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Pick Your Poison: Catching yourself in the Act

Site-specific artwork is umbilically linked to the physical location of its installation, but also to the site the work occupies within the political and social history of when it is created and installed. To experience the work in a significantly different time period changes the effect of the work as much as physically relocating the work. I am interested in questioning this tenuous and fragile site inhabited by site-specific work through the writing of Sigmund Freud on the *Psychogenesis of the Joke*, Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture* and through Juli Carson's writing on the *Tilted Arc*. To narrow the scope, I will focus my investigation through the phenomena John Welchman describes as "catch [ing] yourself in the act" wherein a new site is created between the time period when the work was created and the moment of hindsight reflection. By citing the contemporary consciousness and discourse to reframe and relocate past site specific work, the work is both created anew and destroyed by its removal from its original site and relocation to the collapsed space between times. In his interview with Mike Kelley, John Welchman questions the act of self-reflectively acknowledging your participation in the institution or pedagogy you critique. This self-reflexive discourse is the orphaned legacy of site-specific work that both destroys and saves the fragility of site-specific work.

As Richard Serra stated at the hearing to remove his piece *Tilted Arc*, to remove a site-specific work from its site is to destroy it (Carson). I assert that site includes the physical site *and* the site within political and social history. To substantiate that site includes time I look to both Architecture and Performance Art. These two media situate site-specific artwork between their polar concerns with space, time, and function. Architecture is inherently site-specific in terms of its physical location because the construction must respond to both physical and engineering constraints imposed by the geographic site. For example, a 30ft by 30ft lot with uneven terrain necessitates a specific design in response to the allotted space. However, given the same physical constraints, more complicated notions of site do apply, addressing the cross section of

space, function, transportation, economy, history, politics and human desire (just to name a few). Particularly relevant to this discussion, is the additional responsibility of the architect to respond to how the structure (definitely), function (hopefully) and aesthetic discourse (sometimes) will evolve through time. International Style buildings of the 1920's and 1930's intentionally disregard the more complicated physical site, including time. The structures were conceived as being timeless, placeless and always relevant. In that very totalizing attempt they brought about their own demise. The International structures now point more strongly than ever to a time specific fantasy of the future located in a finite cultural moment. Through time, the repression of this site specificity manifested itself by ultimately making the elements of site – time, place and politics – become the focus of these buildings. Site-specific works of art similarly reside in the complicated site of time and place.

Performances represent the extreme of time based site specificity. Similar to architecture and site-specific installations, performances inherently engage the limitations of the physical space. However, performances quite literally only exist in a specific moment in time or through birthed incarnations in video, sound and writing. Interesting for consideration is the idea espoused frequently in the 1960's, that if you were not at a performance, you could not experience it. No reproduction would suffice, and in many cases, none were permitted. This demonstrates a complete embrace of site specificity as time and place: the work only exists in the precise time and place of its inception. This strikes me as a form of birth control for the genesis of orphaned discourse, and an escape from the fragility of the work re-locating in time (re-siting).

If site entails place and time is it possible to know one's own place and time?

Entrenched in the historical, political and spatial site – even if you are not “drinking the kool-aid” – it seems improbable to possess an objective knowledge. The issue has been explored in many disciplines including physics, psychology and many others that concur with this assumption. In physics, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle outlines that given a specific place, time cannot be determined with certainty.

Schrodinger's Cat experiment also discusses the paradox of measuring and the moment of measurement (which can be likened to creation and the moment of creation). The

same paradox discussed in terms of space and design is taken up by Denis Hollier in his essay *Against Architecture*. He discusses the paradox of addressing (measuring) a site or discourse and being the site. Hollier cites Bataille's denouncement of Architecture's "complacency with authoritarian hierarchies" (Hollier 1) His writing outlines an inherent issue with site-specific work in general: that the work in turn becomes the site. Juli Carson adds to the discussion in her article *1989* discussing Richard Serra's Tilted Arc. Carson acknowledges this limitation in site-specific artwork: "...the book (The destruction of the Tilted Arc) performatively demonstrates how Tilted Arc's "presence" is inextricably bound up with the rhetoric from which it was conceived... and to which it contributed" This comment leads us from the first premise – that the site of site-specific work includes time- through the second premise – that it is not possible to be detached from or outside of the site-time of creation – and to the question, that of what then (what happens. What is the result etc.)?

By no means does the specificity of site-specific work present an inherent problem. By establishing that site-specific work includes the site of time, I will address what productively and problematically occurs the moment after creation when the site has already altered. Fragility becomes an issue for site-specific work with the intention of maintaining a relevant dialogue across time and the desire to produce a legacy through the creation of new discourse. This is not always the intention and therefore not an issue in all cases. Richard Serra's decisions around his work Tilted Arc illustrate a response (intentionally or not) regarding how to address the fragility of his site-specific work and its destruction. In answer to the removal of his Tilted Arc, it can be said that Serra chose to preserve the work's legacy through a book over the integrity of the work as solely residing in the physical and historical space in which it was created. Fragility comes at the hand of removing a work intended as site-specific from its original site in geographical space, historical or politic time. The fragility becomes problematic if destruction of the work is not desired.

The inherent fragility of site-specific work to time can be empowered through embracing the orphaned dialogue that ensues from Welchman's "catching yourself in the act." When John Welchman introduces the idea of calling one on oneself he states it

in this context: “It’s about how you catch yourself in the act of understanding how you have been produced by misrepresentations – at the same time as being caught up in them.” (p. 353) I will discuss three models for approaching this process, none being mutually exclusive. One model for this self reflexivity includes the Derridian Father, Son and Orphan model discussed in Juli Carson’s article *1989* that allows for both the destruction and (complicated) preservation of site-specific art through the relocation of the work to the new site of printed material or spoken discourse. The second paradigm is Freud’s writing on the psychogenesis of the joke. This paradigm proscribes the acknowledgment of the joke, in this case the repression or untruth that the work of art could ever be timeless or universal, freeing the work from the destruction of this expectation. The third model builds off the idea of the Joke, and questions whether the acknowledging the artist’s own inability to overcome the fragility of site specificity can prevent the destruction of the work. (Self reflexive critique beats time to the punch by acknowledging the work’s shortcoming in advance and including this in the intended design of the work - the intended site includes multiple time periods: that of the moment of inception and that of the future from which the artist and society will reflect). All of these models provide questionable access to a new dialogue (strengthening the inherent fragility of the work) while tenuously threatening the existence of the original site-specific work.

Juli Carson’s discussion of the Derridian father, son, and orphaned discourse model provides a clear example of the complicated productive and destructive capacity of relocating the work in place and time through Richard Serra’s site-specific sculpture *Tilted Arc* installed and removed from Federal Plaza in New York City. Carson distinguishes the son and orphan in the following passage:

The origin of the power of speech (as logos) is always the Father. He thus gives birth to living logos in the form of the son who wants dutifully to record his spoken word. But in the very attempt to record the Father’s spoken word, to make good on it, there is the threat of producing what Derrida calls the “orphaned” text: that piece of work separated at birth from its father, whereupon the orphan forever forth becomes “his own man.”

Carson asserts that in the Derridian model of Father- Son - Orphan, the Arc itself is the son of Serra, and the written work on Tilted Arc is the orphaned work. Carson notes that many people only know Serra's *Tilted Arc* through his book, *The Destruction of "Tilted Arc"*: "Tilted Arc, a work about which we have read so much, one that most of us in fact know only through such readings is a referential site for the following story" (Carson 331). Further, because of Serra's own words on site specific work – that once removed from the site the work is destroyed – the Tilted Arc's second incarnation in this book represents the second death of the work (the first being the physical removal of the work from its Federal Plaza location and the second being its relocation into the pages of the book). I would assert that this orphaned site of the Tilted Arc simultaneously represents its resurrection. As stated earlier, the relocation of the site-specific work from its intended time and place into a different site both destroys the work and ensures its survival. In applying Welchman's phrase "catching one's self in the act," Serra collapses the time between the publication of *The Destruction of "Tilted Arc"* and Tilted Arc's creation in order to produce the orphaned text. In that process the text – at times the only access to the original sculpture – becomes its own work and renders the Arc almost obsolete in its actual physical incarnation. This process embodies both the death and rebirth of a previous creation or discourse in the form of new independent creation.

Another interpretation of how "catching yourself in the act" in your own practice can be productive is through the lens of the joke, as written about in Freud's *Jokes and the Unconscious*. Freud writes that "by the help of a joke, this internal resistance is overcome ...and the inhibition lifted." (Freud 144) In this case, what is repressed is that the work is inherently caught up in the same machine outside of which it purports to objectively stand. Additionally repressed is Greenberg's assertion that work should stand outside of time: "Time should be eliminated from the viewing experience" (Carson quoting Greenberg). Both the totalizing effect of work mentioned by Greenberg (and applied similarly by the International Style architects mentioned earlier) and the ability to objectively stand outside your own environment are hardly possible. Debating this fact would take a much longer writing. However, the result is

that the inability to achieve this objectivity – to not be caught up in your own act – is repressed. In whatever form it takes – written or verbal - Welchman’s “catching yourself in the act” releases the repression. This operates in a few ways. The first is that the act of authoring your own critique in critique in the form of a joke diminishes others’ abilities to assert critique and removes much of the negative judgment of that critique. A second form of Joke is absurdity, which can take the form of absurdity of comparison or absurdity of a work as viewed in a different context. Freud describes this functioning by “re-establishing old liberties and getting rid of the burden of intellectual upbringing; they are psychological reliefs” (Freud 156). This relies similarly on the relief from self-imposed and learned expectations about one’s own work. The joke relieves reasonability of the site-specific work (to follow these expectations). The third method of joke relevant to “catching yourself” is that of recognition and unification: through recognition of the repression it is diffused. By re-contextualizing the work then with its site in contemporary context, unification occurs. Freud describes this process of “rediscovery of something familiar” as pleasurable. (Freud 149) In whatever form the joke manifests it diminishes the responsibility of the work and artist, acknowledges the internal and external repression, and through the unification of contexts – then and now – provides pleasure by a relief of psychological effort.

The effect of “catching oneself in the act” in the form of a self-reflecting joke, repression and responsibility are relieved. Freud notes that the joke yields pleasure and that “this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychological expenditure that is saved” (Freud 145). In the case of site specific work, the pleasure gained through un-repressing the inhibiting expectations of the work to function through its relocation in time feeds the creation of the new site. If the new site of discourse for the work is the joke itself, the newly created site only exists between the old and new, reliant on both. Freud writes that with the Joke, “something familiar is rediscovered, where we might instead have expected something new. “ The new site relies on maintaining the old, and familiar site of the work as well as uniting this with the contemporary context. The new site for the work is limited by its reliance on the past work and present context and is therefore not able to completely divorce itself from the original or manifest as new dialogue. However, to laugh (joke) at oneself alleviates the repression, relieves

responsibility of the work to be site-specific in relation to time, and fuels a fused discourse through self-acknowledgement of limitation.

A return to Architecture provides another model for approaching the issues presented by site-specific artwork. In some cases the indexicality of time seen through the degradation of materials is a planned component of the design of structures. In these cases, the intended design of the construction only functions as a relation of time and place. Other structures plan for how future inhabitants might use mobile units in different future locations. In these site-specific designs, the site traverses multiple times and geographic locations.

In *Against Architecture* Denis Hollier provides a more sophisticated and less successful example of planning for future critique while being consumed in the contemporary or dominant discourse. He describes the Parc de la Villette as a “paradoxical storming of architecture – by itself” and cites Bernard Tschumi, the park’s designer, in describing the park as “Architecture against itself” (Hollier 3). Unlike catching one’s self in the act and reflexively reconditioning the work, in the Parc’s situation, the critique is generated in the moment of creation. The Parc attempts to “challenge the very ideology it implies” (Hollier 3). In this way, the intended (both original and new) site for the Parc is the liminal site between two discourses – not the collapse of then and now. By unpacking some of the hierarchical and symbolic authority of the site and collapsing the site-specific design and the site itself, the Parc de la Villette demotes the importance of its site specificity. By broadening the site it inhabits to the moment of creation and the future critique, the site is stretched to prioritize flexibility. However, I question the potential this gives for unbinding site-specific work from the singular discourse of its creation. Similar to the way the timelessness and universality envisioned by International style architects ultimately represented their dated anticipation of the future, the inclusion of self reflexive (post-modern) critique in a site-specific work itself still connotes a prediction of what will be based on what is known now. In its failure, this model illustrates the difficulty of creating work that includes a site (space or time) in the future. The “catching yourself in the act” occurs within an impossible hypothetical site of what you don’t know you don’t know.

Works of art are site specific, which means they are time specific as well as location specific. This allows for a hind-site contextualization of these works revealing the artist's own complicity in the site (time/place/ politics). In realizing this complicity, the artist has the opportunity to create a new site for the work by connecting the original to the hindsight revision. Through the Father-Son- Orphan paradigm, completely new discourse is created which can become the more permanent site of the three. The orphaned dialogue embodies both the death and recreation of a previous creation or discourse. This new site can be in written or verbal form, or could even be constructed in public memory. When memory becomes monument, the site is the father, the art is the son, and the legacy is the orphaned product. Freud's joke paradigm becomes the fulfillment of the site-specific work by freeing it from the repression of the expectation of objectivity or timeless correctness. The intention is not the modernist self referential and site-less works, but instead the creation of a new site or dialogue. The new discourse becomes the remedy and poison in one and the product is a legacy of how the work functioned in the past, how that legacy affects contemporary practice, and ultimately a new site to begin the cycle again. Although all models for relocating site-specific work into contemporary times through "catching yourself in the act" destroy the work in some form, the act ultimately produces a necessary post-modern procreation of artwork and discourse.

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