

INTRODUCTION

This volume documents and extends a symposium which sought to examine the legacy of 'site' in artistic practice, to ask whether, on a planet whose entire surface is mapped and apped, the critical force of the concept is spent; and to chart some of the (perhaps irreducibly multiple) ways in which site continues to be a concern for contemporary practice.

The discourse of site-specificity, as it developed through the sixties and seventies, saw the artwork insisting upon the circumstances of its making and exhibition, so as to mitigate the ideological illusion of autonomy and the indifferent commodity circuit for which this idealism groomed the work. Rapidly expanding beyond the merely physical and spatial, the notion of site systematically incorporated perceptual, subjective, institutional, and economic dimensions, in search of a critical materialist orientation that would enable it to navigate a path from the sovereign autonomy of artist and artwork to the real conditions of their production and distribution.

Recent decades have seen an increased interest in site, but one increasingly conditioned by the global 'non-space' of electronic networks, transnational nomadism, and the institutional framework of commissioning. This new set of practices seems afflicted by a fundamental equivocation. In a felicitous convergence, the heritage and culture industries have seized upon the notion of site-specificity, recruiting artists to represent the specificity of sites and to fortify local identity as part of regional and municipal agendas of renewal and regeneration. Art's supposedly extra-economic dimension, its ability to champion idiosyncratic specificity against the forces of global homogenization, is affirmed loudly, but is solicited by those forces themselves. Where site-specificity once seemed to harbour a potential for genuine disruption with wider repercussions (Haacke's *Shapolsky et al*, Serra's *Tilted Arc*), it now runs the risk of being assimilated into a capitalist logic adept at transforming specificity into reproducible symbol and immaterial value.

As attested to by the contributions from artists in this volume, the most intriguing contemporary practices align themselves with neither the overtly critical project of site-specificity that emerged in the sixties, nor the contemporary practice of serial site-zapping. There is no doubt that the question of

site is still strongly present; but today it stands for a perplexing divergence of multiple spaces and times, superposed surfaces and shifting depths. The supposed 'non-space' of the virtual global village has revealed itself to be just as differentiated, securitized, and politically charged as the planet from which it sprung. And the planet itself has entered onto the scene with a vengeance, itself now apprehended as a circumscribed site whose finitude and uneven development are reflected in its every locale, virtual or actual. As we see in these texts, sites are now seen as superdense bodies into which are unevenly compacted the traces of human, terrestrial, and cosmic histories, as dispersed composites of information, power, and representation, and as repositories of competing identitarian, aesthetic, and economic investments.

If they have become more complex in the intervening years, the questions addressed by the concept of site-specificity remain no less pressing, and they also converge with fundamental problems in contemporary philosophy. Stripped of the absolute reference points of divine guarantee and sovereign author, the problem of modern thought is first of all one of orientation. A sited thought, or a geophilosophy, has to acknowledge the contingent locale from which it sets out, and must mitigate for the limitations that gave rise to its delusions of autonomy. At the same time it seeks to maintain the possibility of a systematic expansion of knowledge which operates through a progressive series of reorientations that also transform the subject of thought. Conceding that its provenance is local and contingent, how can thought secure an escape route to wider horizons?

Alongside artists' discussions of their practice and their approach to site, and philosophers' reflections on the local and global conditions of thinking, here contributors from a range of other disciplines introduce concepts from cartography, mathematics, film, fiction, and design that may help us to think otherwise the relation between local and global, and between specific sites and their material conditions. In particular there is an emphasis here on plot, a concept whose historical knotting of graphic, geometrical, narrative, and conspiratorial dispositions, it is argued, may offer a resource for a more agile navigation of the routes between local and global. Finally, the last section of the book profiles a project which takes an multilayered approach to site, conducted through the medium of sound alone, presenting some compelling challenges to artistic and authorial orthodoxy.