestures that cross-reference installation art. Seemingly inexhaustible numbers of
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Inhabited by both. This was accomplished either by eliminating the object's internal relationships altogether or by making those relationships a function of simple structural repetition, of "one thing after another." Whatever relationship was now to be perceived was contingent on the viewer's temporal movement in the sphere shared with the object. Thus the work belonged to its site; if its site were to change, so would the interrelationship of object, context, and viewer. Such a reorientation of the perceptual experience of art made the viewer, in effect, the subject of the work, whereas under the reign of modernist idealism this privileged position devolved ultimately on the artist, the sole generator of the artwork's formal relationships.5

The site of installation becomes a primary part of the content of the work itself, but it also posits a critique of the practice of art-making within the institution by examining the ideological and institutional frameworks that support and exhibit the work of art. "To install" becomes not a gesture of hanging the work of art or positioning a sculpture, but an art practice in and of itself. Crimp goes on to discuss artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher—artists who expanded the original tenets of site specificity with materialist critiques.

Speaking of the infamous removal of Richard Serra's Tilted Arc from its public site, Crimp problematizes both the reception of the piece and also the recuperation of site specificity within art discourse to serve seemingly opposite claims of conceptual radicality and timelessness: estheticism.

The larger public's incomprehension in the face of Serra's assertion of site specificity is the incomprehension of the radical prefiguratives of a historic moment in art practice. "To remove the work is to destroy the work" was made self-evident to anyone who had seen "Sculpieces" literalization of the assertion, and it is that which provided the background of "Tilted Arc" for its defenders. But they could not be expected to explain, within the short time of their testimonies, a complex history that had been deliberately suppressed. The public's ignorance is, of course, an enforced ignorance, for not only is cultural production maintained as the privilege of a small minority, but it is not in the interests of the institution's art and the forces they serve to produce knowledge of radical practices even for their specialized audience. And this is particularly the case for those practices whose goal is a materialist critique of the presuppositions of those very institutions. Such
practices attempt to reveal the material conditions of the work of art, its mode of production and reception, the institutional supports of its circulation, the power relations represented by these institutions—in short, everything that is disguised by traditional aesthetic discourses. Nevertheless, these practices have subsequently been recuperated by that very discourse as reflecting just one more episode in a continuous development of modern art. Many of “Titled Art’s” defenders, some representing official art policies, argued for a notion of site specificity that reduced it to a purely aesthetic category. The trajectory from Smithson to Crimp traces the development of an art practice designated within a particular sphere of theoretical and conceptual boundaries that claim its radicality. The conclusion of sculpture is declared, with installation and site-specific art awkwardly occupying part of its terrain.

Upgrading Richard Wagner’s original operatic definition, Walter Gropius theorized architecture as the Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art. Architecture was to assimilate all forms of the visual and performing arts into a single totalizing project that would define the twentieth century. The Bauhaus would attempt to resolve the split between art and craft as well as performer and audience, the alienation of the subject from art, and the artist’s alienation from technology and commerce. In the totalized project of art, object-making, music-making, and building would form a singular modernist unity. Installation aspires to this continuum.

The material content and constitution of installation suggests ever more complex and varied sources and legacies, including everything from Neolithic standing stones to eighteenth-century human garden statuary up to contemporary video projects. Installation traverses upon and draws from disparate legacies, from Fidelis Schubert’s Grotto of Versus built for “Mad” King Ludwig II in 1876 (which sported an interior, underground lake complete with swans) to Simon Rodia’s Watts Towers (hand built from urban detritus in Southern Central Los Angeles between 1921 and 1954 and including a 102-foot high central spire encrusted with glass bottles and crotchery). The desire that motivates installation—to fabricate interior and exterior environments, to alter surfaces until they envelop the viewer, to construct “all-over” compositions utilizing natural and man-made objects, and to reallocate and disorder space—can be situated in relation to myriad historical art movements and smaller, sometimes private domestic actions. The artists of the dada, happenings, Fluxus, situationist, and Arte Povera movements have all produced work indicative of these concerns, as have so-called visionary, environmental, or folk artists.

Located in the intersection of the collection, the monument, the garden, and the domestic interior, works of installation and site-specific practices can be positioned in several locations that predate modernist genres and labels. I would suggest that both the Wunderkamern, or cabinets de curiosité (cabinets of curiosities or wonders), and the Kunstkamern (room-sized collections of art and intriguing objects) from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have more than a passing resemblance to the contemporary practice of installation. They were the personal and idiosyncratic collections of private individuals that predate the establishment of public museums in Europe and are often characterized as having laid the foundation for the establishment of the modern museum.

Wunderkamern were composed of collections of items chosen not because of their historical value as antiques or their monetary worth but because the collectors found the objects pleasing and demonstrative of the ‘wonders of the world,’ whether natural, spiritual, or man-made. The objects in a Wunderkammer were arranged according to circumference, height, weight, color, luminosity, transparency, or like geometries. A Wunderkammer might juxtapose a group of ostrich eggs with marble acorn garden ornaments, or a wooden bow with the thigh bones of an antelope. Barbara Maria Stafford, in one of several extensive explorations of the Wunderkammer’s placement in the historical discourse of the eighteenth century, recounts the reaction of neoclassical critics to the Wunderkammer’s “past crimes”: “Lord Shaftesbury, the Abbé Batteux, Winckelmann, and Lessing exorciated consciously artistically and extraneous profundities. They termed ‘deformed’ and ‘unnatural’ any egalitarian or truly interdisciplinary hybrids. These dissonant decorative mixtures grazed the heteroclitic cabinet de curiosité. According to unsympathetic critics the equivocal ornamental grotesque embodied everything that was excessive, contaminated, and ‘monstrous’ about the uncontrolled imagination.” This lack of homogeneity is precisely what makes the Wunderkammer such an intriguing precursor to installation art. It suggests as well a connective to acts of intimate material collection and repositioning such as curio or souvenir cabinets, personal altars, roadside and hiking memorials, and autobiographical mantelpiece groupings, all of which take the institutional scale of the Wunderkammer and dissolve and redistribute this passion for knowledge through the