

Constellation, Insertion, Act? approaching *Frontier – The Line of Style* through critical spatial practice

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The following text provides a very short introduction to my definition and development of the term 'critical spatial practice' as way of approaching *Frontier – The Line of Style*. I hope that by outlining some of my thinking about the specifically spatial and critical aspects of interdisciplinary processes that operate between art and architecture when located in the urban realm, it is possible to open up aspects of the project in three different ways – through the spatial, temporal and social.

I first came up with the term 'critical spatial practice' in 2003 as way of describing projects located between art and architecture, and I pushed this idea further in my book *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*.ⁱ Here I examined a series of projects located between art and architecture that both critiqued the sites into which they intervened as well as the disciplinary procedures through which they operated. I argued that such projects operated at a triple crossroads: between theory and practice, between public and private, and between art and architecture.

Here I am keen to draw out three particular qualities of critical spatial practice. First, to highlight how the definition of the term 'critical', taken from Frankfurt School critical theory, can be extended to encompass practice – particularly those critical practices that involved self-reflection and the desire for social change, that sought to transform rather than to only describe.ⁱⁱ Second, that by drawing on the work of Michael de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre,ⁱⁱⁱ it is possible to make a distinction between those strategies that aim to maintain and reinforce existing social and spatial orders, and those tactics that sought to critique and question them, I tend to define the latter as 'critical spatial practices'. Third, I am most interested in practices, which desire to transgress the limits of their particular disciplinary procedures and explore the interdisciplinary processes that operate in between them.^{iv} The writings of another key spatial thinker, postmodern geographer, Edward Soja, and his examination of the interrelation of the conceptual categories of space, time and social being,^v suggested to me three ways of focusing on different aspects of this place between disciplines: the spatial, the temporal and the social. So I am now going to move on and

draw out briefly some of the key qualities of these places between when considered spatially, temporally and socially.

In focusing on the spatial aspects of a place between – the betweens that exist between here and there – for me, the particular issue that comes to the fore is the relation between sites. If we start with the site and non-site dialectic, then one has to begin with Robert Smithson. In 1965 to 1966 Smithson worked as a consultant artist for an architectural firm called TAMS on designs for Dallas Forth Worth Airport. This project alerted him to ways of working outside the gallery, to examine how works might be viewed from the air and to think about how to communicate aspects of exterior works to passengers in the terminal building. This latter aspect he termed the ‘non-site’.^{vi} Commenting on this project he states:

I was sort of interested in the dialogue between the indoor and the outdoor ... I developed a method or a dialectic that involved what I call site and non-site ... so I decided that I would set limits in terms of this dialogue^{vii}

His first non-site titled ‘A Nonsite, Pine Barrens, New Jersey’ (1969) consisted of bins filled with sand taken from the runways of a little-used wilderness airfield laid out in a hexagonal pattern in the gallery with a photostat map and a text that read:

31 subdivisions based on a hexagonal “airfield” in the Woodmansie Quadrangle – New Jersey (Topographic) map. Each subdivision of the *Nonsite* contains sand from the *site* shown on the map. Tours between the *Nonsite* and *site* are possible. The red dot on the map is the place where the sand was collected.^{viii}

If Smithson’s work highlights the relation between sites and non-sites, more recently, 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 where, in a strange reversal of Smithson’s concept, the gallery reclaims its position as the site of the work. Adam Chodsko’s intervention, *Better Scenery* (2000) commissioned as part of the Camden Arts Centre’s off-site programme, is a good example of a project, which questions this spatial logic. *Better*

Scenery consists of two signs, one located in the Arizona Desert and the other in the car park of a new shopping centre, the O2 Centre, in Camden.^{ix}

The plain yellow lettering on the black face of each sign gives clear directions of how to get to the other sign. Both sets of directions end with the phrase: 'Situated here, in this place, is a sign which describes the location of this sign you have just finished reading.'^x

The signs point only to each other, their relationship is entirely self-referential; they make no attempt to relate to their immediate context, and in speaking only about where they are not, Chodzko's signs critique the ethos of site-specificity and accessibility behind many off-site programmes.

If the relation of site to non-site to off-site allows us to think about how works are organized through space but with respect to the gallery as a site to question or critique, it is also possible to consider the arrangement of works to one another but with no reference to the central, if absent, site of the gallery; this would certainly be the case in *Frontier – The Line of Style*. In projects of this sort the decision to locate a number of specially commissioned works across a specific territory is the strategic and conceptual decision of curators as well as artists. This kind of practice has a long history growing out of the ongoing projects at Munster and Documenta at Kassel, for example, where artworks are curated throughout the city, but it is also possible to examine the works produced by particular commissioners over certain terrains, for example, Art Angel and the projects they have funded and curated in the United Kingdom, specifically London, or the Public Art Fund or Creative Time in New York.^{xi}

This brings to mind Rosalind Krauss's notion of an 'expanded field' first introduced in 1979 to describe the work of artists producing interventions into the landscape.^{xii} While this was an important contribution to art historical and theoretical discourse in the 1970s, its relevance for today cannot be simply translated across time, rather one has to think through the ways that art, architecture and landscape are related to one another today. When Krauss expanded the term sculpture with respect to architecture and landscape, she did so by examining individual works, yet contemporary practice seems to raise different questions around the definition of sculpture, and rather introduce issues concerning the distinction between art, architecture and urban space,

shifting attention away from a study of specific objects to developing understandings of the particular processes of art, architecture and design and the new practices being generated which operate between and across such disciplines.

Although in such curatorial projects, works might be located in different sites and produced over varying lengths of time, a spatial pattern emerges which might be thought of as a constellation. A constellation is a spatio-temporal configuration, it provides both a map and calendar of the individual stars and planets and their place in the overall pattern of the sky. Each star occupies a discrete position in relation to the others; it also has its own unique life span or time. Each star has a different duration, and what we see of a star 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.^{xiii}

Turning now to the second aspect of a place between, I would like to highlight the importance of the temporal dimension of the between, specifically, the relation of past and present in allegorical, montage and dialectical constructions and the time of viewing and experiencing art and architecture in urban settings. On the one hand, it is possible to consider projects that focus on aspects of the ruin, disintegration and transience not only to inspire feelings of melancholic contemplation in the viewer but also to provide experiences where critical transformation can occur through quiet but active thought. A work such as *Caliban Towers I and II*' (1997), one in a series by artist-photographer Rut Blees Luxemburg entitled *London – A Modern Project*,^{xiv} images two high-rise buildings aspiring to touch the skies. Shot at night with a long exposure, the architecture gains a strange luminescence when seen in a gallery setting, and produces a contemplative viewing condition. But for a short period in 1998, as part of a public art project, the image was installed under a railway bridge in east London, a mile or so down the road from the very housing projects depicted in the image. On a sunny Sunday in July, while 'Caliban Towers I and II' were resident in south Hoxton, a block of flats just like them was demolished, dust in nine seconds, to make way for regeneration, this provoking a much more engaged and critical response in the viewer.

On the other hand, it is also possible to complicate the principle of montage by examining contemporary works where new insertions into sites produce juxtapositions which displace

dominant meanings and interrupt particular contexts create environments in which the experience may initially include shock, but over time starts to engage with the more subtle ambiguities more usually associated with allegory. In 'New Holland' (1997), by positioning a piece of the local vernacular, a shed for factory-farming turkeys throbbing with techno sounds, at a rakish angle next to a Henry Moore sculpture and Norman Foster's gallery for fine art for *East International* at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, England, artists Cornford & Cross produced a sculpture to which the initial reaction might be shock, an outraged response to the transgressive nature of the gesture – a turkey shed on the lawn of an art gallery! – and yet over time a closer engagement begins to reveal that a more complex set of contradictions structure this work.^{xv}

Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image is far from straightforward, yet it is distinct in its attempt to capture dialectical contradiction in an instant as a visual image or object, rather than as an unfolding of an argument over time. This is perhaps clearest in the following statements he makes concerning the dialectical image: 'The dialectic, in standing still, makes an image.'^{xvi}

It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent.^{xvii}

I have found Benjamin's understanding of the dialectical image – as a concept and fragment occupying the threshold between past, present and future – very helpful for considering how works, as acts of insertion into existing contexts, can produce interpretations which point both to the past and to the history of a site, but also to what is not yet visible, or predictable – its future; the range of works commissioned for *Frontier – The Line of Style*, have the potential as a constellation of urban insertions to point towards this range of temporal possibilities.

I would like to turn now to the third and final aspect of a place between, that of the social, the place between one and another. A feature of much contemporary art practice and criticism has been a shift towards understanding art as relational^{xviii} or dialogical.^{xix} 'Relational aesthetics',

despite important critiques put forward regarding the often non-critical attitude adopted towards the social, has risen to a position of the new orthodoxy in fine art practice,^{xx} and its ascendancy has served to displace a number of historical precedents: for example, various live art movements of the 1970s, the writings of feminists such as Suzi Gablik on aesthetic practices of connection and listening,^{xxi} and Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture which also places emphasis on the role that physical objects can play in prompting and tracing relationships between those people – artists, architects, users and participants – involved in producing a work.^{xxii}

In the 1990s, in their re-positioning of architectural process as product, the London-based art-architecture collaborative muf asked 'what does it take to make a relationship to make a thing?'^{xxiii} We are now experiencing the question from the other direction, in, for example, the ECObox project based in the La Chapelle area of Paris. Here aaa (*atelier d'architecture autogérée*) use the production of architecture as a vehicle for the enabling of new subjectivities – those with the agency to develop their own urban spaces – so seeming to ask in inversion: 'what does it take to make a thing to make a relationship?'^{xxiv} It is almost as if the making of a thing – a work – for certain artists, architects, and possibly urbanists, can operate now as a subterfuge for the real project in hand – the desire to operate more politically and set up conditions where people can reconfigure their relations with one another. This seems to be what the project *Frontier – The Line of Style* is really all about: to demonstrate that urban mark-making is concerned not simply with changing a site visually or spatially or with the creation of a social situation for a moment in time, but with how urban subjects can be transformed (perhaps longterm) through such insertions, as acts (operating across the city over time).

ⁱ I first introduced the term 'critical spatial practice' in my article Jane Rendell, 'A Place Between Art, Architecture and Critical Theory', *Proceedings to Place and Location* (Tallinn, Estonia: 2003) pp. 221-33 and later consolidated and developed the concept in my book Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture* (London: IB Tauris, 2006). Since that time, the same term has been taken up by individuals such as Judith Rugg in her seminars at the RIBA, London, from around 2008; Eyal Weisman to describe activities as part of the 'MA: Research Architecture' at Goldsmiths College of Art, London; and most recently by Marcus Miessen to identify the 'MA: Architecture and Critical Spatial Practice' launched in 2011 at the Städelschule, Frankfurt.

ⁱⁱ See for example, Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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- ⁱⁱⁱ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
- ^{iv} See for example, Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: An Interview', in Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (eds) *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, vol. 2 (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998) pp. 5–6.
- ^v See for example, Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Expanding the Geographical Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).
- ^{vi} See Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 55–8. See Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site' (1967), Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). p. 291.
- ^{vii} See "'Earth" (1969) symposium at White Museum, Cornell University', Jack Flam (ed.) *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 178.
- ^{viii} See Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), p. 67.
- ^{ix} See Adam Chodzko, *Plans and Spells* (London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2002) pp. 40–41 and Adam Chodzko, 'Out of Place', John Carson and Susannah Silver (eds) *Out of the Bubble, Approaches to Contextual Practice within Fine Art Education* (London: London Institute, 2000) pp. 31–36.
- ^x See Chodzko, *Plans and Spells* (London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2002), pp. 40–41.
- ^{xi} See for example Gerrie van Noord (ed.) *Off Limits, 40 Artangel Projects* (London: Artangel, 2002).
- ^{xii} Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', Hal Foster (ed.) *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1985) pp. 31–42. This essay was originally published in *October* 8 (Spring 1979).
- ^{xiii} In popular parlance we use the term constellation to refer to 'a group of celestial bodies (usually stars) that appear to form a pattern in the sky or appear visibly related to each other' This is actually something astronomers would call an asterism, and in astronomy the term constellation refers to the stars and other celestial bodies that are present in a particular area of the night sky. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constellation#Definitions> (accessed 9 June 2011).
- ^{xiv} See Rut Blees Luxemburg, *London – A Modern Project* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1997).
- ^{xv} See *Cornford & Cross*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009).
- ^{xvi} See Walter Benjamin, 'Materials for the Exposé of 1935', *The Arcades Project (1927–39)*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 911.
- ^{xvii} See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (1927–39)*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 462.
- ^{xviii} Nicolas Bourriaud argues that the work of particular artists produces open-ended conditions that invite the viewer to participate in the construction of the work, where the work of art operates as a partial object, a vehicle of relation to the other. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: Presses du reel, 2002), p. 47 and p. 99.
- ^{xix} Grant H. Kester provides a way to consider art and the making of relationships through discussions around dialogue following the writings of Emmanuel Levinas on 'face-to-face' encounter which provide an ethical dimension to the debate, in particular his concept of the figure of the irreducible 'Other', and invoking literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that meaning is constructed between the speaker and the listener, rather than simply given. See Grant H.

Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) pp. 118–23.

^{xx} For the most influential of these criticisms, see Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, n. 110 (2004) pp. 51-79.

^{xxi} See Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) and Suzi Gablik, 'Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism', in Suzanne Lacy (ed.) *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), pp. 74–87.

^{xxii} See for example, Joseph Beuys, 'I am Searching for a Field Character' (completed in 1974 and translated by Caroline Tisdall), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds) *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 903. This article was originally published in the exhibition catalogue *Art into Society, Society into Art* (London, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1974).

^{xxiii} See Katherine Clarke of muf (1999) 'How to: a description of what it takes to make a relationship to make a thing', in Jane Rendell (ed.) 'A Place Between', special issue of the *Public Art Journal*, (October 1999), pp. 42–3. See also muf (2001) *This is What we Do: A muf Manual* (London: Ellipsis).

^{xxiv} See for example, Doina Petrescu, 'Losing Control, Keeping Desire', Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till (eds), *Architecture and Participation* (London: Spon Press, 2005) pp. 43–64. See also Doina Petrescu, Constantin Petcou, Niashat Awan (eds) *Trans-Local-Act: Cultural Practices: Within and Across* (aaa peprav, 2010) and aaa (eds), *Urban Act, a handbook for alternative practice* (Paris: aaa-PEPRAV, 2007).