



2021

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### Recommended Citation

Sigda, Lauren D. (2021) "Site-Specific Art and Ephemerality," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 67.

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# Site-Specific Art and Ephemerality

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## **Abstract**

Site-specific art is created with the intent of coexisting with its physical environment, like the term implies. The content and meaning of the work cannot be divorced from its sense of place, its self-professed existence. As they are tethered in space to the area around them, these works are typically ephemeral in their materiality yet unmovable by character. Since this type of art remains in the open it can become a victim of time and weather, evolving with its environment. My goal is to explore the lifecycle of site-specific art with particular interest in instances where the art is intended to be temporary. It becomes adrift with its referent and redefines the space around it in meaning. I will delve into different site-specific phenomena and address the impact that temporality holds over the companionship between art and site. Richard Serra famously said “To remove the work is to destroy the work” (Kwon); in a similar vein, I survey works that rely entirely on their site for support, forming their spatial and aesthetic ecosystems. These works include *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson (1970), Katie Patterson’s work *Inside this Desert Lies the Tiniest Grain of Sand* (2010- present), Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas*, Laura Aguillar’s *Center 94* (2000), Meredith Monk’s *Juice* (1969), and *Tilted Arc* by Richard Serra. These instances explore the duality between the ephemeral and the monumental, and how a work which possesses both spirits can be torn apart by this contradiction.

**Keywords:** Site-specific Art, Ephemeral, Ana Mendieta, Meredith Monk, Robert Smithson

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The term “site-specific” was coined in the late 1960s and early 1970s, grouping together works which sought to tie themselves to their surroundings in a staunch hyperrealist contrast to modernism. Modernist sculpture “absorbed its pedestal/base to sever its connection to or express its indifference to the site, rendering itself more autonomous and self-referential, and thus transportable, placeless, and nomadic, then site-specific works” (Kwon, 85). Through unavoidable positioning in space which increases both the self-awareness of the viewer and breaks their mutualistic organic relationship to the space, modernism exacerbated the art from the blank slate of the background. Site-specific art challenges this idea by actively embedding itself into its landscape. The distinction between art and non-art is collapsed, and the artist asks whether this binary ever existed in the first place. The setting, divorced from the confines of an “institution” projecting authority, rejects traditional barriers between the work. Its consumption is in favor of experimental forms which refuse commodification, pulling the pedestal out from under the work and ceasing to commodify to become an “object”. Additionally, the timing of the movement is pivotal, since the 1970s coincided with the minimalist movement which sought to distance itself from modernism.

One exemplar of a site-specific work which embodies anti-modernist principles is *Spiral Jetty* by Robert Smithson (1970). Smithson was intrigued by places that had been depleted by oil industry and sourced this work near an old oil jetty meant for extraction (Tate, 2012). Smithson’s massive jetty protrudes into the lake water from the shore, extending the boundaries of “human” land into nature’s domain. It transgresses the modernist sculptural boundary between base and art, and rather than eliminating subjective noise which could affect the experience of the piece, it embraces it. It is not transportable by any means, and

certainly cannot be commodified through replication. It would fail to exist entirely without the exact circumstances of its creation. *Spiral Jetty* embodies the tenets of site-specific art and is an essential pioneer of land and environmental art. Also, with the changing climate, *Spiral Jetty* is slowly vanishing with the movements of the tide it's anchored to. The site will envelop the work over time, so as each year passes, they resemble each other a little bit more.

Around the heyday of site-specific art, land art gained prominence and they became intertwined seemingly by design; land and environmental art inhabit and project a dialogue upon a specific site. Art that is both of and for the land was appealing; it rebelled against typical modes of artistic production, raised questions about the art market, whether the inherent value of art could be found in the work, or the context, or the material. Site-specific art and land art also mirrored each other in their idealism: land art rejected institutions, prioritized immobility and broke from tradition by taking to the landscape, and shared quasi-minimalist sensibilities. Land art can be considered a subsection of site-specific art where the environment itself is a medium. The works are intentionally transient, highlighting how nature itself is self-sustaining but man-made works are doomed to be destroyed.

As site-specific art is grounded to and gains meaning from its site, what happens to the duo as they age over time? These instances explore the duality between the ephemeral and the monumental, and how a work which possesses both spirits can be torn apart by this contradiction. The balance rests on whether the artwork in question can withstand the physical and cultural elements that are integral to its site. Treating examples of land art as case studies for perceiving tangible changes to the site-specific work provides insight into the nature of the partnership.

Some site-specific art exists in a state of pseudo-evanescence: they have varying maintenance needs, but it is anticipated that these works are either preserved by their sites or meant to dissolve into them. Ephemeral art as a term is derived from a Greek word meaning “only for a day” (Liddell & Scott, n.d.). It became popular with the rise of Fluxus works which took art outside of museums and galleries, abandoning the art market. The lifespan of these artworks mirror that of a human. Their fleeting nature and limited duration increase their aesthetic appeal and desirability since site-going viewers experience the art more as an event than a piece which sits in a gallery for centuries. Site-specific art is subject to trials of the outdoors and manmade changes to communities such as global warming, gentrification, and time which can make works physically vulnerable to change. On the other hand, these works can be considered metamorphic in that their meaning changes over time. Another ephemeral scale of site-specific work is that even though the site and the art may remain, it may never be viewed again after its initial unveiling.

Katie Patterson’s work *Inside this Desert Lies the Tiniest Grain of Sand* (2010- present) falls into this latter category. Her work combines the physical presence of art with a pilgrimage which invokes performance art. Patterson took a grain of sand from the Sahara Desert and chiseled it using nanotechnology to be “0.00005 mm across, completely invisible” (Tate). Although no longer visible to the human eye, it was still sand and may even be thought of as a sculpture. She then journeyed to return it to the Sahara in an ultimate staging of the site and concert, and later sent out 500 postcards to friends and family to commemorate the occasion (Tate, 2012). The piece feels almost satirical in its performance; the brevity of the presentation in contrast to the longevity of the form itself is ironic. The sand is attractive in its elusiveness

yet its site is so vast that the idea of ever finding the exact grain is impossible- the sculpture is lost to its very site.

Land art can stimulate artists to create works which reclaim their land and correspondingly themselves, placing both the art and the artists as the subject integral to the site. Ana Mendieta used earth body works as a surrogate to channel her homeland of Cuba. Her *Siluetas* series in particular amalgamates land and body art by performing with and/or dissolving herself into nature. These works are incredibly multifaceted and delineate grounding oneself into their surroundings. Mendieta marked outlines of her silhouette in the earth using a variety of modalities: she constructed some with flowers, molded them using clay, trimmed them out of grass, seared them out of fire or produced an imprint using her weight after laying on the ground (Sleek). One of the most distinguished *Siluetas* is “Imagen de Yagul” (1973). Mendieta laid nude in an empty stone casket and set white flowers over herself - as though they were emerging from her figure (NYT, 2018).

Mendieta’s compositions in this series vary in their degree of violence and gentleness between art and site. The lighter, fiery pieces contrast with the brutish approach of the artist’s dirt stamp silhouette. The fiery pieces may also touch upon how fire is viewed as a purifying force in indigenous cultures. Fire cleanses and dances on the surface, and the viewer can see the flickering existence of the flames as lighter in effect than the weight of pushing into the ground. Imprinting in dirt may be like bruising the earth, denoting an intrusion or penetration. It comments on humanity’s connection to, and interference with, nature. Similarly, the *Siluetas* associate the female body with its ability to create life as a natural process. However, whether the works signify an embrace of living or a connection to death is subjective to the viewer.

There are further implications of spirituality and the occult as signified by the elemental choices in her works which are a reference to her homeland (Foster, pg. 657). Mendieta seeks to convalesce herself by portraying her scars and healing corporeally through the earth. This signifies a transient relationship between her humanity and the land she sculpts with.

Though the physical evidence of the productions faded over time, Mendieta's work was documented by camera. The photography may be a part of the work, but it is merely an archive of the *Siluetas*. The photograph on its own is not land art or site-specific; interestingly enough, it distinguishes itself from these methodologies in that it is inherently pro-capitalist and serves museums and galleries. Nonetheless it is a practical method for prolonging the decaying effects on the work which is used by many artists practicing cursory movements. For Mendieta, photography was crucial for preserving her work because if the act itself is grounding and re-establishes the artist's presence, then the archive is proof of her inaugural self.

Another artist who employed photography as a tool to capture and ultimately inherit the work is Laura Aguilar. Mendieta's practice involved physically altering the territory, but Aguilar's was solely tangential. Aguilar's work is singular in its integration of the curvature of her body and surroundings portrayed on the flat plane of archival photography. The work itself is a site-specific performance. The artist lays nude in a scene and becomes one with the landscape, leaving no remnant trace into earth since she is a part of it. This elevated sense of oneness may be a subtle reflection of society and how Aguilar felt discarded by it. As a "large-bodied, queer Chicana woman... she felt accepted by nature. Feeling the sun on her body was important to her because she did not get a lot of touch in her life." (Duron, 2020). She leaves the earth unscathed but integrates herself into it in a way in which she is welcome. In her work

*Center 94 (2000)*, Aguilar lays perched atop rocks, forming a peak. Behind her is a river shrouded in trees. Her body drapes across the rocks with weight shifted so her skin shows a likeness to their form. The hierarchy of placing the human subject over both the site's rocks and river suggests that although humans and nature live in tandem, human use of nature may be unbalanced.

Performance art which is site specific involves performers fully interacting with the space created by the site. Though there are many different types which are incredibly versatile, most are restrained by the setting's perimeter. Dance is a modality highly adept at transfiguring itself to suit an environment, and Meredith Monk is a choreographer who is renowned for her many site-specific concerts. Her piece *Juice* from 1969 maps out a dance to be performed in three parts at three different locations. Part one was performed at the Guggenheim Museum by 85 dancers who used the space on the surrounding coiled ramps as a stage and additionally incorporated their sounds. Since the museum is quite large and prone to echo, there was a bold sound emitted from the movements of the dancers (Kaye, 120). The audience is welcome to walk around the ramp so that each dancer's presentation can be viewed as though it were an exhibition. *Juice's* two later parts build upon the idea of memory from the first showing. The concert is short-lived, but returns in the audience's recall. Monk expertly ties in the idea of planned movements, or maps, and physical location such that the new site of each part becomes a map for a new performance while tracing the former. The transitory nature of the production plays upon itself and outlasts its initial site. However, I argue that the motions are so beholden to the topology of the Guggenheim's ramps that they are inseparable from the site and its original show.



Monk's work and the temporary nature of site-specific art in general calls to impermanence as an intention. Planned evanescence by the artist signifies the authority of time over all things, with special attention drawn to art which has been represented in an unprecedented scene. Land art typically evokes "planned obsolescence" in that its works are left up to natural forces. Although, this is not a given for all art. Many gallery pieces or ambiguous works like Katie Patterson's tiny grain of sculpted sand intend for the work to remain as it is, where it is, for the rest of the foreseeable future. Since site-specific art can have niche maintenance needs and particular upkeep, many different factors play into whether this is always possible.

Intended or not, there is a certain liberation which arises from the deterioration of a site. The duo of the work and site allow fluidity of subjectivity, identity, and spatially" (Kwon). The idiosyncrasy of these works after they adapt over time can even be channeled to take apart community traditions that no longer reflect their publics. Site degradation is a form of artistic adaptation whose power is gained entirely through its temporality. The ability to obtain multiple identities, meanings, and representations through one icon is similar to the time course of art which is not dependent on its site. Works are changed over time depending on cultural relevance and public opinion of the artist.

But how much of this temporal power is referenced by the site, rather than the art itself? Can the art alone be site specific in its own self-referentiality? A counter argument is substantiated by site-specific art whose site remains intact, but the art itself has atrophied or been removed. There have been myriad instances of site-specific art displaced from its environmental context, most notably with Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1979). It was used as a

physical benchmark and metaphorical boundary between the public and the high art community. The steel arc was eventually broken down into pieces and moved to a distant warehouse. Other than some foundational markings, the site remains largely unchanged by the transformation. The notoriety of *Tilted Arc* has undoubtedly shaped the art world and fortunately laws that preside over art creation and ownership. However, the celebrity of the work itself is not enough to negate its relationship with its site; the correspondence of the park and the steel are what bind the work.

Site-specific art can be deemed a memorial. It commemorates a moment in time, and it venerates its former public and refers to how the public sphere evolves. Art that has lasted with its mutual environment conveys the needs of the public since it remains there, while also marking itself as a public imposition and perhaps hinders change within its community. It raises questions about publics and their neighboring counter-publics, and the transition between the centrality of the groups. It might even elucidate how an outdated public evolves into a counter-public. However, most critically, site-specific art is bonded to its site. As it ages it still relies entirely upon its site for interpretation and typically meaning. These works are entirely metamorphic and symbolize evolving human relationships to nature.

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