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What issues can arise from site-specific work, and how can they be avoided?

Site-specific artwork is created in response to a particular location, with its physical, social, political, or historical context contributing to the meaning of the work. However, some approaches can create problems when a piece of work conflicts with morale, political sensitivities or changes how the space is used. These issues can be explored through JR's Kikito (2017), installed at the US-Mexico border, and Richard Serra's Titled Arc (1981), formerly located in the Federal Plaza, New York.

Although both artworks depend on their locations for meaning, their reception and reaction from the public demonstrates the importance of considering accessibility, public opinion, permissions and the relationship between art and its surroundings.



JR's Kikito was installed in Tecate, Mexico in 2017. This large-scale photographic image depicts a young child looking over the US-Mexico border fence, creating the illusion that he is peering into the United States. Moreover, its site-specific nature is essential to its meaning and context because the fence represents political division, immigration, and the separation of people. By placing a child's innocent, candid expression against this imposing structure, the artist creates a human and emotional response to what can otherwise appear as an impersonal political structure. The contrast between the innocent appearance of the child and the imposing border fence, JR encourages the viewer to question the human consequences of borders. (JR, 2017)

However, the work raises issues surrounding political sensitivity and accessibility. Although the installation was constructed on the Mexican side, it was best viewed from the US side, meaning the child and his family could not simply cross the border to see it from the intended viewpoint. Additionally, the work also risks simplifying a complex political issue through a simple image of a child. However, these issues can be addressed through consultation and careful consideration of who can access and interpret the artwork.



Richard Serra's Titled Arc was a large, curved steel sculpture installed in Federal Plaza, New York in 1981. Designed specifically for its location, the 120-foot-long structure divided the plaza and altered the way pedestrians moved through it. Serra intended the sculpture to change the public's awareness of the space and their movement within it. Its meaning therefore depended

on its physical relationship with the plaza rather than functioning as an independent object. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, n.d.)

However, the sculpture generated significant public opposition. Some office workers argued that it obstructed the pedestrian movement and negatively affected their everyday use of the plaza. Moreover, following a public hearing, the General Services Administration decided to remove it, and the sculpture was dismantled on the 15th March 1989, Serra opposed the decision as he believed relocating the work would destroy its site-specific meaning. This case shows the conflict between artistic intention and public needs. Earlier consultation, accessibility assessments and discussion of potential objections could have helped identify these conflicts before installation, although they would not necessarily have prevented disagreements.

Both JR's, Kikito and Serra's Titled Arc demonstrate that the meaning of site-specific art is inseparable from its location, however, they reveal different challenges. JR uses an existing political boundary to communicate ideas about immigration, childhood, and separation. The border gives the work its emotional and political significance, but it also creates issues of access and raises questions about how migration is represented. The work was temporary, and its impact depended partly on the relationship between installation and the communities on both sides of the border. (JR, 2017)

In contrast, Serra created a permanent sculpture that physically changed the use of a public plaza. While JR's installation invited the viewer to reconsider an existing division, Titles Arc introduced a new physical obstacle into an everyday environment. Its removal illustrates how public dissatisfaction and practical concerns can conflict with an artist's intention to preserve the relationships between an artwork and its original site. (Serra, 1981)

The comparison suggests that site-specific work can be controversial when artistic intentions do not align with public expectations or practical requirements. However, consultation does not mean that every artwork must please everyone. Instead, artists and commissioners should research the site, assess accessibility and safety, communicate with affect communities and establish clear expectations about the artwork's duration. These steps may reduce conflict while preserving the works creative purpose.

Another important difference is the role of public opinion in determining the future of each artwork. JR's installation used its location to encourage discussion about an existing political issue, whereas the controversy surrounding *Tilted Arc* demonstrated how public objections can lead to the removal of an artwork. This raises the question of whether the public's practical needs should take priority over an artist's creative intentions.

In conclusion, site-specific work can create meaningful connections between art, place, and society, but it can also generate political controversy, accessibility, and conflict with the public. JR's *Kikito* demonstrates the challenges of creating work within a politically sensitive environment, while Serra's *Tilted Arc* highlights the consequences of insufficient agreement over how public space should be used. These issues can be reduced through thorough site research, consultation with local communities, appropriate permissions, accessibility and safety assessments, and clear communication between artists and commissioners. Although disagreement cannot always be avoided, considering these factors can help artists create work that responds meaningfully to a site while respecting those who use it.

1. JR (2017) *Giants, Kikito*. Available at: <https://www.jr-art.net/projects/giants-border-mexico>

(Accessed: 19 October 2026).

2. JR (2017) *JR in Tecate*. Available at: <https://www.jr-art.net/news/tecate>

(Accessed: 19 October 2026).

3. JR (2017) *Kikito*. (Photographic installation) Tecate, Mexico.

4. Serra, R (1981) *Titled Arc*. (COR-TEN steel). New York.

5. Silver, H (2024) *Remembering Richard Serra (1938-2024), American art's man of steel*.

Available at: <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/richard-serra-obituary>

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6. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art (n.d.) *Legal records relating to Richard Serra v. United States General Services Administration et al., 1985–1988*. Available at:

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/legal-records-relating-to-richard-serra-v-united-states-general-services-administration-et-al-6104>

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7. Smithsonian American Art Museum (n.d.) *Maquette for Tilted Arc*. Available at:

<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/maquette-tilted-arc-22145>

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