The Art of Relating Sites

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Miwon Kwon set up a challenge for artists making site specific art to address a new relational specificity in which they should deal with the:

> *"uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances between one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another, rather than invoking equivalences one thing after another" (Kwon, 2002).*

Kwon asserts that an artistic response to a site can be neither just the specific personal experience of a place, as articulated by Lucy Lippard (1997), nor even multiple subjective experiences of that place. In the modern world, experiences are increasingly fragmented into physical and virtual spaces, where the perception of time may also be distorted. Kwon suggests that an approach that locates a site in a wider context of interrelationships in time and space is needed. This view is supported by the geography theorist, Doreen Massey (1992), who argues that *"space is not static, nor time spaceless"* and that space and time are interrelated:

> *"Another way is to insist on the inseparability of time and space, on their joint constitution through the interrelations between phenomena; on the necessity of thinking in terms of space-time" (Massey 1992).*

Lippard (1997) herself quotes Foucault:

> *"we are in the epoch of the near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 1984)*

before championing a "return" to a more grounded and focused experience that takes in the detail of our surroundings. Within architecture, there has recently been greater emphasis on this "sense of place", which focuses on localised site specific aspects in line with Lippard's views. This local viewpoint is challenged by Massey (1994):

> *"It is a sense of place, an understanding of "its character", which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognise that, without being threatened by it. What*

we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place".

This paper investigates some strategies that artists employ in relation to site-based art, focusing particularly on painters. It reviews the extent to which a selection of contemporary artists measure up to the challenge of Kwon's relational specificity. It is suggested that psychogeography offers a productive means of making connections between adjacent places in time and space in order to foster new and unexpected perspectives on a site.

The strategies that artists have adopted in relating sites include using series of representational views, juxtaposition, collage, layering and maps. Alternative or multiplicity of response to place is a characteristic of psychogeography, a detailed history of which is not for this paper, but it is nonetheless worth drawing out the key points.

Coverley (2010) describes the development of psychogeography along two literary paths focused on London and Paris. Historically, English psychogeographers have generally taken a role of passive observers dating from Defoe and De Quincey to the 1990s emergence of a new movement of writers and associations with Iain Sinclair and Will Self at the forefront. In Paris, the flâneur as described by Baudelaire was similarly an aloof observer of the urban scene but through the Surrealist writings of Breton and Aragon, the French path took a more political activist route in response to the perceived homogenisation of the city as a result of Capitalism. After Benjamin and Czetchglov, Guy Debord and the Situationist International made a definition of psychogeography:

> *"Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Debord, 1955)"*

They promoted a theory of unitary urbanism utilising techniques of the dérive and détournement, through which they sought to subvert the influence of the dominant power on the urban environment.

In an interview with Steve Hanson (Coverley, 2010), the film maker Patrick Keiller discussed how psychogeography has returned to a more passive, documentary role. However, new protagonists are seeking to reinvigorate and refocus psychogeographical practice, each claiming new terminology, such as Nick Papadimitriou ("deep topography"), Phil Smith ("Mythogeography") and Tina Richardson ("schizocartography"). Richardson (2015) (notable in pioneering a female perspective) has developed a methodology for critique of sites which channels the multiplicity of subjective responses to place, as theorised by Guattari (1992), into challenging or subverting the prevailing dominant power structures sustained under late Capitalism.

In the following review of contemporary artists, some express multiple psychological responses to places, or subvert the dominant viewpoint as a central aim of their practice.

The quiet, atmospheric paintings of George Shaw are an autobiographical representation of the Tile Hill estate near Coventry where he grew up. The paintings are devoid of people, yet full of quotidian traces of life in suburbs and edgelands that many people will be intimately familiar with.

Shaw works largely from memory, using photographs as a reference. Avoiding reliance on photographs distances the artist from recorded reality, which may help him to filter, rearrange or control the visual detail. The painting process becomes a negotiation between multiple aspects of the central subject and peripheral detail, derived from both photography and memory.

His style treads a line between photorealist and casual. The Humbrol enamel paints he uses, make a mental connection with childhood hobbies of model-making, and add to a general nostalgia and melancholy. These are not designed for painting with on a large scale, and so Shaw has adapted a method to the

medium's constraints. The choice of paint challenges the value or status of the painting as "high art".

A powerful, cumulative sense of place is built up over series of related paintings, but the wider world is only hinted at. The suburbs were designed to provide comfortable homes away from industry and are rich in hidden narratives of human lives. Shaw questions perceptions of the suburbs and creates ambiguity between his suggestions of personal reminiscence and something darker, bleaker.

The mundane subject matter is rendered uncanny by the wintry darkness of early evening or the moments after rain, and by the intensity with which Shaw observes the details of overlooked pieces of wasteland, urban woodland, muddy pathways, unkempt public territory and other liminal spaces. Many of the paintings feature fences, walls and other barriers suggestive of being restricted, under control and isolated. Roads and pathways lead the viewer into the picture, but they do not seem to offer a means of escape. The stillness creates a feeling of potential or past drama, perhaps violence, in a place or time beyond that depicted, and so in that way it makes connections elsewhere, simultaneously linking past and present.

Laura Oldfield Ford takes a more adversarial approach in her meticulous depictions of edgeland places. There is a strong political undercurrent to Ford's cynical portrayal of dystopian Modernist/brutalist architecture and urban dereliction. She draws attention to the impermanence of cities.

Her practice includes painting, drawing, photography, writing and performance. She self-published a zine entitled Savage Messiah between 2005 and 2009, and this continues as a blog (Ford, 2015). Psychogeography plays a key role in her work whereby she conducts dérives to inform collages of text and image, which she has described as "emotional mapping".

Ford's paintings and drawings of liminal spaces create a sense of transience and movement through urban areas. These spaces may be termed heterotopia, as

articulated by Foucault (1984), being places of "otherness" with multiple uses and subjective interpretation.

In her drawings, the modest materials of ballpoint pen or pencil, coupled with the sensitive attention to detail, are in stark contrast to the bleak, unloved scenery. The spray paint of urban graffiti is relevant to its subject and adds visceral colour, while text is unequivocal in its acidic critique.

Unlike Shaw, Ford's paintings are sometimes populated by people, marginalised but seemingly comfortable, perhaps hardened, by their surroundings. Their resignation creates a post-apocalyptic image that goes beyond the reality of the present.

Modernism, its optimism and its demise, is also a central concern in the diverse work of Toby Paterson. Paterson's practice extends across painting, collage, reliefs, printing, installation and sculpture, using a variety of different materials. His paintings offer an ambiguous view of the Modernist aesthetic, with clean, spacious graphic design and pastel colours in collages that are based on the built environment of real cities, yet they describe the feel or atmosphere more than specific buildings. They generate a sense of movement or transition. He constructs a subtle hybrid of architectural forms and pure geometry which play on our individual relationships with such places.

There is a certain reverence with which Paterson approaches the idealism of European Constructivists, Brutalist architecture and British constructivists whilst also recognising discontent and failed promise in exploring the dynamics of social space in flux (Normand 2011). This was indicated by certain images of dereliction and installation of palisade fencing in his "Inchoate Landscapes" exhibition. Although not overtly revealed, Paterson's work invokes associations with neglected modernist flats found in many UK cities.

Clare Woods creates semi-abstract evocations of rural and woodland landscapes, which are inspired by photographs of sites without necessarily representing any one specific site. There is a dark, mystery in her fluid

landscapes in which organic shapes entwine, suggesting glimpses into hidden glades with light glinting from secret ponds, or more detailed close ups of vegetation and rocks. This approach between abstract and representation allows the imagination to bring in the viewer's own subjective experiences of similar places.

Woods combines areas of colour, sometimes flat, sometimes with visible brushstrokes on her favoured materials of oil or enamel on aluminium. She makes precise interventions of bold, contrasting colour to give the work vibrant energy and a psychological charge. Her handling of colour and form imbues the work with atmospheric effects, and establishes Woods' psychogeographical credentials.

Soja postulated a thirdspace or 'realandimagined' space (Soja 2000), building from Lefebvre's spatial theories in which the trialectics of 'spatiality, sociality and historicality' are combined. Both Paterson and Woods manipulate elements of real places until they evoke a 'realandimagined' place in visual form.

The emergence of collage with Cubism, and its subsequent development in Dada and later art movements, allowed artists to juxtapose visual elements in order to generate new meanings and make the familiar unfamiliar. Collage and montage offer an approach which reflects the surprising and chaotic characteristics of modern life, dominated by advertising and commercial motives, where seemingly unconnected elements swirl by or collide.

Following a heritage that may be traced back through Mimmo Rotella, nouveau réalistes to Rauschenberg and earlier Dadaists, Mark Bradford makes décollages using found materials to build up layers of colourful papers from advertising and commercial posters. He sands back the layers to reveal beautiful seemingly abstract works full of optical incident. On close inspection, many of the individual fragments are visible, all held within a compositional structure that resembles a map. The map may be suggested or actually based on places such as Bradford's own neighbourhood in South Los Angeles. In combination, the map

and gathered materials react together to generate a sense of place at a point in time. Pedrosa (Schwabsky, 2011) states:

> *"Bradford's surfaces are loaded with the detritus of everyday life, an endless superposition of scraps of paper that carry their own meaning and history"* and *"the messages of these pictures are plural and elusive"*.

Benjamin (1999) discusses how modernity thrives on obsolescence and a form of history can be constructed from analysing what was discarded, both literally and metaphorically. Benjamin makes an analogy between the "ragpicker" and cultural historians (Highmore 2002). On similar lines, Kurt Schwitters' collages of everyday fragments of envelopes, bus tickets and torn newspapers describe the character of a place at a particular time. The meanings and history of the places depicted by Bradford and Schwitters change continuously as their work is viewed at later dates in different contexts.

Julie Mehretu's paintings and drawings combine architectural drawing, cartography and abstract gestural marks to build up frenzied layers of urban order and chaos. Her two dimensional models recognise that cities are a palimpsest; they are inherently unstable, dynamic and multilayered, incapable of accurate representation. Erasure and reworking play a role in her paintings, which evolve and take on a life much like the urban systems she tries to emulate. Buildings rise and get swept away in time, and places forge relationships only for those to change or be destroyed by politics, war and mass migrations.

Mehretu was born in Ethiopia, and has travelled widely, working predominantly in New York. Her global experience informs her paintings which partly reflect real places but also draw on her imagination and psychological responses. In New Perspectives in Painting (Schwabsky 2002), Dailey notes Mehretu's pyschogeographical approach:

> *"As in the Situationists' dérive, Mehretu presents these familiar locations in unexpected ways, suggesting rather than literally depicting an environment".*

In interviews with Rodrigo Maura and Tim Marlow of White Cube Gallery, Mehretu discusses her methods and thought processes in some detail. When combining topographical elements, like formal architectural line drawings, with expressive marks, she is aiming for an interaction between them in the mind of the viewer (White Cube Gallery, 2014). Scale, position and viewing conditions are key considerations for Mehretu, since works range from modestly sized drawings to vast canvases and murals. The many layers in each work are fixed into a single layer by spraying on an acrylic medium such that the smooth, lacquered surface finish mediates between the marks and the viewer, and "freezing" the work into a stasis strangely at odds with the furious energy on the canvas.

Dailey (Schwabsky 2002, pp214) suggests that:

> *"each formal layer could be seen to signify a specific point of view or perspective, one being that of the community, the other of the individual, the active moving composition representing the living whole"*.

Mehretu is making work in which she coordinates multiple subjective responses to connected places all moving and changing through time.

The many artists using cartography as a basis offer a diverse range of mappings of places with varying degrees of physical, emotional and psychological associations (Harmon, 2010). Cartography establishes a visual code in which a place, and its spatial relationship with the world at a particular point in time, is represented in a 2D or 3D form. Artists developing their own visual mapping are automatically creating a form of relational specificity for the place of interest.

Matthew Picton creates maps that retain conventional geographic representations, while building in layers both physically in three dimensions (incorporating text and images) and in psychological meaning, in order to make associations with history and multiple interpretations of place.

Ingrid Calame makes alternative mappings of sites by collecting life size tracings of marks and objects from the physical environment. She then selects from the

layers of tracings to create a single composite layer which she paints sometimes as outlines and sometimes in block colours. The finished works have the appearance of abstract expressionist paintings, but can be considered Post-Modern in that the artist's spontaneous gesture is removed and the outcome is, in part, governed by a systematic process.

Calame's tracings offer no means of navigational orientation, but present a wholly new reinterpretation of the world in terms of its surface textures and shapes. Landscape elements are merged and juxtaposed in a single plane becoming a fascinating fusion of objective and subjective, conscious and unconscious.

Calame successfully builds a network of direct, physical relationships with different places. Her whole approach questions the hegemony of map-making by treating the inconsequential and culturally significant with equal compositional importance.

Stephen Willats is multi media artist exploring the connections between people, society and their environment. He is regarded as a pioneer of conceptual art (Victoria Miro, 2015) and has exhibited work since 1963. Willats continues to be active in collaborative, interactive work that crosses into various disciplines including cybernetics, systems research, learning theory, communications and computer theory. The work is dependent on a keen visual aesthetic which makes it particularly successful in engaging with its audience.

He has stated his objectives regarding relational specificity on his own website:

> *"Some of the polemics and issues that impact on my work involve seeing culture and its society as fluid, transient, relative and complex. I view the world we live in as a multi-channel experience in time, that our encountered fragments of reality are in themselves random variables, that we create the order we choose to see, and in this respect art practice itself becomes a social phenomenon. (Willats 2015)"*

This illustrates that Willats' intentions adhere strongly to Kwon's viewpoint. Willats (2000) further describes how when examining a structure (or place), decisions are made, consciously and unconsciously, to filter information.

> *"The higher the level of resolution the more complex the structure is viewed (Willats 2000)"*

In a work entitled "Five Actions of Transformation" (October 1998) he lists the increasing levels of resolution as revealing: presence, identity, behaviour, components and fabric. A site could, therefore, be represented with different sets of visual information, depending on the resolution filter applied. This multi-channel vision adds further dimensions of variability to individual subjective experience.

Many of Willats' projects have been based on specific sites, sometimes over a period of time. A few selected examples include the Avondale Estate, London ("The Lurky Place" (1978) and "Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Club" projects (1981)), and North Peckham Estate, London ("Creating my own Journey" (1993)).

Willats' research investigates the relationships between the institutionalised environment and the internal, personal space of the individual (Guidi, 2008). One area of focus is around the creative tactics people adopt in dealing with imposed external structures, which is based on De Certeau's theories of everyday life (De Certeau, 1984). The visual output of Willats' research illustrates visual links between people and different elements associated with the site. In the "Meeting of Minds" project (2006), Willats worked with residents of the Sefton Estate in Liverpool to gather visual records of individual journeys collated onto display boards.

> *"The work asked its audience to transform their perception of everyday reality with its associated set functions and attached pre-determined meanings, and to create a parallel reality of an imagined self organised meaning." (Willats, 2003)*

Willats multi-channel vision is a useful tool for analysing which resolution filters other artists have adopted. Cartographic artists operate at a level which reveal their subject's presence, and some insight into higher resolution components and fabric. Calame operates purely within the detailed fabric of places, revealing little of their identity, yet offering multiple alternative interpretations of their characteristics, which have relationships extending beyond the specific site.

Shaw and Ford work across levels of resolution that illustrate interaction between the identity, behaviour, components and the fabric of sites. Paterson and Woods use a narrower range focusing primarily on the behaviour and components of sites, with little indication of their identity or fabric. Consequently, they allow the viewer more space to integrate their own subjective, psychogeographical interpretations with the artist's response.

Mehretu casts a wide net to capture and present information from all levels of resolution, with results of overwhelming complexity. Bradford's paintings have similar degree of visual complexity but are produced within resolution filters of presence (map) and fabric (collected paper fragments).

In summary, the artists considered in this brief review, each in their own way express their experience of places, and in so doing, begin to make connections with other places and times, consciously or not. Some of the painters, such as Shaw, Ford or Calame, focus on specific sites and are more selective in expressing a particular viewpoint, but nonetheless begin to relate the site to a wider world and history. Other artists, including Paterson, Bradford or Mehretu, take a more global view by combining multiple elements and allowing relationships between them to emerge.

Julie Mehretu's paintings are close to the relational specificity that Kwon describes. Her glimpse into the bewildering chaos of contemporary life, where cities are in constant flux, is almost too much to comprehend.

Perhaps then, painting might be regarded as inadequate for comprehensively modelling the physical and psychological landscape of sites in addressing

Kwon's challenge. It could be argued that it requires a multi-disciplinary, multi-media, time-dependent approach, such as that practised by Stephen Willats, to begin to take account of the flux of space-time at multiple levels of resolution. However, it is my contention that no medium can truly model the reality of space-time at any resolution, and it requires assistance from human imagination to extend the artwork into a 'realandimagined' place (Soja 2000). Painting's strength is in using the powers of selection, subversion and suggestion to mobilise the imagination for creating personal connections with sites. Painters can generate sense of movement in space and time with a medium that is itself static. Painting ventures into the psychological space around sites, allowing the viewer to compare their own subjectivity with that of the artist.

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