

A Report on Site Specificity

What issues can arise from site specific art?

Abigail Ashman

2204992

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Site-specific art is a unique form of creative work designed specifically for a certain location, it draws its meaning and significance from that place which means it would lose some or all of its meaning if it were to be moved to a different location. According to the Tate “the term site-specific refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location” (Tate, 2017). The strong connection between the art and its site often allows the work to evoke powerful emotions or address political themes, however, this can also lead to challenges. These issues could include navigating cultural or political implications or addressing the practical challenges of creating art for complex and sometimes unconventional spaces.

Artwork 1



Figure 1

Face 2 Face by JR and Marco, displayed in 2007 on the separation wall in Bethlehem, is a powerful site-specific artwork that uses photography to challenge division. The installation featured large-scale portraits of Palestinians and Israelis who shared the same professions, such as farmers, taxi drivers, and teachers. JR described the subjects as being “...like twin brothers raised in different families” (JR - Artist, 2019). By presenting these faces side by side on a wall that symbolises division and conflict, the artists aimed to emphasise the shared humanity between the two groups, encouraging viewers to find joy in such a terrible war, and to also find their similarities. “We want, at last, everyone to laugh and to think by seeing the portrait of the other and his own portrait” (JR - Artist, 2019).

The artwork's site is critical to its meaning, placing it on the separation wall which is the physical barrier between Palestinians and Israelis imposes a political charge. The work aims to challenge why there is separation in the first place when the people on either side are so similar anyway, its site-specificity creates a space for confrontation and discussion of these things, while also making it heavily controversial.

Artwork 2



Figure 2

Remembering by Ai Weiwei, displayed in Germany at the Haus der Kunst commemorates the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, which tragically claimed the lives of 5,219 people. The installation consisted of 9,000 colourful backpacks spelling out a message from a victims grieving mother: “All I want is to let the world remember she had been living happily for seven years.” (Weiwei, 2018) By using children's backpacks Ai Weiwei highlighted the loss of so many young lives at the negligence of the Chinese government, who were accused of covering up their mistakes in the construction of their schools which resulted in this disaster.

The location of the artwork, the Haus der Kunst, adds to the work being a politically charged act because it was commissioned by Adolf Hitler who was never accepted as an artist. The bold choice of location challenges the global implications of injustice and authoritarian regimes.

Both Face 2 Face and Remembering are powerful examples of site-specific art which work to engage with political and cultural issues, but they also highlight the risks and challenges involved. The placement of Face 2 Face on a barrier with major political implications directly confronts the division it is trying to critique. It relies on the wall's symbolic significance to amplify its message, which ultimately made the project not only controversial but also illegal and risked backlash from both sides of the conflict. Similarly, Remembering uses its location to emphasise its meaning and critique of authoritarianism and serves as a stark reminder of historical oppression.

The issues that arose between the two artworks differed. Face 2 Face involved risking removal and retaliation, from not only the civilians but the authorities too, as it was described as being the “largest illegal photography exhibition ever” (JR - Artist, 2019). Where as Remembering risked backlash off of the Chinese government. As a result of this work along with his other pieces, Ai Weiwei has been exiled from China and imprisoned due to his politically charged work against the Chinese government.

List of References

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