

Site Specific Report - How does a site dictate what work is made?

Unlike works of art in a white wall gallery, site specific artworks are reliant on the space they exist in for their full context and meaning. As Miwon Kwon says in his book on the subject, site specific works are "...ostensibly unsuitable for re-representation anywhere else without altering its meaning" (Kwon, 2002, p. 46). They function as a dialogue between what the artist has created and the space the artist has been prompted by. In this report I will demonstrate how the sites can dictate the artwork in fundamentally different ways: it may be that the site heavily determines the conceptual element of a project, while in other cases the site may impose practical and contextual constraints. By analysing Uli Aigner's *Enemy Contact* installation and Erik Kessels' *In Almost Every Picture #11*, this report will demonstrate how not all site specific artworks are equally dependent on their sites for meaning.



Figure 1

Uli Aigner created the installation *Enemy Contact* in Freud's London home, where the lobby floor was covered in mirrors. Not being able to sustain the weight of a person, these mirrors would break underfoot - so, the viewer is forced to watch their reflection shatter from an arguably unflattering angle. This installation responds to psychoanalysis, a method of therapy of which Freud was a pioneer. Psychoanalysis uses various methods such as dream analysis and free association to try and unearth repressed feelings. For the patient this can be an uncomfortable delve into their unconscious mind and in some cases even cause outbreaks of aggression and violence (Lombardi, 2005, p. 14), and this is what I believe the mirrors are representing. However, more than just inspiring the work, the site limits what the artwork can or could be - without the context of Freud's home, the act of psychological confrontation loses specificity, demonstrating how the site dictates interpretation.

It is important to note that this installation was never open for the public, due to Camden

council health and safety officers deeming it unsafe. The installation was later re-installed in a gallery, although outside of Freud's home the mirrors can only act as artifacts to document the former installation. The concept still remains if one reads about the original intentions of the work, however its existence in a gallery, estranged from the original site, cannot be deemed site specific. The inability of *Enemy Contact* to be realised publicly exemplifies the extent to which the site dictated material and conceptual demands.



Figure 2

The next site specific work I will look at is nowhere near as reliant on its site for meaning as we see in Uli Aigner's example. Erik Kessels' installations from the series *In Almost Every Picture, #11* uses found imagery. A couple, Fred and Valerie had been posting a long running series of images on the internet - Fred taking photographs of Valerie, clothed, in various bodies of water, such as showers, pools and fountains. The series feels playful and in some images slightly erotic although none of the photographs are overtly pornographic. Fred and Valerie describe the series as their "wet fun adventure" (Kessels, 2012). Kessels turned this series into an installation by making large prints of the images and displaying them in water.

Kessels' installations are an interesting example of a site specific work because the site doesn't necessarily dictate the work in terms of content. If we look at Aigner's installation, the work is a direct response to the site, in that the site existed beforehand and inspired the artwork. Kessels' approach is the opposite - the images came first and then the decision to display them in bodies of water. Although there is a strong dialogue between the site and the photographs when displayed, the site hasn't demanded what the artwork needs to be in the same way that Aigner's installation had to reflect something about Freud and his psychological practice. That being said, there are elements of this work that the site (or sites, as they are interchangeable) dictates. Suitability was a consideration, particularly whether the work was appropriate to be displayed in public areas. Some might argue that the erotic

undertones aren't suitable for everyone to look at, yet the work was displayed in fountains outside an art gallery. There are practical demands as well - Kessels had to print these photographs on a material which wouldn't deteriorate in water. So, whilst we can see that Kessels' sites do demand some things of the artwork, they do not dictate the core content of the work in the same way that Aigner's site does.

This comparison demonstrates that while both works are site specific, the extent to which each site dictates its artwork varies drastically. Aigner's *Enemy Contact* fails as a site specific artwork when removed from the context of Freud's home, determining both its conceptual meaning and physical form. On the other hand, Kessels' *In Almost Every Picture*, #11 shows how a site can add more depth and meaning to a work's concept, rather than it being the sole influence. We can see through these two examples how site specificity isn't as rigid a category as Miwon Kwon might suggest. Many kinds of artworks might fit into this category in a loose sense of the term, while others would simply fail to function outside of the intended context. The latter are crucially dependent on their site, yet it is also possible for artworks to have more flimsy connections - the site allowing for greater experimentation and imposing fewer constraints.

Bibliography

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Figure 1 - Aigner, U. (2002) *Enemy Contact*. Vargas Organisation.

Figure 2 - Kessels, E. (2012) *IN ALMOST EVERY PICTURE*, #11. Kesselskramer.