

Research Report

How and why is site specific art different to a framed photograph.

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Site specific artwork is created for a particular space. The meaning and context of the work depends on the location. A site specific artwork is created as a response to a particular site, either physically, culturally or politically. A framed photograph by contrast is created to be movable and can be appreciated regardless of the location of the image.



KIKITO, JR. 2017

Kikito by JR is a large image of a young child, which was placed on a wooden facade, supported by scaffolding. The image was placed on the Mexican side of the border with the USA and depicts the child looking over the fence. “JR is often drawn to places whose residents’ humanity and individuality are habitually ignored or subsumed in political rhetoric” (Schwartz, 2017). The border wall, which is actually a fence, between Mexico and the USA has a strong political significance. It reflects President Trump’s rhetoric regarding foreigners, which inspired JR to create the installation. The child presents an innocent human face to the people the wall aims to keep out. The image is absolutely site specific. The image would have little meaning were it not located next to the wall.



SEASONS GREETINGS, BANKSY. 2018

Seasons Greetings by Banksy, which was painted on the side of a private garage in Port Talbot is a good example of a site specific artwork. The meaning relates closely to the location of the work. The image depicts a child in winter clothes appearing to catch snowflakes on their tongue. The image on an adjacent and perpendicular wall show that the flakes are actually ash from a fire in a waste bin. “The artist played with the corner of the building to create a game with perspectives.” (de Laurentis, 2022)

Port Talbot at the time the artwork was made, was a heavily industrialised town, home to the largest steelworks in Britain. Pollution from the steelworks covers the town in black dust. Port Talbot has been known for poor air quality throughout the life of the steelworks. “On a clear day you can see the other side of the bedroom” (Boyce, 1974). The impact of Seasons Greetings is far greater because of the location, particularly with the steelworks visible from the original location of the painting.

Kikito relies exclusively on the location to give the work meaning. Without the border fence, the piece would simply be an image of a small child. Interestingly, although installed in Mexico it cannot be appreciated from there. The work must be viewed from the USA side of the border fence for the meaning and context to be appreciated.

The site was chosen to create a political statement, which highlights issues such as division, exclusion and nationalism. The work focuses attention on the human construct of borders and how they physically separate people and divide societies. The use of a child emphasises the futility of borders by showing an innocent but curious face. On the final day of the installation, the artist organised a picnic around a long table that stretched across both sides of the fence. Ironically the picnic brought together people from both sides of the border.

Conversely, whilst the message and context *Seasons Greeting* is definitely enhanced by the location, it could be argued however that the image would work in several different locations. The piece draws attention to the problems of pollution, poor air quality and environmental decay. These issues are not however specific to Port Talbot. Environmental concerns and the damage to the environment caused by industry exist in several parts of the country and the world. The fact that the work was removed and exhibited in a new location demonstrates the it's relevance outside of the original location. Ironically *Kikito* was installed on a wooden board and hung on scaffolding, The artist could move the piece at will. *Seasons Greetings* conversely was placed on a building one assumes in order to make it permanent and removing the image required the dismantling of part of the building.

In conclusion, site specific artwork is a response to a site and is significantly enhanced by being part of the site. Whilst it can be moved, it loses some if not all of it's meaning. Framed photographs exist in their own right and lose little or nothing of their meaning when they are moved.

References

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