

Dermot Wilson

Ordinary Resistance Through Displacement: A Discussion of Intervention and Curatorial Practice

I actually wanted to say it's been a fantastic experience. Thanks very much, Demetra, for organizing this and bringing us all here to Banff. I guess the other thing I wanted to say in preamble is just about site-specific art projects that I've worked on, a few of them, and I'll just go through the list. This is as both an artist in some and a curator in other ones. I did two day-long rants at the Days of Action—that was reminded to me the other day—in Windsor and St. Catharines. Those were on the streets. I did something in a bank vault in Hamilton, *Exile on Main St.*, and that was just reminded to me moments ago by Kitty's documentation of an exhibition. I did a rooftop billboard gallery for about a year in St. Catharine's. Centrifugal was a site-specific installation that we did in parking lots in Hamilton. I did two site-specific art projects in Kitchener at the CAFKA Contemporary Art Forum. You probably know about that one. I took over a... I guess it was just a store on Main Street in Windsor, and did an exhibition called *Violet*, in which... okay, I won't go there. *Spasm*, we did a show called *Spasm* in Saskatoon, which included, I don't know... half a dozen artists, and that was all over the city, and we did a bus ride for that. *Digidome* was another site-specific art project. That was in an inflatable sports dome. *Phantom Power* was another site-specific art project that we did, and that was in a twelve hundred-seat vaudevillian theatre in North Bay. *Ice Follies* was a site-specific art project that was on a frozen lake. *Camp North* is coming up. That's site-specific art projects across Northern Ontario by seven different galleries. The *Mobile Media Lab* is a site-specific art project, but it's mobile. It goes across the North. And... that's about it.

Okay, "Ordinary Resistance Through Displacement: A Discussion of Intervention and Curatorial Practice" is the name of the talk.

Since the first manifestations of installation art, artists have experienced and sometimes resisted the aura of the institution - the carpeted, cavernous, hermetic spaces, the pristine urinals of our public art repositories. In Canada over the past

thirty-five years or so, curators have become aware of this spirit of place, this claustrophobic and xenophobic ambience inside the white walls, but that architectural prejudice is not the only authority that contemporary artists and curators must consider when making art and exhibitions. These power sources that many curators are resisting are present and tangible in buildings that exhibit art... in corporate headquarters and—ding-dong, Avon calling—in corporate headquarters and in places redolent with certain kinds of respect.

Today I wanted to examine how curators and artists are resisting this presence through displacement—that is, animating various activities outside the gallery structure that overpower or overturn that structure. The video component of this discussion shows the very budget-minded preparations for our site-specific *Ice Follies* exhibition that happened on Lake Nipissing in February and March 2004. Mikhail Bakhtin writes that “it is only within the viewer where art and life commingle”, but in many of us this integration becomes mechanical when there is no interpenetration between the two. They become mutually exclusive. In this case, when one experiences art, one cannot simultaneously experience life. “The true sense”—and this is Bakhtin—“the true sense, and not the self-proclaimed sense, of all the old arguments about the interrelationship of art and life, about the purity of art, etc.... is nothing more than the mutual strivings of both art and life to make their own tasks easier, to relieve themselves of their own answerability. For it is certainly easier to create without answering for life, and easier to live without any consideration of art.”

Bakhtin’s notion of answerability and the unity of life and art are echoed in contemporary artworks of ordinary resistance, the works of—I mention three artists here—Susie Major, Ellen Moffat, Judy Bowyer. Another influence upon contemporary intervention and site-specific artists is the revolutionary art of the Russian Futurists. That’s what I’m putting to you. Theirs was a resistance to elitism in art and to the connection between art and investment in a context of violence and political upheaval. Yet another possible source for this desire to resist is more related to artists’ perceptions of recent site-specific and process-oriented arts projects, what James Meyer has termed “functional site” artworks. These works are characterized

by displacement from work to frame, from a portable Modernist sculpture to an environmental practice located in the literal space of the viewer, but before looking at contemporary influences upon this relatively new art practice, I want to suggest some precedents for this will to resist in art.

In a wider context, resistance is what we all do when we react to condemn, negate, or satirize the postcorporate hegemony. The history of this type of resistance to authority and to the powerful in society would not properly begin with those Russians Mayakovsky, El Lissitzky, Eisenstein, and Meyerhold. However, the activities of the Russian Futurists—and here I'm referring to the Constructivist artists and poets who were working in Russia during and after the Revolution and the Civil War there, especially those activities termed "agitprop"—were directly related to art production, and throughout the '20s achieved great success as the artists threw out traditional artist/patron values and flooded the streets with posters, music, performance-art events, plays, and public interventions. It was a moment in history when art became politics and activism, a propaganda tool for the people's state.

Now, if we dissect the agitation out of the propaganda and preserve the idealism that powered these activities, is there a continuum of this type of agitprop expression? And I hope so. The same energy and bold rejection of sophisticated methods for presenting art continued with Dada artists like Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara. Their experiments across media and in the immolation of cultural norms like language and poetry were continued in the works of Fluxus artists and early American performance artists like Robert Rauschenberg. Thirty-five years ago, in Canada, this same spirit, I think, imbued the Canadian artists who founded the parallel gallery movement, what has since become known as artist-run... culture, I guess. And with all of these followers of the spirit of agitprop, technology was, if not central, at least peripheral. Essential to experiments in agitation and activism is the mixing of various machinery, that is, the correlation of mechanical reproduction devices. It is also true that these activities were mostly communal. This was a tribe, a group held together by a common goal. So from these false beginnings we can draw relationships between new media, social activist groups, and agitational

art, what would later become situationist, interventionist, and site-specific art.

After describing Dadaism and Surrealism as being responsible for the death of art, this guy Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* mentions the Situation art practice that he's associated with this way: "For Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position"—and here I have to switch to the computer. Sorry. This is what I did in my room when I practised, so it should be okay. And this time hopefully I won't lose the cursor.

Okay, and... we're going to have to read for a little while. *[sigh]* Okay, he said, "For Dadaism—the critical"—I'll start again.

"For Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it, and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position since worked out by the Situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art."

Debord has a truly revolutionary view of the spectacle. For him, it is the veil pulled down around the worker to blind her to ideology, corporate propaganda, and a society that controls the individual, body and soul. As curators, we are working in a very direct sense with spectacle. Debord might say that our artistic spectacles are merely reflections of the supposed freedom allowed by the spectacle.

We only illustrate how benign and open-minded is the information veil. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed. The spectacle, whose function it is to bury history in culture, presses the pseudonovelty of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense.

So, after the death of art and the collapse of the museum, what terrain is left for the curator? I found some sustenance for my own urges to displace art projects

and to interact with the community in a compendium of essays edited by Erika Suderburg called *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. These essays by American art historians posit new parameters for site-specific art projects and describe the history of the practice. Even though I agreed with their ideas about the motives and objects of site-specific art projects and artists, my own reasons for embracing projects that we're doing in North Bay, etc., that intervene, have evolved from three desires not specifically voiced in Suderburg's text, in that book. These are one: a feeling that we can resurrect this cool agitprop mystique and be in art and life simultaneously, that's the notion that art is activism; and then the second is a personal and professional reaction against the cloistered modern art gallery, and three it's just a simple need for human contact in the making of art and doing projects.

So with the tradition and the theories percolating in the background, these ideas have led me to ever-more-outlandish schemes for resisting the spectacle quietly but persistently. For the mostly American art historians writing in *Space, Site, Intervention*, minimalism and conceptualism seem to be the foundations for experiments and innovations in site-specific art practice. "Minimalism displaced the object of reflection"—this is a quote—"Minimalism displaced the object of reflection another degree from the work's medium to the ambient space."

Not surprisingly, these art historians, specifically Suderburg herself, declare that Modernism's attention to the medium and ideal form is a source for site-specificity.

Amelia Jones in her study on the work of Santarromana and the Situationists, that was his topic, again defines installation art "in relation to its conceptual foundations in minimalism, body art, and conceptualism". I agree that this scrutiny of the context of the work follows from Modernist and Minimalist practice—the scrutiny does, but these motives seem to assume a canon rather than a tribe. In my view, Suderburg avoids a consideration of communal and communist influences upon contemporary site-specific artworks... and something's happened to the DVD. Ah, there we go.

That was me, actually. That was an edit.

Within her summary of the history of site-specific art, Miwon Kwon describes the dominant drives of site-oriented practices today. “Concerned to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social, current manifestations of site-specificity tend to treat aesthetics and art-historical concerns as secondary issues, deeming the focus on the social nature of art’s production and reception too exclusive, even elitist. This expanded engagement with culture favours public sites outside the traditional confines of art.”

Whatever the motives and the reasons for this expansion from the confines of art, it is critical that curators understand the art-historical justifications for the popularity of this relatively new art practice and that we consider our own personal motivations as we venture out to the streets, the fields, and the frozen lakes. In the latter portion of this discussion, I wanted to ask a few questions that pertain specifically to site-specific projects occurring outside the centres of art production and consumption. First, how do we displace art and ourselves from the institution and class traditions? As curators, we can encourage new agglomerations of media and I think I’m kind of reiterating some of the things Jason said a little bit here—how we can encourage new agglomerations of media and assume contemporary artists’ abilities to employ any and all means to achieve their objectives as they create site-specific artworks. Variable media will suggest venues for displacement. Physically and simply, we can also search for alternative and inspirational sites within our communities. A vacant hospital in Montreal, a department store in Toronto, warehouse sites, etc., etc.

“What are the effects of these attempts at displacement?” is another question. Usually intervention objects are newsworthy, especially in the regions. For the artists and the presentation partners, broadcast media notice can result in increased profile and, of course, the increased media attention draws a wider audience to the exhibition. This one, we got onto TVO for, like, a half-hour show about this art project.

In the case of Andrew Van Schie’s 2005 installation *Dead Men Frozen in Ice*, the

project developed a whole new area of production for the artist, and I think perhaps Milena was talking about... maybe not. I can't remember who was, but... about how these projects can introduce new media, and a curator can help with that, and then the artist can take that and go and have a whole other practice, almost. It happened with Andrew's work, I thought. The public project can create another area of expertise that may lead to commissions or site-specific projects in other communities. It's of value to the artist, I think.

Displaced projects draw displaced audiences. The walkers, skiers, swimmers, skateboarders, the people going about their business, tend to react positively to the works and often take ownership of the pieces by passing along information and anecdotes about the project, the pieces, the producers, or the artists. As the project matures, if it is meant to, businesses will come forward to connect with the audiences that the artwork is attracting. No matter how ephemeral the project, there will be effects upon local businesses. If they are made aware of the motives of the artwork, most businesspeople will either ignore or support the site-specific artwork, I think.

Finally, there is a controversial effect upon the curators of these projects. Unless the artists are experienced in site-specific practice or are rigid in their loyalty to their initial idea for the artwork, their work can be altered and drastically affected by the curator in these cases. The degree of artistic freedom and control seems to be an issue in many site-specific projects.

Why are we displacing? If replicating cultural absurdities and arranging these in aesthetically pleasing ways in the gallery is somehow inadequate for contemporary artists and audiences in light of the cacophony of ironies that present themselves to us daily on the streets and in the malls, if that, and if aesthetics are secondary for public artists, does it follow that galleries are the repositories for aesthetics? Where is beauty situated? While site-specific artists and curators are displacing to enter into the spectacle of society, is the institution of the gallery meant to become the container for creative genius and beauty? What are the issues that make displacements difficult?

Okay, for regional spaces, anyway... Some regional galleries have the flexibility and the community contacts to effectively carry out these interventions, and that's... to get back to the flexibility issue we were talking about yesterday, I think that's one of the good points, and Jason mentioned that, too, he can phone his board and two hours later start work on the project. One of the downsides is that the government funding bodies lack the flexibility to nurture these projects or even to realize their role in supporting such artworks. They haven't figured that out, I don't think, yet. So resistance in the regions is easier in some ways and harder in others. One of the harder things is to actually get noticed, is actually for the art to be seen within the wider art world. Of course, that's a given.

It's also because, with galleries like the WKP Kennedy Gallery in North Bay, their mandates are so expansive—these are the regional galleries—so expansive in terms of programming, interventions, site-specific works, and partnership projects in small communities must be done sporadically and in the midst of expected, safe programming. In the regions, a context for viewing nontraditional art can only be nurtured by introducing projects that resist the norm or the authority of the traditional exhibit as components of or addenda to those more accepted exhibitions. Oftentimes, artists and art workers cannot leave well enough alone. At the heart of their will to resist is a desire to create unique experiences, for themselves and perhaps for others. Ordinary resistance is always seat-of-the-pants, always akin to the work of graffiti artists, street performers, etc. According to Ernest Larsen in his essay “Ordinary Gestures of Resistance”—same book again—“Modes of micro-resistance to things as they are can never be as resonant or rich inside the gallery. A gallery edits out much if not all of the apparent randomness, multiplicity, and heightened potential of contradiction, not to mention the potential for violence”. And that's Larsen. That's the end of the video, so I've got just two more paragraphs.

I've experienced these heightened audience reactions as both an artist and a curator, but these were always small projects, or they were outside the centres of production and consumption. They were always displaced sites. When I consider—and this just came up—when I consider *The Gates* by Christo and Jeanne-Claude,

it is as if the work had been subsumed into the grand spectacle. Christo's work seems to be somehow sanctioned by that corporate hegemony, and I suppose that is the divide and that is the danger. When these projects become larger-than-life, then art and life cannot commingle. The art becomes a part of the information veil rather than a resistance to it. Site-specific work is focused on establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and the site, and demands the physical presence of the viewer to complete the work. These reflexive, ephemeral, nomadic forms may be replacing public art. Maybe.

The fleeting expression or performance responds more appropriately to our ahistorical and synchronous places, the contemporary societies that, as Debord says, "tend to use culture to erase history". As curators of these types of displaced presentations, it is important that we accept that all art is mediated through context, and promote, especially promote, the freedom, immediacy, and creativity that these site-specific projects generate. Exhibitions like *Ice Follies* allow us to escape the confines of our gallery spaces and to draw together the artmakers, arts workers, and a displaced audience.

Thanks a lot.

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