

Psyche-specificity

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It would be difficult for a spectator, or even an art historian or curator, to discern in my practice the deep influence of Michael Asher, an artist associated with site-specificity (and also with Sculpture Project Munster). Perhaps that opacity exists because, working a decade later, I drew from the work obliquely. In the mid-1980s, troubled by the inattention to physical site and institution-specific context in my own work and in that of my relevant artist peers, Asher became a touchstone. Researching his work and reading his earlier questions, “why put something on the wall; why put something on the floor?” triggered seismic effects on my thinking. He was an artist whose work was equally engaged with institutional critique, so in both regards his work enlarged my practice as a feminist. I came of age at a moment when the concept of site-specificity was broadened to include ideological, political, linguistic, mediatic, and other discourses. Because of my attraction to Asher’s site-specific work, I could address both the *physical* and the *discursive* site in my work.

But I also came of age when the globalization of art exhibition and distribution blew up. Wanting to hold on to the importance of site-specificity, by the late 1980s I developed a methodology I called “site transferability.” Given that most exhibition spaces were generic and that art now travelled to more than one venue or country, my work could be made specific to a given space and location through modifications. I gave up on that approach in 1998.

In 1992, I ran across an exhibition of Asher’s at the Museum of Art in Bern. He had removed all the radiators from the museum and reinstalled them in the lobby, with attached functioning pipes running along the walls of the museum to the boiler. The work was phenomenologically site-specific, but due to his usual cultural acumen, Asher nodded to the heightened global desire for spectacle and contemporaneous changes in art scale - the work rendered infrastructure into sculpture. This was a social moment when the almost “invisible” work on which Asher had built his reputation was not going to cut it, and this work acknowledged that shift.

The more apparent the limits of phenomenological site-specific work of the 1960s and 1970s, the more site-specificity and institutional critique became enmeshed in the 1980s and 1990s. They had at their heart the concept of revelation - of power, inequity, and unquestioned customs as they congregated within institutions of art. But the strategy of revelation was always naïve. It assumed that revelation had the power of critical transformation through the logic of exposure, and through the exposure of logic. That strategy lacked recognition of the psyche’s capacity to transform truth and logic. Certainly the last decades have shown us the political weaknesses of revelation as a strategy. Millions made desperate by economic precarity have been willing to vote for overt representatives of inequity. In an art-specific example, globalized art exhibition and markets have for years displayed with impunity their partnerships with inequitable power. The psyche has the capacity to compartmentalize exposure. Site-specificity is not so much an archaic strategy these days, as one that awaits a redefinition that acknowledges the spectator’s psychically invested capacity to block out truth.