

Jane Rendell

The time-based curatorial premise of *One Day Sculpture* is one that I find very provocative. So much so that it has encouraged me to think again about some of the key spatial terms that I have been working with for several years now – such as ‘spatial practice’ and ‘site-specificity’ – and those I have initiated – in particular ‘critical spatial practice’ and ‘site-writing’ – to ask: ‘what occurs when time comes to the fore rather than space?’<sup>1</sup>

The subtitle of geographer Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* of 1989 – the ‘reassertion of space in critical social theory’ refers to one of the main projects for cultural geographers in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In that period, a number of Marxist geographers took issue with the dialectical processes of historical materialism, in which history was taken to be the active entity in shaping social production; and space was considered merely as the site in which social relations took place. Geographers such as Soja, David Harvey and Doreen Massey argued for the importance of space in producing social relations<sup>3</sup> and in so doing turned to the work of Henri Lefebvre and his understanding of the two-way relation between the spatial and the social. ‘Space and the political organisation of space’, he argues, ‘express social relationships but also react back upon them’.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘turn’ to spatial theory, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, highlighted the importance of space rather than time, in the postmodern period. Academics from all kinds of disciplines turned to geography for a rigorous and theoretically informed analysis of the relationship between spatial and social relations, and of place and identity. Published in 1993, Michael Keith and Steve Pile’s edited collection of essays, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, marked a moment in the debate at which identity and place became central to discussions of space.<sup>5</sup> By interrogating the reciprocity of the relationship between the politics of place and the place of politics, the introduction and many of the essays in the collection highlighted an interest in ‘unfixing’ place.<sup>6</sup> As an intellectual tool, the ‘unfixing’ of place operated as a critique of writings which had emphasised the special qualities of particular places, as if they were somehow pre-given and not open to change or connected to wider conditions. Like Harvey and Massey, these writers stressed the importance of understanding the specifics of particular places as parts of larger networks, systems and processes, both physically and ideologically.

However, it is interesting to note that the desire to ‘unfix’ one term often involves the ‘fixing’ of another; while the geographers were unfixing place, those in the art world were specifying ‘site’. The interest in ‘site-specific’ art, as an evolution of both public art and context-specific art, developed an understanding of site that went beyond indicating the physical location of a work to include considerations of performance and ethnography. Nick Kaye made a strong argument for site as a performed place, along the lines of Michel de Certeau’s notion of ‘space as a practiced place’, while authors in Alex Coles’ edited collection regarded site from an ethnographic perspective that included the research processes of fieldwork as well as the artist as contemporary ethnographer.<sup>7</sup> These newly spatialised understandings of art do not define sites simply in terms of geometry or morphology but in relation to the cultural and spatial practices that produce them, including the actions of those who investigate them. Indeed, self-critique, along with culture, context, alterity and interdisciplinarity, are key aspects of anthropological research, which had already been noted by Hal Foster as the impact of the ‘ethnographic turn’ on fine art practice.<sup>8</sup>

In her book, *One Place after Another* (2002) – the text that probably best takes to task the political tensions inherent in site-specific practice – Miwon Kwon notes that site-specificity has been “embraced as an automatic signifier of ‘criticality’ in current art practice”. She goes on to argue that, in fact, there is a lack of criticality in much site-specific work; that, while site-specific practice has a radical potential, it is always open to co-option by institutional and market forces.<sup>9</sup> The title of her book sounds a warning of ‘undifferentiated serialisation’, one of the dangers associated with taking one site after another without examining the differences between them.<sup>10</sup> Kwon points to Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘relational specificity’ as a way of emphasising the importance of thinking about the particularity of the relationships between objects, people and spaces. Akin to James Clifford’s notion of site as a mobile place, located between fixed points, Bhabha’s concept suggests an understanding of site that is specific but also relational.<sup>11</sup>

These are relatively new ways of thinking about site, but it is possible to look at an earlier trajectory, coming out of Rosalind Krauss’ notion of the expanded field in her seminal essay of 1979, as well as an even earlier indication of relational specificity in artist Robert Smithson’s concept of the dialectical relationship between site and non-site found in his 1972 essay on ‘Spiral Jetty’. In the past decade in the UK, many contemporary galleries have adopted the term ‘off-site’ to describe the commissioning and curatorship of works situated outside the physical confines of the gallery which implies, in a strange reversal of Smithson’s concept, that the gallery is the ‘site’. Such work starts to question the often-binary distinctions between site and off-site work, to suggest a way of curating works as networks and configurations across locations. This is evident in the *modus operandi* of curatorial commissioning bodies, such as Artangel, Locus+ and the former Public Art Development Trust (PADT); galleries which work beyond the physical limits of their buildings, like the Camden Art Centre and the Serpentine Gallery, and particular curatorial initiatives from the 1990s, such as *Artranspennine98* and *In the Midst of Things*.<sup>12</sup>

*Thinking Space*, a collection of essays edited in 2002 by two geographers – Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift – reviewed the ‘seminal’ theorists whose ‘spatial thinking’ had influenced geographers.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, the editors identify a number of new themes in spatial thinking, such as experience and travel, trace and deferral, mobility, practice and performance.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note, as in the work of Kaye and Kwon, the valorisation of the relational and the performative – two terms that cannot be theorised or practiced without reference to time. These emerging critical thematics are integral features of what is being called the ‘performative turn’, which acknowledges the *time* of space, place and site. The new attention being given to time has huge implications for spatial practice in general, and for my term critical spatial practice in particular. If the term critical spatial practice emphasises the importance of the critical – deriving from the self-reflective and emancipatory impulses of Frankfurt School ‘critical theory’<sup>15</sup> in spatial practice following Lefebvre and de Certeau’s different understandings<sup>16</sup> – it seems I took the term practice for granted. However, since practice is a process, it is nothing if not time-based; to practise is a verb, verbs are words of action – they make or take place over time.

What happens if we rethink Soja’s call for the ‘reassertion of space in social theory’ as the ‘reassertion of *time* into critical spatial practice’? It is stating the obvious that the spatial must be thought of in relation to the temporal; this is a discussion that has been at the heart of philosophical enquiry, and is well known to geographers like Massey, Thrift and others. Yet, what we are considering here is not necessarily time as history – the history which dominated historical materialism, and which led

geographers to call for the reassertion of space – nor necessarily a full investigation into all of time’s modalities: flow, flux, duration, ephemerality and event. Rather, this particular reassertion of time into critical spatial practice leads us to search for the temporal equivalents of terms such as site-specificity and to look at how time operates in critical spatial practice.

Now, in *Art and Architecture* (2006), I did highlight the importance of the temporal dimension of critical spatial practice, specifically the relation of past and present in allegorical, montage and dialectical constructions and in the time of viewing and experiencing art and architecture. I suggested that allegorical projects, which focus on aspects of ruin, disintegration and transience, not only inspire feelings of melancholic contemplation in the viewer but also provide experiences for critical transformation through quiet, but active, thought. I examined the principle of montage through works in which new insertions into sites produce juxtapositions, displacing dominant meanings and interrupting particular contexts, in which the experience might initially include shock but which, over time, might engage with the subtler ambiguities usually associated with allegory. And I looked at a number of artworks in which, through the insertion of new fragments into existing contexts, certain aspects of history lying buried in the present, might be unearthed or reclaimed.<sup>17</sup> But what, perhaps, needs fuller consideration here, is not how individual works are time-based but, rather, how ‘time-specificity’ operates as a way of transforming spatial curating, addressing such questions as:

- How does one curate across, through and in time rather than, or as well as (or even as) space, place, site and location?
- How does one commission act temporally rather than spatially, positioning works in temporal relation to one another – before and afterwards, right now and just then, simultaneously or in sequence?
- What does it mean for an artist to choose a time rather than a site?
- What happens if time takes priority over space; if time structures the conceptual operations of a work and the spatial concerns follow on as pragmatics?
- And how might a temporal curatorial brief operate through a series of individual sites but also as a way of understanding the project as a totality?

It strikes me that this is the kind of time in which performance deals. But, suggesting that the curators of public art might look to time-based arts such as dance, film, music, performance and theatre, and more specifically to the spatio-temporal activities of choreography, dramaturgy and scenography, is not to imply that a mode of curating attentive to time in the spatial arts would end up repeating those curatorial moves of the time-based arts. Absolutely not! I think that given their different genealogical trajectories, institutional contexts and contemporary imperatives, an interest in time in contemporary spatial art curation would be qualitatively different, because of the concern, reticent or not, with the presence, or perhaps absence, of artefacts.

In March 2009, struggling to produce a piece of ‘site-writing’ for the *One Day Sculpture* conference<sup>18</sup> that would respond to the spatial-temporal arrangement of the project, I imagined the configuration of the curated works as a night sky. This drew on an earlier idea which remains only lightly touched upon in *Art and Architecture*, of the possibility of imaging large-scale site-specific commissioning projects, which take place over time and across space, as constellations. Since the constellation is a spatio-temporal configuration, it provides both a map and a calendar of the individual works and their place in the overall pattern.<sup>20</sup> Each star in the night sky occupies a discrete position in relation to the others; it also has its own unique life span or time. Like a star, each artwork has a different

duration, what we see of a work today is not simply a function of what is physically present right now, but it is also a trace of what has occurred, which even as we look at it now is no longer present ...

<sup>1</sup> See Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) and Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming). Through the process of writing about critical spatial practice in *Art and Architecture* I came to realise that the changing sites I occupied in relation to art, architecture and theory not only informed my critical attitude but rather produced it. I concluded *Art and Architecture* by arguing that criticism is itself a form of critical spatial practice and that acknowledging the *situatedness* of the critic plays a key role in determining the performance of the critic's interpretative role and structuring a written response to a work.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 8. This quotation, emphasised by David Harvey, is discussed in Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, op cit 81.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Keith and Steve Pile, eds., *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Alex Coles, ed., *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000). See also Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). Reiss argues that site-specificity is one of the key characteristics of installation art.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002) 91. See also Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 171–203, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 1.

<sup>10</sup> Kwon, *One Place After Another*, op cit 166.

<sup>11</sup> James Clifford, 'An Ethnographer in the Field', interview by Alex Coles in Alex Coles, ed., *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000) 52–73.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of these projects see Rendell, *Art and Architecture* op cit.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See Crang and Thrift's 'Introduction' in Ibid 1–30, especially 19–24.

<sup>15</sup> Critical theory is a phrase that refers to the work of a group of theorists and philosophers called the Frankfurt School operating in the early twentieth century. The group includes Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin, and their writings are connected by their interest in the ideas of the philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel, the political economist, Karl Marx, and the psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud. Taken together, their work could be characterised as a rethinking, or development, of Marxist ideas in relation to the shifts in society, culture and economy that took place in the early decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>16</sup> In Michel de Certeau's discussion of practices, he uses the terms 'tactic' and 'strategy'. For de Certeau, strategies seek to create places that conform to abstract models; tactics do not obey the laws of places. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 29. For Henri Lefebvre, spatial practices, along with representations of space and spaces of representation, form a trialectical model in which space is produced through three inter-related modes. See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. It is possible to draw connections between de Certeau's strategies and Lefebvre's representations of space, on the one hand, and de Certeau's tactics and Lefebvre's spaces of representation, on the other, to suggest a distinction between those practices (strategies) that operate to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders and those practices (tactics) that seek to critique and question them.

<sup>17</sup> Rendell, *Art and Architecture*.

<sup>18</sup> My intention in 'site-writing' is to explore the position of the critic, not only in relation to art objects, architectural spaces and theoretical ideas, but also to the site of writing itself, questioning the terms of reference that relate the critic to the artwork, positioned 'under' critique, and constructing, as well as tracing, the sites between critic, artwork and reader. See Rendell, *Site-Writing*, op cit.

<sup>19</sup> Rendell, *Art and Architecture*, op cit. Note Artangel's new website which is presented as a constellation [www.artangel.org.uk](http://www.artangel.org.uk)

<sup>20</sup> To be true to astronomy we should really use the term asterism to refer to the project, *One Day Sculpture*, and constellation to refer to the location of New Zealand.

## THE EVENT

Mick Wilson

The question of the 'event' looms large in recent art, philosophy, political theory and criticism. The term has a complex intellectual history in all of these contexts and, arguably, these different fields of resonance are activated when the theme of the 'event' is addressed in the context of contemporary public art commissioning practices and strategies. Philosophically, the event holds longstanding interest, naming something which happens, which takes place, which has a time and a place but which does not otherwise have a 'thing-like' existence. An event passes into being and passes out of being again without resolving into a discrete 'thingly' object as such. The event is clearly laden with all kinds of potential for intellectual play and befuddlement in terms of its ontological status. Recently, this situation has been exploited further as the term has taken on a central role in the work of philosophers such as Badiou and Deleuze, giving rise to very technical and nuanced definitions and usages.<sup>1</sup> Intrinsic to the construction of an event is that something happens – a particular situation in the world is modified and subject to alteration at a particular moment. Elaborations of this construct can focus on the question of how to establish the spatial and temporal edges, or locus, of this 'something that happens', or on questions of causality, contingency and consequence, or on how the 'something that happens' comes to be dependent upon happening for someone. All these aspects of the event have proven to be rich resources for both traditional and experimental philosophies. It is precisely these same semantic resources in the construction of event that have made the term important for contemporary thinking about public art.

The twentieth century arguably received an understanding of the production of art for explicitly 'public' contexts – public statuary, decoration of state buildings, public display in museums – as essentially a question of producing artworks that endured in a certain fixity and were addressed to a somewhat abstracted constituency (the people, the nation, the public, the citizens, the townspeople, etc.) This constituency, however framed, was often also construed as having a certain durability and consistency over time. This equation of public art with durable, fixed and open visibility was effected by the conflation of two lines of development. On the one hand, the modern renegotiation of the private / public distinction tended to be reduced to a distinction in terms of the portability / fixity of the art object (artworks for private ownership may be carried off and disposed according to the wishes of the owner, whereas artworks for public edification should be fixed for ready access in a public precinct or edifice). This was accompanied by the reification of the artwork as a thingly thing requiring a materiality capable of supporting 'proprietary' relations; artworks required well-defined edges which, in some way, allowed 'proper' categorisation, both descriptively as 'art' and prescriptively as 'owned'. We might consider for example the unsettling effects of the production of statues from Rodin's casts after the artist's demise.<sup>2</sup> (Of course, various avant-garde strategies have attempted to problematise this ontology of the artwork.) On the other hand, there was a tendency to establish 'timelessness' as a key component of elevated cultural value; even within modernism, the specific quality of the contemporary, the 'just-now' was to be married with the 'eternal' qualities imputed to art.<sup>3</sup> This requirement for enduring value converged with a desire to produce – to invent – a retrospective and prospective continuity to the abstract constituency addressed by a 'public' production of meaning (be that 'public' understood as the people, the nation, the citizens of the state, etc.).