A Report on Site-Specificity

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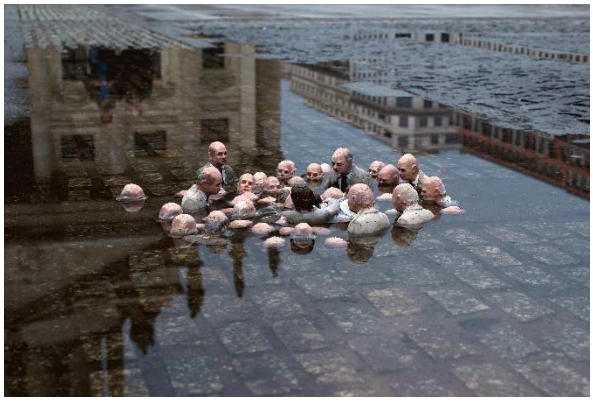
How and why is site-specific art different to a framed photograph?

When we hear the words 'framed photograph' we all picture neatly placed photographs hung on walls. Or perhaps a collection of images gathered on mantel pieces or shelves. 'Site-Specific' art we see on the walls of our cities created with spray paint, or the large sculptures and designs we find on our beaches made from sand and stone. Whilst the Art Gallery may be perfect setting for the framed photograph, site-specific art demands more thought into the location the artwork is to be placed. Site-specific art will be designed for a specific location, utilizing the location to help the art speak. The location becomes a part of the art, therefor, if moved from its location, it could lose all or most of its meaning.



(figure 1, Politicians talking about climate change)

'Politicians talking about climate change' (also known as 'Follow the Leaders') is a sculpture created by street artist Isaac Cordal. The work involves miniature clay models huddled together, partly submerged within a puddle in Berlin, Germany.

What makes Issac Cordals piece a great example of site-specific art? Well firstly let's look at how the location is important to the narrative. Why Germany? Why Berlin? Well one reason could be Germanys involvement with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (unfccc), whose secretariat is located in Bonn, Germany, where they meet multiple times a year to discuss matters of climate change. Possibly choosing Berlin because it is the largest city, not only in Germany, but in the EU. It is the capital city and is the seat of government.

By placing the sculpture within the puddle, it creates an instant impact for the observer, without any further information they can instantly understand the narrative. By being within the scene, by seeing one's own refection within the puddle,it makes the statement that little bit more personal. We become a part of the scene, a part of the problem.

The framed photograph has its own way of creating this impact.

‘Ice Bed’, a photograph taken by Nima Sarikhani, which has triumphed in the 2023 Wildlife Photographer of the Year 59 People's Choice Award, displays an image of a lone sleeping polar bear on, what looks like, a small iceberg.

(Figure 2, Ice Bed)

The moment is impactful due to its emotional nature but unlike Issac Cordals piece, the Polar Bear cannot be picked up and placed within a public space for a large amount of people to see, nor can the artist invite the public to the far north of Norway. What Sarikhani could do, is place the photograph online to enhance the volume of viewers, or create the feeling of being there, of witnessing the Polar first hand. This possibly could be done by printing the image life size and placing it on a wall within a huge white room inside an art gallery. This would therefore help the viewer really feel like they are within the scene. The photograph works together with the space, the space becomes an extension of the image to create an impact and to communicate the narrative.

‘Remembering’ created by Ai Weiwei in 2009 consists of 9,000 children’s backpacks spelling out, in Chinese, the sentence ‘She lived happily for seven years in the world’. The backpacks represented all the children who had lost their lives during an earthquake in China in 2008.

(figure 3 Remembering)

Ai Weiwei’s piece, which was exhibited along the exterior of the Haus der Kunst (House of Art) museum in Munich, Germany, was a political act, not only against his home country China, who’s government had been censoring and controlling all of the information about the earthquake, but also an act acknowledging Germany’s own

political history. ‘The Haus der Kunst is a historical building. The architects made it especially for Hitler. They all knew he loved art but had never been accepted as an artist. He criticised any work he considered “degenerate” – any abstraction or early examples of surrealism. So, to cover that museum’s facade was a very political act, a very dramatic act’. (A.Weiwei, 2018) Weiwei wanted to be heard.

By using backpacks Weiwei forces the viewer to really see the scale of loss caused by the earthquake. He produces an emotional connection by using an everyday object owned by nearly every child in the world. The object becomes a poignant symbol of the lost children and creates a realisation and an impact similar to that of the shoes at the Auschwitz holocaust museum.

(figure 4, Shoes of Auschwitz)

In both cases, everyday objects have been used to convey the scale of human loss, something a photograph may not be able to communicate as well. Using objects can be a multi-sensory approach to communicating the narrative, which in many cases increases the emotional connection towards the work. ‘The emotional weight of an object often derives from its association with pivotal life events—marriages, graduations, or personal achievements. These items symbolize the feelings experienced during those moments, be they joy, pride, or a sense of accomplishment. For instance, the robe worn during a graduation ceremony may embody the struggle and satisfaction of completing an academic degree, making it a cherished item.’ (J.Clinton, 2024)

Site-specific art and the framed photograph both have their ways of creating an impact, of igniting emotion, of telling their story and of being seen. They can both be used by artists for different reasons depending on the narrative. Site-specific art has the option of using location, objects and materials, not only to tell its story, but also to encourage observers to engage with the art and often placing themselves within the piece. The framed photograph has the option of being moved, it is not limited by location. It could be hung within the Tate Modern in London one day then packed up and moved to the Haus der Kunst in Germany the next, therefor having the potential of being seen by more viewers. The framed photograph also has the power to take us to places we’ve never been, like that of Sarikhani’s ‘Ice Bed’, or showing us places that we would never otherwise have the possibility to see, like photographs of space taken by NASA, or images returned from deepest parts of the Oceans.

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