



**RE/PLACING PUBLIC ART:
THE ROLE OF PLACE-SPECIFICITY IN *NEW GENRE* PUBLIC ART**

**CAMERON CARTIERE
BFA, MA**

**CHELSEA COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
THE LONDON INSTITUTE**

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Abstract

RE/PLACING PUBLIC ART:

The Role of Place-specificity in *New Genre Public Art*

Cameron Cartiere, Chelsea College of Art & Design

This research is an exploration of the development and influence of place-specificity within the field of new genre public art. Over the last several years the term *place-specificity* and its variance, *place-specific* has occurred frequently in art reviews and exhibition catalogues particularly in relation to installations, permanent public art works, and public interventions. While place-specificity is now a recognised term in the current lexicon of public art discussion, within many texts the phrase *place-specific* is often indiscriminately interchanged with *site-specific*, implying that the two terms are synonymous. While the relationships between site, space, and place are actively explored within fields such as geography, cultural studies and architecture, distinctions between site-specificity and place-specificity have rarely been critically addressed in discussions of public art.

Based on both theory and curatorial practice, this thesis explores a range of perspectives on the role of place within socially engaged public art practice. The study examines the difference between site and place and how place influences our perceptions of specific locations through memory, history and experience. The thesis explores place as a subject, an artistic influence, and a social and cultural signifier. Also examined is how artists use place as a means of connecting to specific locations and audiences, as well as a way of exploring their personal histories and memories. Utilising a combination of approaches, this study incorporates naturalistic enquiry, conversation as a method, a think-tank, interviews, and video documentation to uncover how a group of public art practitioners reflect on place-specificity within their work, how they utilise place, and are influenced by place. The research reflects on the potential of place-specific public art to celebrate unique cultural differences, inspire international collaboration, and provide a forum for local distinctiveness in the face of globalization

The study also serves as one model for practice-based research utilising curatorship as a practice. This study identifies further areas for potential research within various aspects of art and design as well as other disciplines. The thesis is accompanied by a suite of DVD's which document the curatorial practice and address place-specific themes that emerged from the research.

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Author's note: In keeping with the spirit of the socially conscious nature of new genre public art practice, this thesis is printed on 100% recycled paper.

INTRODUCTION

To be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place.

-- Edward Casey (1993, p.9)

'RE/PLACING PUBLIC ART: The Role of Place-specificity in *New Genre Public Art*' is a research project that was born out of equal measures of curiosity and frustration. I was curious about the development of 'place-specificity' as a term emerging in the current lexicon of public art discussion. I observed this term and its variance, 'place-specific' peppered through numerous articles in various art magazines over the past several years. Often the phrase would be interchanged with site-specific, as if the two were synonymous. I noticed that place-specificity appeared most frequently when used in reference to *new genre public art*; a phrase coined by artist and writer Suzanne Lacy, which refers to public art that is based on engagement. While I was comfortable with Lacy's loose definition of new genre, numerous questions developed every time I encountered a reference to place-specificity. The term began appearing in art reviews and exhibition catalogues and it seemed to be taken for granted that there was a universally held definition. While the relationships between site, space, and place are explored within fields such as geography, cultural studies and architecture; place and place-specificity are rarely defined in discussions of public art. Perhaps one of the

most influential contemporary scholars of place is geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. His publication, *Space and Place* (1979), helped to establish the discipline of human geography. It is from this field that much of the scholarship on 'the power of place' has been produced.

Within the public art canon, there is also the unargued assumption that place-specificity is always a desirable attribute. Place has become universally positive and space, in comparison, has developed negative connotations. Yet, I could find no convincing explanation for why place was moving to the forefront of current public art discourse and this frustration became a catalyst that instigated the research questions. What does it mean to be place-specific? How does it differ from site-specific? Can a common definition of place-specificity be attained when the word 'place' holds numerous definitions and interpretations? What role does place-specificity play in the development and execution of new genre public art works?

The foundation for the development of practical aspects of this research began in November 1991, when I had the opportunity to work with Suzanne Lacy and the California College of Arts and Crafts, who sponsored a three-day retreat for thirty artists, critics, and writers from across the United States. The retreat was an opportunity for the participants to discuss critical issues in the developing field of new genre public art. The primary focus of discussion was the need for a critical language that would identify and evaluate public art by

addressing both political and aesthetic aspirations. Many of the artists working within new genre public art do not limit themselves to strictly visual media. They engage in performance, intervention, and community actions. The focus of their work covers a broad range of contemporary issues including sexism, racism, toxic waste, multiculturalism, homelessness, and domestic violence. In the early 1990's, critiques of such work seemed unable to address the radical aspects of this genre and the participants of the symposium hoped to expand the critical debate. From this symposium came the first collection of writings on new genre public art, *Mapping the Terrain*. What inspired me most about this project was the format. Lacy took on an enormous, multifaceted topic and she recognised that in order to gain a perspective equal in complexity to the subject, she had to approach the project as a collaborative effort. Thus, with a core group of volunteer co-ordinators, Lacy began the herculean task of assembling over thirty individuals with thirty different agendas from across the United States. The resulting effort created a dialogue which over ten years later continues to inform our view of the influences of new genre public art.

My initial literature review indicated that place-specificity would prove to be an equally complex subject. Yet, there is something specifically about place that speaks to the personal. Bringing together thirty individuals to speak about such an intimate subject was not only impractical for this particular project, but also arguably counter to the personal nature of the topic.

Given that place is definitively personal¹, a very personal approach was taken in developing this project. The structural development and execution of the research evolved from my practice as a curator. In order to create a dialogue about place-specificity, artists were brought from the United States to talk with artists from the United Kingdom. More specifically, I brought three artists from my previous place, San Francisco, together with three artists from my present place, London. As artists, writers, social activists, teachers, curators and arts administrators, we have all utilised aspects of place and place-specificity in our work. Many of us have held multiple roles and our perceptions of place may vary depending upon whether we are acting as, for example, artists or writers.

I was concerned that the methodology reflect the personal and intimate nature of place. This was a primary motivation for using conversation as a method. The initial conversation for this project started in November 2000, in Oakland, California. Like many interesting conversations, it began around a dinner table. The discussion continued over the months via telephone and e-mail. The focus or common thread of those preliminary conversations was developing a list of questions about place in public art. Those questions served as a starting point for our conversation when the participants finally met in London. In May 2001, Oakland-based artist Seyed Alavi, Shelly Willis, Public Art Manager for the University of Minnesota at the Weisman Museum, and

¹ The relationship of place to the personal is examined in later chapters of the thesis and in the DVD suite.

Bay Area writer and curator, Terri Cohn came to the UK to meet with myself, and the three members of the London-based artist group Platform, Jane Trowell, Dan Gretton and James Marriott. As part of my practice, I developed a five day think-tank during which we spent many hours in conversation examining and exploring our various theories and philosophies regarding the transformation of space to place, the relationship of place-specificity to our various practices, and the role of place in our work.

In August 2001, the Platform group was awarded a one-month residency that took them to San Francisco and afforded our team the opportunity to continue the conversation in person. It was also an opportunity to experience each other's place – the San Francisco artists in London, the London artists in San Francisco. Platform's residency was at the Headlands Center for the Arts (HCA), located just north of the city, across the Golden Gate Bridge in the Marin Headlands. The Center served as the host for our day of continued conversation. The Center also became a common denominator for the group. Each of the project participants had some professional relationship with HCA, as residents, collaborators, or affiliates. This realisation inspired the development of a case-study of HCA. While the first half of the project focused on the uses of place in new genre public art, the case-study focused on how place (specifically a place such as HCA) affects artists both in their initial work within that given environment and in the continued influences on their work after they leave that place. This case-study evolved into the other

practice component: a video exhibition, a retrospective of the Headlands Center for the Arts. While I am a curator and not a videographer, nonetheless, video occupies a central role in the documentation and interpretation of the practice. Through video, I have been able to create an afterlife for the think-tank – a means through which the viewer (not present at the original events) can gain a sense of the think-tank as a process. With this documentation, I have also ‘curated’ short, topic-based video pieces that examine specific aspects of the conversations such as, “What makes a space a place?” and “the Headlands as place”.

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first half of the thesis focuses on the theoretical outcome of the research and follows the development of place-specificity in tandem with the development of new genre public art. The research does not aim to explore the evolution of place within other disciplines such as architecture and geography, but rather draws on examples from such fields to develop a more cohesive understanding of the role of place within new genre public art – an art form which itself draws on a myriad of disciplines, such as geography, anthropology, biology, and political science, to create public art projects.

Within Part I of the thesis, sections 1 and 2 are primarily concerned with explaining the practice for this research and the methodology. To date, most practice-based research in the fields of art and design has been conducted

through studio practice, often represented at the completion of the research in some form of gallery exhibition. This research project is a departure from that model of inquiry, as the practice is based in curatorship. The nature of curatorial practice (as distinct from a public or studio artist) provided a unique position from which to begin a new line of inquiry. It allowed for a collaborative examination of the research questions and an innovative approach to exploring the relationship of artist to place and place to artist. It is a position that I refer to as *the practising curator* and is examined within section 1. The methodology of the research draws on naturalistic enquiry and conversation. The ethnographic implications of naturalistic enquiry in relation to public art are explored, as are the motivations for utilising conversation as a method and the means by which conversation was developed as a tool for inquiry.

Section 3 is composed primarily of the literature review on the development of place-specificity and new genre public art. Various aspects of place are explored in relation to public art including functionality, such as place as history and place as community. This section is not intended to be a comprehensive historical account of the theoretical evolution of place; rather, it is a contribution to the understanding of the development of place-specificity within public art and the role of place within the specific field of new genre public art.

Section 4 provides a summation of the theoretical aspect of the research including the common themes regarding the role of place-specificity in new genre public art that emerged through the research. These themes included place-specificity serving as a platform for engagement to occur between artist and audience; as a means for highlighting, preserving, and presenting the unique social aspects of a specific place; and as a method for revitalising ‘placeless’ regions.

The second half of the thesis (sections 6 and 7) is devoted to the practice and includes descriptions of the curatorial projects developed and executed in the course of the research. Not all aspects of the projects are represented in the video suite which accompanies the thesis. The hours of conversations which occurred during the think-tank and the subsequent meetings and interviews have been curated into five topic-based DVDs. The descriptions of the projects provide a better understanding of the lengthy process involved in the development of the practice in relation to the research and the nature of conversation as a method within the evolution of the work.

THE PRACTISING CURATOR

“There is always a filter, a meditation, which inspires your work; not when you are looking out of the window but when, once you have closed it, you recollect what you saw outside. You cannot avoid your work being influenced by culture and perception.”²

-- Giulio Paolini

What does it mean to be a curator in this post millennial art world? How has the advent of curatorial and museum studies programs in the 1990's affected the perceptions and expectations of curators just entering the field? What influences have such programs had on curators with more established careers? Are there now “old school” and “new school” perspectives which define curatorial practices today? Is contemporary curatorship a profession or a practice, or both? Is today's curator a facilitator, a visionary, an enabler, or a type of artist in their own right?

In order to define my own practice as a curator, these are some of the issues I have examined during the course of the research. I began first by looking at my own motivations for becoming a curator and talking with colleagues in the

² This quotation is one of three offered as advice to beginning curators by Lynne Cooke, curator at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, in the publication *Words of Wisdom*. The other two quotes are, “One sits more comfortably on a color one likes.” – Verner Panton, and “Prophecy is the most gratuitous form of error.” – George Eliot (Kuoni 2001, p.40).

field. Amongst these peers, none could say that they set out directly on the path to their ultimate profession with the primary intent being, to become ‘a curator.’³ The majority of curators I know started out wanting to study and write about art history or to create art. They became curators because they needed the financial support to pursue their initial interests; simply put, they needed a job and wanted an occupation which was sympathetic to their vocation. They worked as preparators and exhibit builders, docents and administrative assistants, research fellows and interns. As time went by, many became assistant or junior curators, project co-ordinators, and gallery managers. They found themselves spending less time in the studio or the library and more time in the business of full-time curating. In the process, they finished their MFA’s and PhD’s in studio art and art history. Some even graduated with one of the “new” masters degrees in museum studies (myself included), but few knew in the beginning that they would eventually find themselves in the practice of curating.

There are exceptions of course. At an exhibition opening some years ago, I overheard a man say that he had wanted to be a curator since he was a child. He could trace his decision back to an experience he had while viewing a dinosaur exhibit at a natural history museum during a school field-trip. He noticed there was an exhibition label with the curator’s name and title etched

³ The examination of the development and expansion of the boundaries of the practising curator is limited in this research to the field of contemporary fine art, as related to the topic

on it, and noted that the curator's name was the same as his. He did not know what a curator was, but seeing his own name next to the title was fairly impressive and that was how he initially chose his professional course.

My own interest in becoming a curator came from similar childhood impressions. The first art exhibition I encountered was at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Arts (now the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Arts) and it was a retrospective of the artwork of Dr. Seuss. Of course, one would expect the fanciful worlds created by a renowned children's book author and illustrator to make an impression on a child. However, my own fascination was not focused entirely on the work, though the illustrations and models were quite memorable. Instead, I was impressed by the environment of the museum in relation to the work – the colourful paintings against crisp white walls, the wonderfully strange creatures of Seuss's imagination in sculptural form, standing on raised pedestals staring down at me, the hush of the gallery, and the view of the Pacific Ocean from a picture window at the end of the hall. Within this museum context, a world that I had previously known only on the page or within my own imagination was brought into the physical world. I could move in and around it, and view it in relation to my own world that was within view just outside the window. I asked my mother, "Who did this?" She said it was Dr. Seuss, but I gestured around the gallery. "No, this. Who made *this* happen?" She said it was the curator, and standing in the gallery, under a

of the thesis. While curators in fields within the sciences and humanities may have shared similar experiences, their disciplines are outside the parameters of this inquiry.

Seussian version of a moose head mounted on the wall, I decided to become one.

Even if one chooses to become a curator at the age of ten, as I did, the path towards that goal is not always a clear one. Today's contemporary art curator can come from a number of backgrounds. She or he may have started out as a studio artist, an educator, a private collector, a writer, a librarian, or any other number of practices. Robert Storr, senior curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, started his career as an art critic. Storr's colleague, Gary Garrels, chief curator of painting and sculpture, trained as an art historian. Renny Pritikin, curator of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and co-founder of the alternative gallery New Langton Arts (both in San Francisco), began as a studio artist. Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, notes that when he began in the profession over twenty-five years ago he had a sense that curators came from art history background and went from being an assistant curator to an associate curator, then to a curator, and on to a chief curator. There were clear distinctions between those who worked in galleries and museums. However, "in the last twenty years, our whole sense of what a curator is has been blown apart." (Marincola 2001, p.23)

The variety of institutions and venues that today's curators may find themselves working in are just as varied as curators' backgrounds.

Contemporary curators may practice in the more traditional realm of the museum as well as university and college collections, private collections, non-profit galleries, commercial galleries, public and private libraries, government agencies, municipal museums and galleries, and public art programs. Depending on the size of the venue, today's curator may also be called upon to operate within a variety of roles including exhibition designer, preparator, educator, fund-raiser, and director. If the institution is small enough, the curator may have to incorporate all of these roles simultaneously. With so much variation and diversification, the world of the contemporary art curator is in constant flux. Each new exhibition brings its own unique challenges and every institution carries with it varying requirements. As curators move from exhibition to exhibition and institution to institution, the roles and skills they utilise create a continual variation of the points of exchange between the curator and the venue, the curator and the work, and the curator and the audience.

In addition to these variations of practice, many curators choose to work as independent or freelance curators, without affiliation to any single institution. These types of curators may work primarily within the profession or may combine the practice with other disciplines. Lucy Lippard, who describes herself as a writer and activist, has curated a number of exhibitions, some within the gallery context and some in public spaces. Art critic and independent curator Rosa Martinez served as the artistic director for both the

Istanbul *Biennial* (1997) and the third *Biennial* at SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico (1999) as well as curating exhibitions in Korea, Ireland, and the Netherlands, and publishing in England and Spain.

Perhaps one of the most influential independent curators (particularly in relation to new genre public art) is Mary Jane Jacob. Currently an independent curator based in Chicago, Jacob was the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, as well as the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Jacob consciously chose to leave a more financially secure museum position to pursue projects which were beyond the institutional mission of most established venues. As an independent curator, Jacob developed a number of innovative exhibitions including *Places with a Past* (1991), *Culture in Action* (1992-94), and *Conversations at the Castle* (2000)⁴ which were developed and executed entirely outside the more traditional museum or gallery forum. These widely acclaimed exhibitions have served as models of innovative curatorial approaches to community-based public projects.

Over the last decade, there has been a continuing trend toward developing curatorial practice within an academic framework. Graduate programs in museum and curatorial studies continue to develop and expand in colleges and universities around the world, including programs in Japan, the United States,

⁴ These exhibitions, and their relationship to place-specificity and new genre public art, are examined in further detail in chapters III and IV.

Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Departments for curatorial studies such as those at Goldsmiths in London, Bard College in New York, and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver are developing a variety of critical studies programs to train and prepare future curators. The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College is one of the pioneers in the development of such programs. Their intensive two-year graduate program involves course work in contemporary art history, theory and criticism in contemporary art, the history of exhibitions and museology, and a series of curatorial practicums which incorporate care and collections management, exhibition design, the intellectual and practical tasks of preparing an exhibition, critical and interpretative writing, educational programming and public relations. This course work culminates with students developing complete exhibitions for their master's degree projects.

Evidence of the continual evolution and ongoing debate in the curatorial field can also be found in a recent publication by Independent Curators International. The New York-based organisation produced a curator's *vade mecum* for those working in contemporary art. A *vade mecum* was originally a medieval trade manual; an easy-reference guide to many aspects of life's challenges which often contained equal amounts of text and illustrations, thus introducing some kind of uniform professional standards to a largely illiterate society. The aim of this publication was to provide a handbook for beginning curators. The editor asked sixty-one curators from around the world to offer

'words of wisdom' for the next generation of curators. The sixty assembled essays provide a range of perspectives, observations, and opinions. At times, the advice and attitudes of various curators are in conflict with each other. However, as the editor notes, "from the sixty essays assembled here, two main lessons might be drawn: first, that no rules exist in the field of curatorial work and, second, that curating an exhibition of contemporary art only addresses issues of the particular moment in which the exhibition was created" (Kuoni 2001. p11).

Another determination that can be drawn from these essays, as well as from the continual changes and innovations in the field, is that curating is an active practice involving both the development of original concepts and the communication of ideas, often through collaboration (with artists, institutions, other curators, etc.). In her essay, Yuko Hasegawa, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa Japan, suggests that,

"The role of the curator is not only to be a thinker, but also to be a communicator, to explain your thoughts visually through exhibitions and projects. The balance of intuition, intelligence, and sensitivity is very important. It is as if you are the conductor of an orchestra; curating an exhibition involves the art of creating harmony and atmosphere. The very existence of a curator activates the exhibition space and work to pull everything together." (*Ibid.*, p.80)

This perspective can be viewed as coming from a new school of curating. As Schimmel indicates, twenty-five years ago, the concept of a curator in a museum could have been viewed quite differently than it is today. In 1971, Edward Fry defined his view of the curatorial position into three roles in his article, *The Dilemmas of the Curator*. The first role being “the caretaker of the secular relics of a nation’s cultural heritage”; the second role as “the assembler” through collection acquisition “of an otherwise non-existent cultural heritage” and the third as “ideologue.” (Doherty in Thea 2001, p.110) Since 1971, the role of the curator in the field has evolved beyond Fry’s parameters. In an interview in 2000, curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist observed some of these changes.

“I think Fry’s definition is partially obsolete, partially valid. The museum has a storage function, for which the curator is caretaker. What is clear is that amidst all the changes within the museum, the collection of the museum remains its backbone ... but this is only one aspect of a greater complexity. I am a negotiator of new forms of curating; a catalyst, someone who builds pedestrian bridges from the art to many different audiences.” (Thea 2001, p. 89)

Within Fry’s definition, there is no reference to advocacy for the artist or responsibility to the audience. When Fry developed his definition of the curator’s role, the majority of large museums were not extremely vocal about artist advocacy or audience responsibility either. Within traditionally structured museums the institutional framework of the time held that curators

were responsible for the concept behind the exhibition, the supporting scholarship and the selection of objects. From that point, the exhibition was often turned over to the design department which developed the exhibition design; from there the exhibition would move into the hands of the installers and finally the education department was brought in to develop programming for the audience. At each stage of development, the individuals involved might make important design changes based on aesthetic or practical rationales. Each change could draw the exhibition further and further away from the curator's initial concept resulting in a final exhibition which was confusing to the viewer. In the 1990's many major museums in the United States began to develop a team design approach. The method involved bringing all the participants (curator, designer, installer, educator, publicist, etc.) of an exhibition together for a series of preliminary meetings to work out how the exhibit would be developed and presented to the public. These initial group meetings allowed all the participants to better understand the curatorial concept and to work out design and educational concerns in advance of producing the exhibition. This type of team planning also expanded the role and responsibility of the curator as issues of education and audience were incorporated into the development of exhibitions at much earlier stages.

Another major shift which contributed to the new school of curatorial thought was the expansion of smaller galleries, university and college museums, and non-profit galleries over the past two decades. These organisations are often

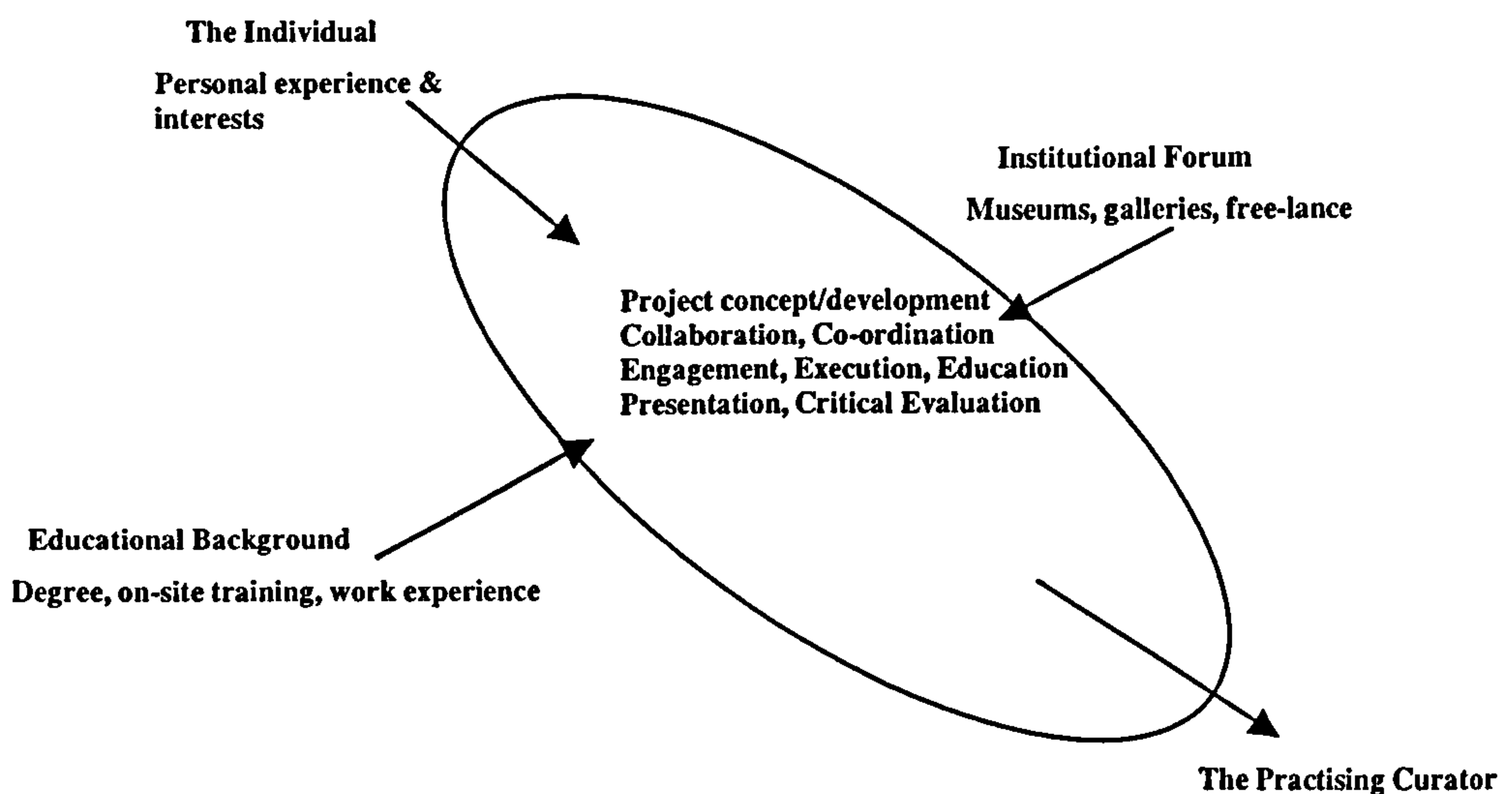
staffed by a small handful of individuals performing in a number of capacities. In some galleries, the curator may also be the director of an organisation. In other galleries, where being the director is not part of the job description the curator may also serve as the gallery educator and public relations officer. If one is working in the capacity of a freelance curator, s/he may serve in every role from concept to completion including fund raising, installation, and catering the reception. Therefore, today's curators can bring with them a variety of personal experiences and interests, diverse educational and practical backgrounds, and work experience from a range of venues. They produce countless variations of contemporary art exhibitions and formats, and they perform in varying roles to accomplish their aims (diagram 1).

A curator never works in a completely neutral or clear space, therefore the activity of a curator is in part a response to particular determining conditions dependent upon the exhibition environment. This is particularly true when working within specific physical and human places. The history, memory, and identity of places can have a significant influence on how curators (and artists) approach a project for a specific place.⁵ A curator may develop an exhibition that is in response to the history of a particular place or may adapt an exhibition to create a juxtaposition between a place and the work that will be exhibited within that place. For several years I was the curator at a cultural centre which was based in a Victorian mansion. While the mission of the art

⁵ This influence is highlighted in the discussions documented in the DVD, *Headlands as Place*.

program was to produce contemporary art exhibitions, I was always faced with the issue of how to incorporate the work within this specific place. Often the history of the house served as a historical platform for exploring contemporary issues such as immigration, women's rights, and racism.

diagram 1.



Contrary to Fry's definition of the role of a curator, this curatorial model works beyond the boundaries of the theoretical realm (though theoretical and philosophical concerns may be part of the curatorial endeavour) and is actively engaged in the development and realisation of a particular vision which takes on a physical manifestation. Such a manifestation may exist in a

variety of forms; including exhibitions, public events, ephemeral works, publications, interventions, and conceptual projects.

This creative curatorial process involves conception, research, development, collaboration, execution, engagement, presentation, and evaluation. It is not a practice that replaces or overshadows the artist. A curator must never confuse the art of exhibiting with art. “It is possible for some exhibitions to become art; however, an exhibition should not be considered art simply because it ‘contextualizes’ the ephemeral.” (Amman in Kuoni 2001, p.22) While the practice of curating is a creative process, it is not a surrogate for the creative practice of art-making. Curating is a practice which exists in relation to the practice of art. Senior curator Igor Zabel of the Moderna Galerija in Slovenia, summarises this position in his contribution to the *vade mecum*,

“...one essential task of the curator is to construct a space for the work of art – physical space as well as mental, social, etc. A work can only be seen and experienced in an actual context; its existence per se (i.e. outside any such particular context) is only an abstract idea. The curator can therefore essentially affect the reception of the work without actually becoming an artist.” (*Ibid.*, p.175)

The tone of this statement is echoed in many of the essays in the *vade mecum*. This is also the position I hold in my own practice. As a curator, I assume the

role of an enabler and I trade in ideas. It is essential, therefore, to maintain a clear vision of some of the principal tasks of the profession: advocating for artists and their art; communicating to an interested public; and confronting the reality of the institutions in which curators operate. (DeSalvo in Kuoni)

This position persists whether one is working in a traditional gallery context or within the more radical conditions of new genre public art.

The recognition of curatorship as a creative practice is a recent development and as such, there are only a limited number of publications exploring the process. Like the *vade mecum*, the majority of works produced are first-hand accounts of curatorial practice and the evolution of the field. *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility* was a symposium produced by the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative to address the state of current curatorial practice in 2000. The symposium was subscribed to capacity and the event made evident the desire for those within the profession to come together to discuss the “philosophical and pragmatic needs of practice.” (Marincola 2001, p. vii) The publication resulting from the symposium is a transcript of the key sessions including a response to the symposium by art critic Dave Hickey. From the position of a critic, Hickey defined the role of curators as “appointed conservators, not elected officials. They are facilitators and practitioners of a secondary practice, as critics are. The curator’s job, in my view, is to tell the truth, to show her or his hand, and get out of the way.” (*Ibid.*, p. 126)

The transcripts from the symposium provide additional insights into the range of issues contemporary curators grapple with in the context of a continually changing art environment. The participants debated issues such as the curator as cultural broker, the impact of globalisation, the rise and influence of the independent curator, changes in curatorial practice over the past few decades, and the changing dynamics between museums, artists, and audience. While the symposium offered a host of varied opinions and perspectives, the development of curatorship as an active practice was repeatedly supported by practitioners in both large and small institutions. A curator may act in a variety of roles depending on the exhibition context, however the core elements of the current process remains fundamentally the same: conception, development, collaboration, co-ordination, interpretation, presentation, engagement, education, and evaluation. The result of this process is an active practice, my practice – the process of a practising curator.

From a curatorial perspective, the initial development of this research project was not unlike the preliminary methods I utilise for developing a conventional exhibition. My curatorial work has always existed as a dialogue with the artists I am interested in having participate in a project or exhibition. A project generally originates from an individual idea, but it develops and expands in tandem with my own visions, ideas, and inspirations and those of the artists I work with. Through this collaborative process, the final project becomes more than just the view of one individual; rather it evolves into a vehicle for many

voices and allows more avenues of exploration and understanding. This is certainly not a universal approach to curating, but it has served as the foundation for my practice for more than a decade.

The development of an exhibition can generally be broken down into four broad categories: *what*, *where*, *who* and *how*. The first category – *what*, is the substance of the exhibition or project. This is the theme, the focus, the core reason for the exhibition. I have often worked within a thematic format and in the development of this research project the theme was place-specificity in new genre public art. The *what* is also the structure of the project. An example, in conventional exhibition terminology, may be a group show, a retrospective, a solo exhibition, a performance, or a public project. In this research project, the structure became the week-long think-tank: the gathering of individuals with a range of experience within the field of new genre public art, who worked with issues regarding place-specificity. The participants included myself, as a participant-observer; Oakland-based artist Seyed Alavi; Shelly Willis, Public Art Manager for the University of Minnesota at the Weisman Museum; Bay Area writer and curator, Terri Cohn; and the three members of the London-based artist group PLATFORM: Jane Trowell, Dan Gretton and James Marriott.

The issue of *where* an exhibition will take place is often given only brief consideration within the structure of a conventional gallery or museum. Most

galleries and museums have predetermined exhibition spaces, many of which may inherently possess interesting design challenges, forming a rather contained arena in which to present an exhibition. Intriguing challenges in determining *where* often come with unconventional modes of practice and within the realms of new media. In the past, I have seen artists' works that were accessed by the public through phone boxes, public washrooms, shopping malls, open fields, and on the sides of buildings.

In this research, the determination of *where* developed from my personal relationship to a sense of place. I wanted to bring individuals from my previous place, which was the San Francisco Bay Area together with people from my current place: London. I was interested in the differences and similarities that might surface in an exploration of the development of place-specific work within these two culturally diverse metropolitan areas. I was also intrigued by how artists from the UK might perceive the subject of place and if those perceptions would be similar to the perceptions of artists from the USA. Would general themes develop cross culturally or would the perspectives and methodologies of the artists from each country be radically different? As a participant/observer, I was also interested in exploring whether my own perceptions of place were changing now that I lived in London, or if inherent cultural influences from my region of origin were more essential in my perspectives on place and my methods of approach towards place-specific work. Given that the research was based within the London Institute and that

financial resources for the project were limited, it was evident from the beginning that the think-tank could be best supported in London. However, the opportunity to continue the project at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California arose when the London participants were awarded a month-long residency in August 2001.

I have found that deciding *who* will participate in an exhibition or project often proves to be one of the most challenging tasks for a curator. Even when developing a solo exhibition, a number of factors come under consideration including medium and genre, topics within the work, location, length of the artist's career, audience, other exhibitions which may be taking place concurrently, a curator's area of expertise, and existing relationships with potential artists. In developing this project, I wanted to bring together a diverse range of individuals with varying professional experiences and philosophies. My experience with the *Mapping the Terrain* project proved that bringing together individuals from a variety of disciplines (i.e. artists, writers, critics, and curators) provides the potential for a broader perspective on a specific topic such as new genre public art. Given that I had limited financial resources and I was curating and managing this project without a crew of volunteers or assistants, I chose to work with a smaller group of individuals who each possessed a variety of experience and expertise within the field of place-specificity. The search began for three individuals from the Bay Area and three from London, enough people to provide diversity of experience, but

still a reasonable number of individuals to manage during such an intense project as a think-tank. The final selection of the participants came from a combination of recommendations from colleagues, past working relationships, slide reviews, interviews, availability to participate in the project, and mutual interest.

While choosing *who* the participants would be was a challenging aspect of the project, *how* to develop and present this project proved to be equally challenging and intriguing. Again, drawing on my experience with *Mapping the Terrain*, I wanted to develop a process that would allow individuals to come together to share their experiences and ideas and possibly develop new perspectives or insights. I wanted to experiment with a format that was less rigid than the *Mapping the Terrain* project. During that weekend retreat, a series of thematic sessions were developed and closely controlled by session monitors who were instructed not to let the group discussions stray from the given topic; regardless of whether those tangents might prove to be more interesting or possibly more germane to the overall focus of the retreat (criticism in new genre public art). I also wanted to work with a format that encouraged more interpersonal exchange and an opportunity for people to expand on and question each other's ideas and experiences. While there are few definitions of a think-tank beyond the bringing together of a group of individuals for the purpose of intensive research or problem solving, neither are there standard guidelines on how to do this. Therefore, I had to draw on

my personal experience curating public programs and seminars, as well as my experience attending conferences and workshops to determine the structure of the think-tank: how many days, how many meetings, length of sessions, meals, time for rest, reflection, and recuperation.

I also needed to determine *how* to present the project. Many artists working within new genre public art rely on video documentation as a primary tool not only for creating a record of the event or project, but also as a means of presenting their work to a larger audience. Both *Mapping the Terrain* and another project, *Conversations at the Castle*, served as an additional model for this research through the utilisation of video as a means to document the conversational process. However, I wanted to utilise the medium in a manner that was more reflective of my practice as a curator. Rather than present an unedited recording of the think-tank sessions and the subsequent sessions at the Headlands (the result of which would be a video almost fifteen hours long), I curated a suite of shorter videos which reflect the principal themes and issues that developed during the research project.⁶

⁶ The DVD suite serves as a curatorial model as well as evidence of practice within this research. The practice component of the research is discussed in greater detail in the methodology section of the thesis.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A METHODOLOGY

The Theory of Place / The Method of Practice

To examine the role of place in new genre public art, this study utilises naturalistic enquiry⁷ and an ethnographic framework of participant-observer. Naturalistic enquiry is a methodology which displays a variety of characteristics including the researcher as participant, research conducted in real situations, qualitative research, and analysis through reflection. This method mirrors curatorial and artistic practices as it is reflective, qualitative, participative, adaptive, experimental, and is based in real life situations. Naturalistic enquiry also mirrors the phenomenology of place as an open-ended and interactive process. The methodology allows for a multi-method approach and the research incorporates literary review, video interviews, conversation, a case study, photographic and video documentation and experimentation, and curatorial practice. Naturalistic enquiry is in accord with certain ethnographic approaches which utilise a combination of theory and practice, while placing the researcher in the position of a participant-observer. From an ethnographic perspective, “the concept of participant observation encompasses a relay between an empathetic engagement with a particular situation and/or event (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation).” (Clifford in Coles 1999, p. 41)

⁷ This model was derived from the methodologies defined in Robson, C., *Real World Research: a Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

This same perspective is reflective of the naturalistic enquiry method in which using the participant-as-observer role, the observer is known as the observer from the start. The observer then establishes close relationships with members of the group. This position means that as well as learning through participation, the observer can ask questions of members in order to explain various aspects of what is going on in the group. During several of the group sessions in the research project, this scenario was evident, and the duality of the role of participant-observer allowed me to pose specific questions to the group members in relation to the role of place in their work and to clarify the parameters of our enquiry. In particular, during a group session which was held at the Headlands Center for the Arts in August, 2001, I posed specific questions to the artists that defined our conversations for that session. Having this flexibility allowed for a more concentrated focus to our conversations when time was limited and we only had one day together, versus a more open-ended conversation when we had several days together. For instance, during the think-tank in London, the conversations could be less directed and more experimental as we had several days to revisit the additional topics which developed around the initial research questions, and explore to what degree these other subjects related to place-specificity in new genre public art. On the other hand, at the August 2001 Headlands session, the group only had one day together; therefore I posed very specific questions. This allowed for less experimentation; however, the conversation was quite concentrated.

One effect of the naturalistic enquiry method is that members are led to a more analytic reflection about processes and other aspects of the group's functioning. This positioning was particularly conducive to the development of the think-tank.

“One possible strategy is for the observer to evoke a particular situation or behaviour from members of the group. Essentially this involves setting up a situation which has meaning for the group and then observing what happens. This kind of active involvement borders on carrying out an informal field experiment....”(Robson 1993, p.197)

The think-tank proved to be just such an informal field experiment. The aim behind the design of the think-tank was to establish as loose a parameter as possible in order to test the use of conversation as a method of enquiry in relation to the practice and to encourage the group to explore their individual perceptions of place beyond conventional definitions of site, space, or place. Over the course of the week-long process, various members of the group had a range of reactions to the process. At times, some members wanted more structure to the conversations. Others commented on how a less rigid format allowed them to develop an understanding of their relationship to place beyond their own preconceived connections. Some members found themselves continually moving back and forth between a desire for the reassurance which comes from direction and enjoyment of the freedom of a more fluid framework. In general, those with a background that was curatorial

tended to request more structure; while those whose practice was more studio based appeared generally comfortable with fewer parameters.

Utilising naturalistic enquiry in combination with an ethnographic perspective allowed the research to be conducted through an approach which was appropriate in an investigation of place-specificity and the phenomenology of place as an open-ended and interactive process. However, ethnographer James Clifford offers a cautionary note:

“It’s interesting to connect an ‘ethnographic’ approach with ‘site-specificity’ in art. Both are ways of decentering established centers of art/cultural production and display... But it’s important to recognise that the turn to the specific and the local occurs in contexts of ‘complex connectivity,’ to adopt John Tomlinson’s substitute for the diffusionist term ‘globalisation.’ I’d always want to stress...the entanglement of the particular...with networks of power and communication. If this means we can no longer speak of the ‘merely’ local, then we need to interrogate the performative specificity of any ethnographic or site-specific production. Such production makes sense only given audience access (physical access, or written, photographic representations). The same goes for any ethnographic work, which is always already caught up in modes of representation and reception.”(Cole 1999, p.59)

While, as a group, the research participants were not utilising an ethnographic approach to create site or place-specific works, we were using a similar

approach to examine place-specificity within our work and several of Clifford's concerns applied to this research: in particular how the turn to, or focus on, the specific/local occurs in contexts of 'complex connectivity' or globalization. The conflict between local distinctiveness and globalization was a recurring theme in many of our conversations. As Clifford suggests, the local is often caught up with global forces and ideologies. Place is influenced by a variety of elements combining to inform one's perspective of place, so that place is not purely personal, intimate, or local. It is also political, contested, ideological and collective. The nature of place is discussed in more detail in chapters four and five.

The performative specificity of place-specific work in relation to audience and the modes of representation and perception were also considerations within the research. It is important to acknowledge that each artist can only offer a reflection on their own version of place. Equally, the creation of a place-specific work would be developed within the influences of the artist's personal interpretation of a specific place. That interpretation would not only include the unique aspects of the place such as historical use and cultural events, but also the artist's own relationship to the place as well as memories of other places that may be restimulated by a particular site. Similarly, the audience reception of a place-specific work would also be influenced by their personal connections to the place as well as memories of other places. In turn, these personal connections are also open to global, political and ideological

influences. Such influences govern the limitations of the research, particularly the understanding that each of the participants of the project can only offer their own perception or version of place. Therefore, a definitive understanding of the role of place-specificity in new genre public art is unattainable. The research aims at developing a broader understanding of the complex layers of influences that inform our understanding of place and how a particular group of artists are utilising place within their practice.

With these precepts in mind, the initial concerns for the research were how this project would diverge from a purely philosophical investigation of place-specificity and incorporate the considerations of practice. Also, by what means would the relationship between theory and practice manifest itself within the research? And how would the 'performative specificity' of the project be made accessible to an audience?

The potential for several common misinterpretations are prevalent when theory and practice are present within the same research project. One misconception is that the practice illustrates or applies the theory. Another, is that theory should describe practice. While there may be cases in practice-based research where practice does illustrate theory and theory does describe practice, this is not always the case and is certainly not appropriate or productive for all types of practice-based research. Within this project, theory and practice provide an interconnected means for the investigation of the

research questions. A theoretical investigation of several key concepts of place (Casey, Bachelard) initially formed a foundation and a point of reference for a deeper exploration of place-specificity in relation to new genre public art. The point of reference was not a set of hypotheses to be tested, but rather a variety of potential influences on one's relationship to place (such as memory, history, and use) which were explored through the research. Within the thesis, this exploration manifested itself in a more philosophical discussion; while in the practice, the discussions were derived from more visceral, emotional, and intuitive responses to place. The dialogue that developed between the theory and the practice were reflective of Clifford's interpretation of the participant-observer (the researcher) being able to relay between experience (practice) and interpretation (theory).⁸

The practical component of the research was the conception, development, and execution of a conceptual curatorial project. The initial phase, a form of think-tank, was developed and executed in collaboration with a number of artists, writers, arts administrators, and art institutions. As the project developed and evolved, I added an additional element, the exploration of a particular place with which all of the participants had a relationship. That place was the Headlands Center for the Arts in California. It is important to note that this aspect of the project is not *about* the Headlands, but rather about the nature of place in public art, and the Headlands is one particular example of how place is used and interpreted in that sense.

⁸ This dialogue is explored further in the thesis.

The overall project is presented via a suite of videos which highlight aspects of the think-tank process and explore themes developed within the project. The recording of this process should not be mistaken for an arts practice. I am not a video artist. Editorial decisions I made during the course of documenting and editing the videos were derived from a curatorial perspective similar to the curatorial decisions involved in the development and execution of an exhibition. From both a curatorial and an ethnographic perspective, the use of video can prove instrumental in providing audience access. “Nowadays a video camera is an integral part of any site-specific, or local, performance, whether it’s Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco infiltrating major museums as caged New World ‘savages’ or the opening of a tribal museum in Alaska”(Ibid., p. 59). As Clifford cautioned, the need for audience access is important for such productions to make sense. Without a means for audience access, the discussion and interpretation of the event remains confined to the initial participants and the dialogue can not be successfully expanded or explored beyond those present at the event; or from Clifford’s perspective, to de-centre established centres of art and cultural production. The video camera also proved a useful means of conveying the nature of the conversations between the participants of the project. Conversation was one of the primary methods utilised within the practice aspect of the research.

The Conversational Arts

*“Conversation is but carving!
Give no more to every guest
Than he’s able to digest.
Give him always from the prime,
And but little at a time.
Carve to all but just enough,
Let them neither starve or stuff,
And that you may have your due,
Let your neighbour carve for you.”
-- Jonathan Swift (1733)*

Conversation, by definition, is an inspirational process. It is a method by which ideas are created and exchanged, a means to develop solutions and to resolve conflict. It also instils hope and the possibility for a degree of intimacy – that people can be open about their vulnerabilities and fears, that their ideas and opinions will not be dismissed or discounted. It is a familial exchange, an alternative to formal discourse and debate that permeates the standard conventions of communication in our contemporary society. It is a counter approach to the politics of accusation and denomination that turns exchanges on major cultural issues such as religion, education, science, and art into

political rhetoric or disheartening banter. Conversation offers a bridge between the polarised 'us' and 'them' while offering the possibility of unification without homogenisation. Resulting in interaction and integration, conversations are a fundamental aspect of daily interchange. They inform our views and ideas of community, family, and relationship. Not limited to the domain of practical speech, conversation has the power to inspire the creative aspirations of artists, writers, and musicians who create discourse between themselves and their work, as well as between others through their work. But while conversation is a word filled with optimism and potential, it is also a practice involving risk, uncertainty, and difficulty.

Conversation has not always been understood in this way. In 16th century Italy and 17th century France conversation was widely held as an art with prescribed rules of manner, subject, and delivery. In Swift's time one's social standing was in part determined by one's abilities as a good conversationalist. In contrast, contemporary discourse has numerous configurations and capacities, many of which are less than transparent. Conversation can be a method of manipulation as often practised in the political realm where people adapt charismatic conversational styles as a means of neutralising opposition. By skilfully controlling the conversation, opponents can avoid addressing issues or grievances, and steer the exchange in a predetermined direction. This form of conversation is a way of preventing authentic communication from actually taking place. So, while conversation is often viewed as a means of

exchange and acceptance, it can also be a form of cunning manipulation. The question lies in motivation.

Most conversations have an agenda, which is usually dictated by the individual initiating the discussion. While an agenda driven conversation can be a manipulative action, it can also be a means of free exchange. An agenda can serve as a framework allowing the participants to express various perspectives while maintaining a focus for the topic of conversation. It is when the initiator tries to control the outcome of a conversation that the agenda becomes a tactic of manipulation. Every conversation has its own complex mixture of meaning and intent. From the casual exchange between acquaintances to the heart-rending emotional intimacies shared between loved ones, conversations are as varied, complex, and fluid as the individuals who participate in them. Exchanges can be creative or destructive, authentic or rhetorical, inspiring or disheartening. Contemporary conversations also involve a certain element of risk. Without specific conventions and rules which defined and constrained the nature of conversations in the past, participants may find themselves drifting into uncharted waters with an equal chance of discovering new territory or being lost at sea. And while this high risk – high return approach may appear to be a model that many artists, writers, and curators are utilising, many are actually incorporating a more controlled and predictable method. What is often described as conversation or dialogue is usually a thinly disguised interview.

The prevalence of the words 'conversation' and 'dialogue' in art-related articles, essays and publications since the mid-1990's indicates a growing desire to create discourse that moves away from the theoretical and returns to the personal. Explaining the development of her recent book, *Conversations Before the End of Time*, Suzi Gablik writes,

“...I was beginning to understand how the shared experience of dialogue allows one to have and maintain one's own point of view, while at the same time trying to understand and include another's. I began to see that what was needed was not a monologue – my voice making contemporary art debates intelligible to a broad audience – but a dialogue in which I did not necessarily have a program of my own, but would simply create an empty space for whatever specific process was trying to happen.” (1995, p.20)

This sentiment does speak to the power conversation has to inspire and evoke new ideas; however, in practice Gablik actually pursued a more conventional and predictable course of interviewing the artists rather than participating in an active dialogue. Taking the role of interviewer, Gablik's contribution consisted primarily of her asking questions and recording artists' answers. She avoided potential conflict, seldom challenging an artist's response with an opposing view, and never beyond a sentence or two before moving on to the next question.

The title of Tom Finkelpearl's, *Dialogues in Public Art* (2000) suggests the possibility of an innovative format, but Finkelpearl is quick to dispel such

hopes by clearly labelling his exchanges as interviews from the table of contents onward. Thus, the reader is not under the illusion that Finkelppearl's book will offer something beyond the classic interview format, in fact he stays well within those constraints from the first interview to the last. While the interview process does allow a forum for individuals to express insights, viewpoints, and convey new information, this format seldom serves as a platform for 'creating' new ideas or change.

The potential for conversation as an effective medium of exchange was embraced in an innovative and experimental project during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. Organised by independent curator, Mary Jane Jacob under the auspices of the Arts Festival of Atlanta, *Conversations at The Castle* proved to be a groundbreaking public art event. Having developed a reputation for unique place-specific, community-oriented, and issue-driven public art projects⁹, Jacob was invited to develop a public art exhibition for Atlanta. The aim was to commission new works for the community, which could also gain the Arts Festival greater exposure during a time of unprecedented exposure for Atlanta. What Jacob's developed evolved beyond the context of site-specific installations. The project became an exploration of an expanded concept of contemporary art in public space and modes of personal and cultural communication.

⁹ In 1991, Jacob organised *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston* and in 1995, *Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago*. Both projects were widely praised for testing the boundaries of public space and the relationship between contemporary art and audience.

Conversations at The Castle featured a number of artists creating installations in an old historical building located in Atlanta's city centre referred to by the locals as 'The Castle.' While the installations incorporated various levels of conversation – conversation between artists and viewers, conversations between participating artists, conversations between artists and community groups; the real innovation came in the form of the less public aspect of the project. In tandem with the installations were a series of seven discussion dinners. Guests were invited from across the country and included artists, community leaders, arts administrators, writers, art historians and critics. Each dinner had a focus (Youth, Culture and Society; Communications; Audience and Institutions) and a session leader whose role was not to guide the conversation, but to start the proceedings. The topic of the initial discussion dinner was actually conversation. According to Jacob,

“The conversations were intended to encourage exploration of the place and meanings of art in the United States. But the titles of the program (*Conversations at The Castle*) and of the discussions (*Conversations on Culture*), as well as the informality and open-endedness of the discussions, built into each conversation an awareness of the meanings and complexities of conversation itself... and the conviction that the process of conversing can have a texture and vitality that makes its connective tissue as important in the end as any idea expressed or any problem resolved within the conversation.”
(Jacob & Brenson 1998, p.24)

This method of exploration incorporated the belief that through participation and sharing, the conversational series could expand the understanding of art and offer the possibility of extending the traditional museum audience to other realms of the general public; allowing for a non-art-academic experience to form the core of the project.

Enlightenment, education, enjoyment can be found through what one brings to the viewing of a work of art and not just in what one is instructed to get out of the work; in fact, the latter can be in direct opposition to a reaction based on personal or cultural knowledge. We believed that personal experience could provide an important entry to art. (*Ibid.*, p.24)

It is this personal aspect which is so critical to the conversational process. Conversations begin with the personal – the initial exchange from one individual to another. From this starting point, the conversation can expand to incorporate a larger group (fellow dinner guests, artists, museum visitors) and if technology is incorporated to include the Internet the result could conceivably be a global conversation. It must be noted that while the expansion of a conversation on a global level is a theoretical possibility, the practical requirements for expanding a conversation beyond the fundamental participants is difficult, as the time requirement restricts a more casual participant such as the museum visitor. However, “community-based endeavours like ‘Conversations at The Castle’ are laboratories of practice – both social and artistic... art is a vehicle for individualization, embodied

communication. Personal circumstances, class, identity, and ethnicity stay in the foreground.” (*Ibid.*, p.33) This type of practice focuses on process over product, on the value of numerous voices, and on the equivocation and indeterminacy that exists in everyday life outside formal institutions. *Conversations at The Castle* grew out of an awareness that many people who care deeply about art and culture need to be able to struggle openly and collectively with the questions that define this moment in art history – questions such as: What does art mean? Who is an artist? What makes an art experience possible?

If the *Conversations at The Castle* project could create such an inspiring model of the power of conversation, why are there so few examples of this type of conversational practice? There are practical considerations to be considered. Developing a successful conversational project requires time, trust and mutual responsibility. With the limited budgets, restricted schedules, and conflicting priorities that plague many art institutions, the resources needed for similar conversational projects may appear too extreme. Also the outcomes are not as predictable or controllable as a traditional interview format. While any of these limitations may be a contributing factor, perhaps the answer lies with the same stumbling block that can inhibit the most casual or rudimentary conversations – fear of conflict. Despite producing provocative exhibitions with controversial content, even the most avant-garde art centres and programs often still shy away from a process which allows for personal

confrontation or conflict. Like Gablik's text which purports to create a forum for conversation but in reality takes a safer, more controlled platform, these programs are often so tightly controlled and structured that there is little opportunity for exchange, often due to time constraints and discouragement by program organisers. In the mid-90's I attended a symposium at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California that was just such an event. The Center is known for its innovative programs, international artist residencies, and its kitchen. Renovated by artist Ann Hamilton, it is the heart of the Center. During the bi-annual open house events, it serves as a café in the style of many museums, but outside of those two weekends, the kitchen serves a more traditional purpose. It is the gathering point for artists in residence, who wander out of their studios in search of connection and conversation as much as for a cup of coffee. There are monthly dinners followed by slide lectures, readings, and topic discussions. And while there is a formal lecture room upstairs, the presenters will often choose to stay in the intimate setting of the kitchen, giving their talk perched on the back of one of the mismatched Shaker style wooden chairs as the audience remains gathered around the long wooden tables. The presenter/audience interaction is more engaging and natural. Unlike formal lectures where there is often a long moment of silence between when the presenter asks if there are any questions and the first timid hand is raised; at these kitchen functions the audience seldom waits for the end of the presentation to ask questions or make comments. Rather than serve as a distraction to the presenters, the

interruptions create a general feeling of ease. It is easy to assume that such an environment would be the perfect foundation to develop conversational public projects and programs within the more official calendar of the Center's events.

I have attended a number of formal symposia at the Headlands; symposia which dealt with challenging subjects like ecological art, political activism and multiculturalism in the arts. Often these events included 'dialogue' in their titles. And while the symposia proved interesting, seldom was dialogue an active aspect of the proceedings. On one occasion, I attended the symposium on art in prisons. The focus of the day-long series was not just artists working in prisons, but the politics of prisons in America, artists working on prison issues in their work, and the stigma of being an 'ex-con'. The presentations were very formal, the speakers almost dogmatic in their positions, questions from the audience were few and predictable (safe, non-confrontational queries about statistics and policy changes). The bias of the presenters was decidedly pro-prisoner. The moderators did little to elicit alternative perspectives or inspire exchange. The issue of why individuals were incarcerated was never addressed. Nor were the victims or families of victims a consideration. From the stance of the presenters, it would have been easy to believe that everyone held within the contemporary US prison system was a political prisoner. The aim of dialogue touted in the symposium prospectus was decidedly absent. Those few brave individuals who challenged

the panel were immediately silenced with comments like, “we have been on the inside and we know what’s really going on.”

A real dialogue wouldn’t start until the official function was over and people moved down into the kitchen for the follow-up dinner when one of the Headland’s board members asked me what I thought of the symposium. I told him I was very disappointed. There was no engagement and no room for discussion about other aspects of the debate. What about the victims? What about the fact that in some cases, violent crimes have been committed? What about the families of the prisoners themselves? How do they feel about it all? Across the table sat the director of the Center and I could see her eyes widen in horror as I asked these questions. I was challenging the politically correct stance of the symposium and bringing into question the motivation behind the event. However, that moment was when the dialogue finally started. The board member talked about his brother who had been in prison for the last ten years and about his own conflict. He felt shame and confusion as if he were in some way partially responsible to society because he was related to this man who had committed a crime; ashamed to tell people about his brother and ashamed that he didn’t. And there was the anger, for what his brother had done, for how his brother was now being treated. From the other side of the conversation, I talked about my cousin who had been killed in his early twenties trying to break up a fight. The death devastated his family who have never fully recovered some twenty years later. His killer had a history of

violent offences and while one can appreciate how the cycle of violence from childhood onwards can perpetuate a life of crime, as a family victim, it is difficult to muster sympathy for the prisoner when you live with the trauma that individual created by taking a life. During the course of the conversation other members of the table participated in the discussion. Many had mixed views and mixed feelings. We didn't arrive at any answers or solutions to deal with the prison crisis in America, but we did have a conversation. The board member had not talked about his brother in nine years and I had never talked about my feelings of frustration about the cycle of violence before. Others talked about various fears and insights that they had previously been fearful to express. All of us had forgotten about the director who had sat silently at the table for the last hour. As the conversation wrapped up, I looked over at her, wondering if I would ever be asked back to another event. She looked as if she was hardly breathing and I was about to ask her if she was all right, when the board member said to me, "I really appreciate having had the chance to talk about this." With that 'official' acknowledgement of the importance and impact of our conversation, the director finally released a sigh of relief and squeaked out a barely audible, "Well, that is why we have these events."

Faced with so much fear of conflict, how can conversation become an effective method of engagement in the arts and a force for innovation and new thought? Perhaps the answer lies back in the good graces of the 18th century. While Swift's notion of the skills required for the art of conversation may

seem antiquated, there is relevance in his formula for contemporary practitioners of conversation as a method of exploration. The role of the modern-day conversational artist is not unlike that of the good host: giving attention to all the participants, offering one's best thinking, pacing the conversation so that individuals have an opportunity to absorb and comprehend what is being said, eliminating rhetoric which might congest the flow of information, and allowing others shared ownership of the conversational process. This last aspect is often the most difficult as we often sacrifice the importance of listening in our rush to be heard. Ery Camara, who participated in The Castle project, clearly states the significance of listening as an effective tool of conversation:

“One of the rules of conversation is to know how to listen, to receive from someone what is missing in ourselves or to make a link between our sameness and difference. Listening allows a person to better speak or express him- or herself. But consciousness and cross-cultural exchanges are required within conversations so that there can be different voices, sights, and actions, together with respect among persons. This is to share what it means to be a human or just a being – an energy belonging to the whole – from cave paintings to coffins, from temples, places, museums, and malls. To share, to converse, is a part of our search for transcendence, our bridge between death and life, between past, present, and future. It is a constant opposition, and at the same time a transaction, of monologue and conversation, history and memory.” (*Ibid.*, p.85)

After all the 'rules' are observed and comparisons are made, the key to successfully utilising the conversational process as a method of exploration may finally lie in one's ability to embrace a degree of humility – thus allowing for the willingness to encounter what may be lacking in each of us. The reward of this practice being not only a broader understanding of specific issues or questions, but ultimately a greater understanding of ourselves.

TESTING THE METHODOLOGY: DIARY OF A DINNER

The first test of conversation as a method took place in Oakland, California on Tuesday, 28 November, 2000. The participants included four artists, Seyed Alavi, Andrea Brewster, Sue Mark, and Jeff Norman. The conversation was videotaped and took place over the course of a three-hour dinner.

The meal started with an introduction by the author explaining the idea of conversation as a method of research. The goal was to start the conversation with the participants' general impressions of place in their work, but the conversation was free to flow in any direction that might arise during the evening. As with most initial meetings, the participants took a period of time to adjust to the process. Even though each artist was familiar with the others work, it took about an hour before the conversation became more relaxed and individuals started to develop a more personal connect to the topic. The conversational flow covered a wide variety of topics ranging from international travel to local grocery stores.

The first thing we talked about was how I was using conversation as a method and I broke down the process of doing a thesis and my research focus. Jeff asked several questions about my background and where I had worked in the Bay Area and all the places that I lived. Those questions led to us talking about moving and how I felt displaced because I had lived in so many different places.

Jeff talked about a project he had done in the neighbourhood for Chevron. This involved a long explanation of how he worked with the community, how he worked with a liaison of Chevron, how he became a part of the community group. That project led Jeff to do another project in the neighbourhood about the Pussy Cat Theater. During the course of this discussion, Andrea and Seyed were commenting about their response to that response to that project because it was in their neighbourhood and they didn't know that he was the artist. They also thought that the Chevron piece was done by Chevron as a political move for the neighbourhood to make the neighbours feel better about Chevron putting up a mini-mart.

Seyed had two main blocks of conversation where he 'held the floor.' One block of conversation focused on how he was interested in the personal and that place was not of interest to him, politics were not of interest to him, community was not of interest, that it all came down to how it affected him personally; but then when he got to that deep personal plane and asking him "how does this related to me?" then he would ask how does it relate to the place...to the community, etc. So he filtered it all down to the personal first and then expanded it out into the world. So while he was saying that he was not interested in all these things, he actually was, but he needed to start at that real personal place. His other main idea focused on figuring out what he was doing as an artist because he felt like he was a landscape architect, a designer,

a consultant...all these different things, but what was it that he was really doing. He had this vision of different people in different fields carrying a torch and that over the course of the decade because of consumerism and capitalism, as the major motivator for how we operate, people's torches have gone out. So as a group it's really only artists who still have a torch that is lit. And by taking on this new role where we go out into the community where we do collaboration with people outside of our field we remind them how to do their work "artfully" and re-light their torch.

Sue talked about her experiences in Bulgaria, and how she had personal interaction with people in stores and that they remembered her when she came in. They remembered what she would buy and they would measure her progress in the community by the progress in her language skills. Her way of connecting to the place (the town she was in) was through the daily interaction with the community and learning the language. She also worked in the photo archives, which were usually only open to historians but because she was not a historian, she was looking at the collection in a different way. Because of that positioning, she was looking at photographs that even the librarian had not really studied before. So because she was taking a different approach, she created new opportunities for the people who worked there. She also talked about how other artists never ask her "why" she does her work. They always ask her "how". What they are asking is where did you get the money, who

were your contacts, etc. and not her motivation for doing the work. She was wondering if it was fear that kept people from asking why.

I think what Sue was addressing in regards to the question “why” and people’s fear about that question comes from a fear of challenging the system. When you start to ask why things are the way they are, or why we are doing what we are doing, we start to question the very foundation of why our society is the way it is. The system is not set up to allow for that kind of questioning. The question of freedom and what that means came up in a conversation and the myth that we have freedom here in the U.S. Seyed commented that the process I was developing of allowing a conversation to happen without an agenda, which would grow over time in an organic way incorporating everyone’s ideas was actually a form of anarchy. All of the dinner participants thought that was a good thing.

During the evening, we were having a discussion where the phrase “the art world” came up several times -- our relationship to the art world, how the art world is motivated now by consumerism and that our work which often didn’t have a product at the end had a difficult time finding support in the traditional gallery context. Jeff had a real problem with talking about the art world because he did not feel that he was an “artist” anymore, rather he was a community activist. Yet, he used the label of artist when it suited his purposes for example, when getting certain grants. He claimed that art making didn’t

interest him anymore. Both Seyed and Sue challenged him on this point, saying that his recent project certainly incorporated art and that the new role of the artist allows us to take on different aspects of other professions without having to have some official seal of approval, like a diploma in biology.

I talked about the idea of displacement and that coming from a more metaphysical philosophy, I looked at “place” as starting with the self. From this position, no matter where you were, you related to your surroundings and created significant connection based on the body as a “place”. It had to do with this need to be rooted; that we are so mobile and global (people seldom live where they were born anymore) we need to create an internal tether. This concept was what influenced my work; the notion that wherever you are in that moment is a significant place because you are in it.

We talked quite a bit about grocery stores and people’s relationship to going to a small grocery store and getting involved in conversations with strangers in line and that comes from going to the same place over and over again where people start to recognise you, or the person in front of you has a relationship with perhaps the checkout person; they get involved in a conversation and you get drawn into it. Jeff talked about just such an experience where he got drawn into the conversation of the people in front of him and it caused a chain reaction where he then got involved with a conversation with the woman behind him and with the people in the next lane,

and for a brief period of time they were all engaged together. This interaction made him feel more connected to that market and he has been going back there to shop.

The evening's dinner conversation proved a very fruitful test of the methodology for this project. Despite the technical glitch, the test was very positive. Conversation was a means of exchanging ideas, challenging people's perceptions, and creating new ideas and knowledge. We discovered a single conversation was not enough. To engage in this kind of practice is a commitment to a relationship. The process requires a series of conversations where ideas can build upon each other and evolve. It is multi-layered process. The actual conversation serves as an inspiration and the real development of new knowledge comes afterwards when each person goes home, thinks about what was said, and starts to develop new ideas. Those new ideas continue to evolve with each additional conversation.

Conversation serves as the catalyst for change. Not only did the conversation affect the views and perspective of the participants, it also changed the project. Each artist approached the initial conversation with their own unique perspective and experience; therefore each participant had a different reaction to the conversation. Jeff came to the table questioning his role, not only in the project, but also as an artist. Jeff had stopped referring to himself as an artist and prefers the term community organiser. However, he did confess that he

used the term artist when it suited his objectives such as applying for grants to sponsor his community projects. While Jeff no longer wanted to associate himself with the art world, his process of working with community, his research methods, and his final visual product all fell well within the realm of public art practice. Other participants in the conversation challenged Jeff on this point. I suspect that it was this internal conflict which caused Jeff to withdraw from the project. The conversation stirred up feelings, questions, and ideas in all the participants and their response to the event was directly related to their current feelings about each of their work. Sue appeared to be at a point in her career where she was questioning why she was doing this work. There was conflict about wanting the freedom to develop work organically, to explore outside the traditional role of artist and experiment in the areas of history and sociology; and the desire to have a more defined purpose as an artist. In terms of the research project, this conflict translated in Sue's initial desire to have an organic, open-ended project which could evolve out of the participants' conversations; into a request for more clearly defined direction about the role of the participants and what was expected of them in the project. Seyed had already come to terms with the multi-layered role which often faces the new genre public artist. He had spent considerable time reflecting on the nature of his changing roles during the course of various projects. At any one time, he could act as a landscape designer, community organiser, youth co-ordinator, graphic designer, historian, and visual artist. He was generally comfortable in this position and had a clear definition of how

this numerous roles relate to his work as an artist. Seyed begins his work from a personal perspective, always asking the question of how the process, idea, or project relates to himself as an individual. He questions how he is directly affected and why is that relevant to his personal perspective. He then turns those questions outward to ask how whether other individuals, communities, even cities affected. Because of his confidence in his own personal identity and role as an artist, he was more confident with the organic nature of developing ideas from the conversational method.

The technical problem that occurred with the video recorder actually served as a positive procedural test. Despite checking and recheck the equipment a defect occurred in the microphone and while the video recorded successfully, the audio was not picked up on the tape resulting in a 'silent movie'. While the video would have served as an accurate record of the first conversation, the failure to capture it completely raised the question of how the conversational process should evolve and that no single conversation should be so precious the failure to archive it could jeopardise the process. When I contacted each artist to discuss the video problem each responded, the opportunity to re-evaluate the process was developed. Initially, the artist's were asked to write down any memories of the evening and how the process affected each of them. It was this process of requested reflection which caused each participant to re-examine their role in the project and other possibilities for participation. Jeff decided that he was uncomfortable in his role in an art

project and that he was resistant to the process. Also that the project was going to require more time than he was able to commit. Fortunately, he reached these conclusions at a relatively early stage of the research when his withdrawal from the project could be more easily adjusted to. Sue began to question the limitations of the conversational process. How could a conversation be continued over distance of both time and space? How could we continue the conversation without waiting months to meet again? Could we spend a longer period of time together in London so the conversation could evolve more naturally over the course of spending time incorporating aspects of our philosophical discussions with everyday acts such as preparing meals together? Conversations are not just about what is said during predetermined sessions, but also what is exchanged during the times in-between. These early questions helped to formulate methods for continuing the conversation through various means despite the physical distance of the participants.

The test proved that the method of conversation worked essentially as anticipated. The research could have been conducted through an interview process. Each artist would have been able to convey their personal relationship with place in their work. This process is a means of asking 'how' – how does place fit into each artist's work, how is place addressed, how are they influenced by place. The conversational process not only addresses the question of 'how' but also 'why' – why is place a concern, why do individuals

relate to certain places and not others, why is place a re-occurring theme in their work? Conversation is also a method to discover something new – not only about each other, but about one's self.

The following chapter addresses some of the concerns Sue Marks expressed during the Oakland conversation. She asked, how could a conversation be continued over distance of both time and space; and could we continue the conversation without waiting months to meet again?

THE ART OF QUESTIONING

In order to address how one might carry on a conversation over time and space, the project turned to cyberspace. Five initial questions were created during the development of the initial aims and objectives for the thesis. Expanding the process of questioning arose out of the desire to continue the conversation between actual physical meetings. The development of the questions list also served as a vehicle to both focus on a specific format for discussion and to expand the realm of discussion. It was a natural process for expansive thinking – the examination of one question led to the development of additional questions that extend from the initial query. The process of distributing, reacting to and contributing to the list was not unlike an actual conversation. I sent out to the participants, via email, the initial five questions and some additional questions that I had developed during my initial literary review. I also noted for the group that some of the preliminary questions might seem quite rudimentary, but for the sake of a thorough investigation, such questions did need to be listed.

When I received the first response, from Shelly Willis, I distributed her questions to the remaining participants. With each submission, I disseminated the new contributions to the group. Participants were free to make as many submissions of questions as they liked. The participants were also instructed that upon receiving the questions, they were not responsible for trying to

develop any answers, but were asked to simply read the questions and to use that information as an impetus for developing additional questions. At times, some participants would use questions they received as a point of response, weaving their questions (usually in a different font or format) into the original text that they received and returning the entire document back to me. One participant was somewhat confused by the process and was compelled to try and answer some of the questions despite the original instructions. Despite several emails to try and re-explain the proposed process, it took several responses before she realised the goal was not to find answers, but to develop a platform for investigation and for each participant to reveal their own individual style and approach to the topic. Project participant Seyed Alavi, uses the process of developing questions as both a self-examination method as well as a method of artmaking. His two lists of questions were extensive. He approached the development of his questions was created with the same method he would use in developing an art project. His personal philosophy is that all questioning must begin with the self and then expand from that core point, similar to the concentric circles a drop of water makes on the surface of a still pond, moving outward and expanding in scope. Some artists made lists while others reflected back on previous projects and questions that developed during the production of those projects. The questions also offered insight on each authors' point of influence. Some participants with more politically based work tended to ask more political questions. Others who came for a more curatorial perspective, tended to write questions that reflect on the

relationship to community or audience. The process of developing these questions not only served as a means for stimulating thought about the relationship between place and public art, but also proved a valuable method for all the participants to better understand each other and our individual perspectives on the topic.

I. The Original Questions

The lists of questions are presented in the order in which they were developed and received. The first list includes the original correspondence that was distributed by the author and the additional questions contributed by the first respondent (in italics) which were woven into the initial text.

1. The original proposal questions:

What defines place-specificity?

How does “place” differ from “site”?

What are the influences of place on the development of a public art piece?

How are the social and historical aspects of a place incorporated in public art work?

What effect does place-specificity have on the integration of public art into a community?

2. Project specific questions (developing a public art piece for London/Oakland):

Do we need to do a real project to test our theories or is a theoretical project enough?

What are the reasons for choosing the place we will work within?

How did the reasons for choosing the place we will work within develop or change during the process of doing the project? For example did we let the dynamics of the place lead the project development? Was the project unaffected by our immersion into the place?

What aspects of the plan change when the city is changed?

What aspects of the plan change when the people (and their needs) from the community change?

What unique topographical, architectural, landscape, other built environment and cultural conditions affect the project?

What areas of the process stay the same?

Is there a way to expand and adapt the process on a larger scale - from a single place to an entire city? What are the conditions that make this possible/not possible?

3. Addition questions and concerns (a growing, changing, living list)

What are the elements that make up a "place"?

What are the elements that make up a neighborhood, a community, a city?

How are these related/not related to place?

Is it important for the community that is living/working in a place to be integral to the work - either as an audience or participant or inspiration?

How does one evaluate a place-specific work?

Why is it important to evaluate our work?

What defines a “successful” place-specific work?

How is the audience determined?

Is the question: who are we doing this for and why? Always important in place specific work?

Why are we concerned/not concerned about an audience?

Should the selection of an audience be determined before the place? Or what comes first place or audience? Or should the place drive the project or should the audience drive the project? Why?

How are goals, aims, and/or objectives developed for a project?

Why are we choosing to do this type of work? Is there a better way to accomplish what we are trying to accomplish? I hate when we have a "cool" idea, but don't consider if it is the best format to accomplish the goal or worse we don't have a goal - just the cool idea.

How responsible is the artist to the community/place s/he is working in?

Why place-specific verses another form of public art?

Is it important for an artist to always consider place when venturing into the discipline of public art? If not, why not?

To what degree is community involvement important in the creation of a place-specific work?

How does community involvement enhance and/or dilute a public art work?

What are some of the motivations for an artist to create place-specific work?

Who are we (artists, curators, educators) really doing this work for?

Why do we view this type of work as important (valuable, socially redeeming, etc.)?

Why is there so much “bad” public art out there (Is it just me? What makes the work “bad”?)?

What role/responsibility does education (educational institutions, museums) take in the overall subject?

What effect has funding had on the process of developing place-specific work?

How important is it to develop interdisciplinary relationships (involvement of planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects for the success of a place-specific artwork?)

How has the US capitalist driven economy effected what themes, formats, and design of place-specific work? Do these same issues occur in the socialist/capitalist hybrid economy of the UK? *This is a huge question --*

II. Questions from Seyed Alavi (Part 1)

The next list of questions was received from Seyed Alavi. As previously noted, Alavi uses the questioning process in a very detailed and self-reflective

manner. His lists were quite extensive and a few of the other participants found the sheer volume somewhat daunting.

When/why should I ask questions?

What do I hope to achieve with my questions?

How should I ask my questions?

Where should I start? What question should I ask?

What question should I ask first, since everything is so intricately interconnected?

What question could I ask that could go beyond the surface appearance of any problem and expose the inner multi-layered complexity?

Where should I start my questions from, since the social system outside of me, my role as a human being, and the entire practice of academic/ "intellectual" learning, education and even questioning are questionable themselves?

What system could I follow that would question my questions?

Are my questions genuine, or only an expression of some intellectual trend, and/or current cultural fashion?

How could I ask any questions, that does not get co-opted and simply becomes part of the larger trend?

What question could I ask that is beyond the current fashion, taste and trends?

How are my questions effected by my time, location, culture, language,?

How could I ask any questions that simultaneously challenge any prior assumptions?

Who is to answer these questions, if the system at large is questionable?

How am I to even think and search for answers, since I don't even know the correct way of thinking?

How could I look for a correct answer, since I haven't been taught how to find and discover truth?

What is true thinking, since I know it's not about deciding what to eat for dinner, what movie to see, or what clothes to wear?

How could I even use my mind beyond its formed parameters?

What question would I ask, "if there is no one there to hear it"?

Should my questions first and foremost concern me?

Should I just ignore questions like who am I? Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going to?, for the time being and assume that their answer doesn't effect my other questions?

What do I believe in? what is the basic foundation that informs my actions, thoughts, behavior, likes, dislikes, etc...?

What informs my direction and sets my destination?

How does all this relate to the arts?

Is there a definition for the arts beyond the imposed limitations of cultural boundaries and social class structures?

What does it exactly mean to say that I am an artist?

How does art define my being?

Is my being, in a sense, limited by my "identity" as an artist?

How does my culture defines being?

Is my being my ego? Is my identity as an artist my ego?

What is the exact relation/ connection between my being and my ego?

Does the current art system support my development as a being?

What is my identity in the larger life continuum?

What would I call myself if I had to make out a new word?

Why is there so much emphasis in the arts on constantly trying to come up with something "New"?

Does this "newness" has a meaning that is beyond just the formal and superficial packaging?

Are we currently teaching our art students the complexity of reality, and how to use the arts to come closer to the discovery of our own uniqueness?

Are we teaching them the ways of scientist and explorer; discovering new realities and uncharted territories?

Why haven't we experience similar isms such as; "avant-garde" "modernism", "minimalism", "conceptualism", "post modernism", etc.... in the field of science?

Why is it that we have forgotten about meaning/ content, and instead use words and vocabulary that only look profound and meaningful?

What is the relationship between meaning and language/naming?

Do definitions and the process of defining brings us closer to the truth and meaning of a thing?

What is the role, function and meaning of the arts?

Who am I doing my art for?

How is public art different from the other arts?

Is there a separate role and vision for public art? What is this role?

What is a community? Why do we have societies? What is our common unity?

Should I understand the current state of the arts as representative of our current cultural qualities and intellectual standards?

How did we ever get here? After all these years of so called human progress, is this where we have ended up?

Why is the current state of the art for the most part so ugly- dumb, flat, degrading and stupid?

Have we given up pursuing the larger questions of life?

Could art ever step outside of the influence of money/ power?

Who/ what has determined this direction and state of affairs?

Has anything really changed in our societies, since the days that we gathered around the fire to keep warm?

For whom am I doing my art and why?

Why am I interested in doing public art?

What makes an artwork public?

Could an artwork in a museum be considered public art?

Is the notion of public art a new concept?

Does the public/viewer influence the making of the artwork? How?

Does the site/ location influence the making of the artwork? How?

What makes an artwork site-specific?

What is a community based public art work and how is that different from other types of public art?

How does our consumer based society inform the creation, presentation, viewing, etc.... of public art and art in general?

How do we measure the success of an artwork?

Does the public and/or private taste measure an artwork's success?

Should we have a different system for measuring the success of public art?

Is it good art because it's political, social, environmental, multi-cultural, conceptual, sensational, minimal, etc.....?

What does it mean to create artworks that are available and accessible to the public at large?

Does the process of public art sacrifice the artist's vision?

What is an artist's vision and so what if it would need to be changed?

What is the role of an artist in doing public art?

What makes a work in/with/for/by the public into a public art piece? Is it really art if it appears in public?

What makes me a public artist; education, training, experience, passion, my white coat,....?

Should there be a distinction between art and life?

If so, what separates public art/art from life?

What would happen to the commodification of the arts, if art became life?

What is art then, if art is life? and what is life?

If art and life become one, how could we understand art? /what could it be compared with?

Could art be compared to law, philosophy, business, science, manufacturing,...?

What does it mean to be cultured? How does art provide culture?

How does being cultured make me a better human being?

What "culture" should I choose; high/low, American/ European etc...?

How does "being cultured" differs from gaining social status?

What constitutes high or low "culture"?

Is there such a thing as art that is beyond it's costumes and clothes that it has put on at different times, and for various places?

III. Terri Cohn's Responses and Thoughts

Terri Cohn sent her contributions in a combination of reflective correspondence, questions and quotes. The original format of her contributions has been preserved here to retain the context within which her questions were developed.

Dear Cameron,

I was reading a book I like very much, 'Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context and Controversy', ed. by Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster, and wanted to share a few thoughts that came up (in an essay

by Patricia Phillips) that I think pertain to your project. They are as follows, with my questions following in italics: "...the private is a human condition--but the public is invented—and re-created by each generation." (p.296) *How do we define this generation's incarnation of "public"?* "Clearly, public art is not public just because it is out of doors, or in some identifiable civic space, or because it is something that almost everyone can apprehend; it is public because it is a manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis. It is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address, and not because of its accessibility or volume of viewers." (p.297)

"If the 'public' in public art is construed not as the audience for the art but as the body of ideas and subjects that artists choose to concentrate on, then public art cannot be examined for its broadness of communication, for its popular reception, for its sensitive siting. A temporal public art may not offer broad proclamations; it may stir controversy and rage; it may cause confusion; it may occur in nontraditional, marginal, and private places. In such an art the conceptual takes precedence over the more obvious circumstantial."(p.298) *What body of ideas or subjects do I want to concentrate on?*

My favorite part of Phillips' chapter was her discussion of public art being about the idea of "the commons"--the physical configuration and mental landscape of American public life (of course of any country's life). "The commons was frequently a planned but sometimes a spontaneously arranged open space in American towns, but its lasting significance in cultural history is not so much the place it once held in the morphology of the city as the idea it became for the enactment and refreshment of public life--its dynamic, often conflicting expressions...." (p.298, 299) She goes on to talk about how the idea of the commons philosophically allows the collage of private interests that constitutes all communities to articulate, not diminish, the dialectic between common purpose and individual free wills. *What dialogue do I want to engage in on "the commons?"*

I think this type of approach is in line with what you like so much about Seyed's form of questioning, and I agree, after much thought and more reading, that it is imperative with this new mode of artistic consideration. I hope this provides some more material. Let me know what you think.

In a follow-up email, Cohn sent a list of questions that were developed in response to Alavi's first list of questions.

Who am I doing my art for?

Is there a separate role and vision for public art? What is this role?

For whom am I doing my art and why?

Why am I interested in doing public art?

Does the public/viewer influence the making of the artwork? How?

Does the site/ location influence the making of the artwork? How?

What makes an artwork site-specific?

How do we measure the success of an artwork?

What does it mean to create artworks that are available and accessible to the public at large?

What is the role of an artist in doing public art?

Should there be a distinction between art and life?

If not, what joins public art/art and life?

IV. Questions from Jane Trowell (member of PLATFORM)

Prior to the arrival of the American artists, I met with the PLATFORM members on three occasions over a four month period. PLATFORM is a group that works as a collective and as individual members. The three core members, Jane Trowell, Dan Gretton, and James Marriott were all interested in participating in this project; however, due to other projects in progress and previous commitments not all of the members were able to participate in every aspect of this project. Jane Trowell was the member who was able to

participate at each stage and served as the primary connection to the PLATFORM team. During the development on the questions, James Marriott was unable to participate, though he did have the opportunity to review the complete compilation of questions prior to meeting the American artists. Trowell submitted the following questions after receiving Seyed Alavi's first submission.

Do we believe that no place can be like any other, although it may share many characteristics and histories with many other places ?

If we believe this, how does this affect our behaviour when thinking about or acting in that place ?

If we don't believe this, how does this affect our behaviour... ?

Do we believe that each place elicits multiple claims of ownership ?

Do we ourselves create hierarchies of deserved ownership ?

Do I believe I have as much right as you or them to talk about/act in this place ?

When do I/don't I ?

Is any place ever a tabula rasa, a blank canvas ? If so under what conditions ?

If not, why not ?

Am I prepared to take the risk that by acting in this place - whether with or without thinking about 'ownership' - my work may be rejected, neglected or destroyed ? What does this mean ?

Am I prepared to risk that even with a great deal of conversation, collaboration and care, the work could be rejected, neglected or destroyed?

Can I accept failure and rejection ?

Do I think I am 'doing good' in this place ?

To whom ? On behalf of whom ? In whose name ? (Giroux)

Do I mean to return ?

How temporary am I ?

How temporary is my work here ?

What do I believe about other people's creativity ?

What is the measure of success for a project ? Is there a constant ?

Who decides how a project should evolve and when it should end ?

What influence does economics have on such projects ?

What are the tensions between the timescales of money and the timescales of a project ?

Do we really like the term public art ?

When is it time to leave ?

More crucially, how do you say hello ?

Milan Kundera says that the patterns are set in the first week of a relationship...

V. *Questions from Seyed Alavi (Part 2)*

What does it mean to communicate?

What is the purpose of communication?

What are the conditions for having communication?

What are the differences and similarities between communication and expression?

Is it necessary for an expression to be understood by others?

Is there a difference between expression and self-expression?

What is self-expression?

What is the definition of self? Is it the ego? How do we separate the two?

How do we distinguish between a self/ego-expression, and a self-expression that is an extension of a larger archetypal self?

How do we evaluate communication through the arts?

How do we feel about an artwork that communicates very clearly and precisely, versus one that we can not relate to in any way?

When does a work of art become graphic/didactic/ literal?

Why do we think? How do we think?/ what is thinking?

What is the difference between my thinking of what to have for lunch and thinking about the meaning of life?

How is thinking related to the process of understanding, and gaining knowledge?

Do we think in order to know/ discover the truth? What is the truth?- Does truth depend on time and space?

What is knowing/ knowledge? How do we gain knowledge?

What is the relationship between knowledge and information?

What is the difference between thinking and the processing of information?

Does knowing mean having information, or having knowledge?

How much of what we "know" is simply information?

How does language relate to the process of gaining knowledge?

What is language?

What is the relationship between meaning and words/ language?

How do we/ can we understand the meaning of more abstract concepts, such as pain, joy, death, god,.... through words?

What is the relationship between definition and meaning?

What are the conditions for establishing communication?

What is visual literacy?

Is our culture a visual culture? Is it visually literate?

What is the relationship between message and meaning? Is getting the message the same as understanding the meaning?

So what if we don't understand the meaning and only get the message?

How does a culture with a focus more on the message than the meaning influence the making and viewing of the arts?

How does advertising, and politics play with this concept of "message"?

What is the relationship between message, image and meaning?

Why do we accept something as good, only if it looks good?

Is a written word Asian, if it looks Asian? Is a spoken word English, if it sounds English? Is it art, if it looks like art?

Are these discrepancies (between the look, and the content, the message and the meaning) natural or cultural?

How does the cultural context influence the making/viewing of the arts?

How does our culture view and value the arts?

What influences the making of cultural values (how does this affect the arts)?

Who decides/ chooses the cultural values?

How does our culture define art?

Is art culturally specific?

Can art reach beyond it's cultural context?

What informs the making of culture?

How do we define culture?

How does art inform culture?

What is high and low culture?

What is the relationship between culture and class?

What is it to be cultured?

What is the definition of a sub-culture? and how does/ could a sub-culture emerge to become the (main) culture?

How does art connect cultures?

Why should we be concerned with intercultural communication?

How do we view, and understand the art from another culture? What tools/ means do/should we use to approach these art forms?

How do we evaluate/ understand the art from this culture? Do/should we apply the same value system to the arts from other cultures?

How does the consumer culture view/ influence the arts?

Is consumerism a new development in human history, or is it a natural human tendency?

Is art about making connections?

Is that a need to be able to connect with others?

Why do we want to connect with others?

Why do I do art?

Is art about discovering (who I am)?

What do I hope that my art could do in/ for/ with others?

Does art have a personal/private side and a separate public side?

What is a personal/private art, and what is a formal/ public art?

When does personal becomes formal?

How do we define individuality (individual voice) in the arts?

Why is there so much focus on the individuality/ ego of the artist in our culture?

How do/ could we identify self, amidst all the cultural, educational, social and family influences?

When is an artwork an individual/ egotistical expression and when is it a large human/ individual expression?

What is the relation between my creative self and my being, i.e. is my creative self my heart, my mind, my body,...?

What is the relation between my self, and that which is beyond/ outside/ above my self?

How could an artwork connect with diverse audience?

How do we read an artwork?

What are the reflective and narrative qualities of an artwork?

How is an artwork reflective of it's culture, audience, maker,...?

What informs our (creative) decision making process?

What values do we follow in composing/ selecting and editing an artwork?

Is an artwork complete without it's viewer?

How do we choose our medium of expression?

How does the public informs the making of an artwork?

What is imagination?

What is creativity?

What is inspiration?

What inspires creativity in us?

How is a creative space, idea, person, movie, store, etc.... different?

Is something that is creative, inspirational and vise versa?

How does a work/ an idea inspire/ motivate us?

What does it mean to be inspired/ motivated?

How do we recognize creativity?

What answers are we looking for in creation, the act of creation?

What is creativity the vehicle for?

Is creativity cultured or nurtured? When does creativity start in a child?

Is creativity imperative to communication? Is it imperative to development? Why?

What is the relationship between emotions and creativity? i.e. Is something that evokes emotions, creative and vise versa?

What makes art compelling? or when is art compelling?

When is a space, an object, etc... emotionally charged?

What is beauty? Is "beauty in the eye of beholder"?

Are there any common definitions of beauty that are beyond personal, social, historical and cultural contexts?

How could something personal be/become universal?

When do we consider a work/ an idea complete?

How do we value/ evaluate a work/ an idea?

Does a work/ an idea need to end with a product to be considered complete?

Why should we ask questions?

Why is it important to constantly search for who, why, what, where I am/ what it means to be human? (How) Does art help in this process?

What is meant by inclusive, accessible, and approachable artwork? How could an artwork accommodate all these qualities, i.e. in it's process of making, visual composition, conceptual structure, etc...?

What is meaning? Does everything have meaning? How do we access it?

When is language not enough to communicate about ourselves to the outside world?

How does the process of naming/ defining influence our view of the particular thing that is being named and the larger reality as a whole?

Can we simultaneously be aware of the overall unity, and the arbitrary separation that is caused by the process of naming/ defining?

Is reality unified, or a collection of separate entities?

Where do we choose to draw the line between two items, in order to separate/ name them? In a rainbow where does yellow becomes red?

Why do we have this process of naming anyway?

Do we have names in order to be able to identify?

What is the relationship between an identity and a name? i.e. Is the identity summarised in the name? Is "political art" political and "aesthetic art" not political?

Where do we draw the line between the two?

What is "political art"? Does it include the landscape painting on the wall?

How do we determine that a work of art is political, social, ethnic, classical, contemporary, modern, folk, craft, outsider, visionary, etc...?

Is there art for art sake?

Is there such a thing as art purely for aesthetic value?

What is the purpose in expressing oneself?

What is the purpose in communicating to one another?

What are some of the reason for communication, i.e. physical need, emotional need, exchange of information,....?

What is the reason for communication through the arts?

What is the intention for being exposed to the arts from different cultures? Is it to expand my understanding of that culture? Why? What do I hope to achieve/ gain with this understanding? How could this exposure/ understanding help me as a unique individual that I am (beyond my social, political and cultural form/ norm) towards my own set of goals and destinations?

Is this understanding/exposure, perhaps to increase my "tolerance" of our differences?

Is it to practice an open mind? What is the view of my social/ political/ cultural/ educational systems on this matter?

Do we naturally tend to reject differences, or is it a learned/cultured process?

Is prejudism, racism, patriotism, etc.... nurtured or cultured?

Am I indifferent towards how others might talk, behave, dress, eat, etc....? Do I want to control others? Do I want to influence others? Do I want to teach others? How does all this influence my artmaking? i.e. Do I want to control, influence, and/or teach others through my artwork?

How does my art reflect my personal, social, political, and cultural background and context?

How do we identify a cultural expression? Do we know all the complex intricacies that make up a culture in order to be able to identify its expression?

Why do we often simplify the complexity of a cultural expression into a superficial stereotypical image of that culture? Is this an attitude that is nurtured in us, or is it the bi-product of consumer mentality?

Given the current cultural context in the United States, with its diverse socio-cultural communities, how do we identify and exhibit a specific cultural expression?

As curators and/or educators, do we choose/ identify a cultural expression based on; - the artist's place of birth -the (cultural) name of the artist, - the recognizable cultural themes, forms and/or symbols, etc...?

Why do we need to designate a separate category for "others"?

How do we feel if an artist from culture (A) uses themes/ forms/ symbols, etc.... from culture (B)? For example; how do we feel about an all white-American artist painting African-American portrait in the style of self-taught folk artists? and vice versa, meaning, how do we feel about an African-American artist painting portrait of all white-American figures in the "Western" style?

VI. Questions from Dan Gretton (member of PLATFORM)

QUESTIONS ABOUT PLACE IN PUBLIC ART FOR CAMERON CARTIERE

Rather than write a series of abstracted questions, (which I found rather daunting as I told you when we met the other week!) what follows here is a series of reflections/ notes on various PLATFORM areas of enquiry over the last 10 years or so of working in public spaces. Out of these come certain, contextualised enquiries that I hope are useful.

1. The 'Still Waters' project (on London's lost rivers) and several others have been strongly focused on the need for us, and our 'audience' to Re-imagine the Place that we, and they, are walking through. Walking down a rushing central London street and showing people an image of the river that they are now walking over, that has been (almost) lost to memory, concreted over.

- But is it ever possible for the place that was there before to be completely eradicated? (in an urban context)
- How is it possible for us to access the traces of past place without the dead hand of nostalgia creeping in?

Perhaps if the work done is predicated not only on a re-imagining of this place in the past but also an understanding of the Temporariness of the 'Permanent' City? i.e. looking forward as much as backward.

As Shelley put it much better...

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert.... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings,
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

So for us, at the moment in our work with corporations in the financial district of London, it is very important to emphasise that these vast office blocks and marble lobbies are here only for a blip in time. That in a matter of only a few generations grass and weeds will have reclaimed this marshy site.

2. A whole other area of enquiry has related to how it is possible (or not) to Imaginatively Connect people in an urban space like London with those in other countries who are supplying, growing, manufacturing what Londoners consume?

At the end of the 'Homeland' project, which attempted to de-construct the process of light (in the forms of copper, light bulb and electricity) coming into London, we asked Londoners:

What, if any, connection do you feel to the miners of Neves-Corvo who mine the copper in the electric cables you use here? Or to the Hungarians who manufacture many of the light bulbs you use? (of course for the vast majority of people the answer was "none" - we are (mostly) completely defeated by the complexity and enormity of international trade to feel such connection)

But some years later we came across a remarkable project called 'Exchange Values: Images of Invisible Lives' by the artist Shelley Sacks, and she managed a stronger sense of linkage - tracing the exact origin of Bananas sold in English supermarkets back to their growers in the windward Islands, And she then did a whole series of interviews with these farmers. Fantastic project all c. Place and how it might be possible to link consumers and producers.

3. The 'Homeland' project also was rich in terms of investigating very personal explorations of place in terms of the concept of 'home'. These were some of the questions we asked people (again working in the street space - but this time in the back of a long lorry with a huge billboard on the side):

- Is there a place you love above any other? Is this your home?
- When you think of 'home' what do you see, hear, taste or smell?
- How much is your home built of memories?
- Where are you most at home? In your street? Your town? Your region?
Your country? Your continent?
- Where do you feel you stop belonging?
- How often do you think about the future of the place you call 'home'?
- Where would you like to be buried or cremated? Is this your home?

Following these questions we took people on a whole journey that involved drawing a representation of the time and/or place in their lives where they had felt the strongest sense of belonging - the results were moving and often extraordinary.

4. Finally, some more questions, both sets from PLATFORM postcards and focused on place again. The first set are designed to be used with people who work in the financial quarter of the City of London. On one side of the

postcard is a representation of the buried River Walbrook (that flows right under the Bank of England) on the other these questions:

- What blossoms in the City?
- Where can you breathe in the City?
- Who gets burnt in the City?
- What is the wisdom of the City?
- Where does power lie in the City?
- What threatens the City?
- **WHAT GETS BURIED IN THE CITY?**

And the last questions were from a card that James designed in 1990 focused on how connected (or not) people felt in the place they inhabited:

- Where does your rubbish go?
- How long is the growing season where you live?
- What were the primary subsistence techniques of the cultures that lived in your area before you?
- From where you are reading this, point North.
- How many people live next door to you? What are their names?
- What percentage of the population in your area live below the poverty line?
- Who are the major land owners in your area?
- Were the stars out last night?

VII. *Questioning as a Process*

The goal of developing this extensive list of questions was not to find specific answers for the questions posed. The aim was to develop a method of communication that would inspire expanded thought and allow the participants to observe the different approaches and perspectives each member of the group brought to the project. During our conversations in London, the questions served as a starting point for beginning our first discussion. Writing, receiving, and reading the series of questions was an experience we shared and we began our conversation on that common ground.

This compiled list of questions could serve as a practicum for engagement and reflection when approaching a place-specific public art project. These questions are a point of departure for artists to think about their own work and their own relationship to place.

A QUESTION OF PLACE

What Makes a Space a Place?

Within the lexicon of public art, terms such as site, space and place are often used interchangeably. This indiscriminate interchange can cause confusion and can be detrimental to understanding the distinct nature of both site-specific and place-specific work. Equally confusing is how new genre public art has also been referred to as community based public art, new public art, intervention, and activist art. The research sought to untangle this mixture of terminology to provide a more cohesive foundation from which to explore the role of place-specificity in new genre public art. This section of the thesis will examine various theoretical perspectives regarding place, which are germane to the parameters of this investigation. From this foundation, the thesis then develops a working definition for place-specific art. Finally, this sphere of the research explores the categorisation of new genre as a discipline within public art practice.

At the onset, I wanted to explore the possibility of a common definition of place. This seemingly straightforward aim was actually quite a complex endeavour, as place is not merely the categorisation of a specific kind of space, but also a function of personal perspective and individual relationship to space. If each individual is unique, could a common definition of place be developed? Open Webster's Dictionary to the word 'place,' and twenty interpretations are provided ranging from physical location "3. space; room"

or “13. the customary, proper, or natural position, time, or character” to social order, such as “15. an office; employment; position” (Webster 1987, pp. 1086-87). By focusing the field of investigation on physical location, six of the provided explanations can be eliminated. Yet, despite the excepted definitions of the remaining fourteen variations on place, the question still remains – what? What position? What character? What space? Or more precisely; what makes a space a place?

In addition to unravelling the various definitions of place, the research also had to determine from which disciplinary perspective to pursue a course of inquiry. From a theoretical position, there are a variety of disciplines available including sociology, anthropology, architecture, ethnography, geography, and phenomenology. An architectural inquiry could produce an intriguing range of relational topics from gender studies to urban planning. However, I am not an architect or architectural historian and the multiplicity of perspectives within architectural studies and the phenomenon of place are beyond the scope of this specific research. Additionally, extensive anthropological and sociological debates are beyond my discipline. Given my curatorial background and the nature of new genre public art (both of which are rooted in engagement), the research pursued a more humanist geographical¹⁰ approach towards an understanding of place. Humanist geography and new genre public art can be viewed as complementary disciplines. Practitioners within each discipline

¹⁰ Humanist geography is also referred to as human geography, cultural geography, and anthropological geography.

often explore similar cultural issues such as space and place, social structure and community, personal and group identity, globalization and localism, nature and home. Many public artists (including the project participants) and humanist geographers utilise a wide range of similar perspectives and methodologies including ethnography, ecocriticism, and phenomenology.

As a framework for the beginning of this inquiry, the physicality of place is explored through the relationship of internal places and external spaces. These categories are not designed to be philosophical definitions of place. Rather they are a useful means to delineate variations of place within the context of this study, as they lend themselves to some of the modes of place-specific art practice that emerged from the conversations and interviews with the artists in the project. The first theoretical perspective examines an individual's relationship to place through the body, both on a psychological plane (internal place) as well as a physical one (external space). The second realm of investigation concerns more conceptual aspects of place such as topophilia, the phenomenology of place and the virtual existence of place created by dreams and memories. The physical relationships between place and site, topography, and public art are explored later in this chapter under the section *The Further Expanded Field*.

While each arena of place possesses unique characteristics, there are no concrete boundaries between definitions and overlapping physical, analytical,

cultural, and emotional references and connections are pervasive in each category.

I. *Internal Places / External Spaces*

Philosophers throughout time have wrestled with the concept of place, trying to define the nature and parameters of our spatial existence. The ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, argued that humans have a fundamental need to seek out this definition in order to comprehend our relationship to the sheer vastness of the universe (Casey). While these philosophers' understanding of the universe had little to do with contemporary concepts such as light speed, distant galaxies, or black holes: their philosophy was based on the vastness of time and the fundamental questions of 'how' and 'why' we exist in any moment of time.

It is a question of finding our place in the universe. In order to find this place, some philosophers such as Kant began with the basic physical relationship of the body to the space it occupies. Kant discussed the connection between the human body and place in his 1768 essay, *Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Regions in Space*. In this essay, Kant explained the body's role in the implementation of things in regions by providing these things with a directionality they would lack if they were only considered as occupying positions relative to each other.

“...the position of places – that is to say, any coherent clustering of places in a given cosmic region – depends for its directedness on its relation to our own double-sided body. Because of the body’s dual, right/left insinuation into the place-world, our knowledge of the pattern of this world is rendered ‘ordinary,’ that is to say, unreflective, spontaneous, and reliable. Positions depend on regions, but regions and the places they situate depend on the bodies for their orientedness.” (Casey 1997, p.205)

Without the relation to the body, objects would have no orientation. They would lack fundamental direction such as up and down, right and left, front and back. This set of paired terms describe the three dimensions of space, and according to the philosopher Edward Casey,

“...this dimensionality follows from the directionality of the body – head and feet, right and left hands, chest and back. It is because the body is already experienced as bifurcated that humans can perceive sensible objects placed and oriented into areas that mirror this bifurcation. Things are not oriented in and of themselves, but require human intervention to become oriented. This action is not solely based within a cerebral realm, but in direct relation to the physical body.”(1997, p.209)

Utilising this theory, “the ordering of regions – and thus of the places located in them – is due to the ordering already operative in our directed and directive bodies.”(p. 209) This perspective is at the core of Casey’s modification of Kant’s original series of terms: Point – Position – Place – Region – Space; “in such a way that body now becomes the critical middle term, the mediatrix between place and region, position and space: Position – Place – *Body* – Region – Space.”(p.209)

Kant’s concept of the bilaterality of the human body and Casey’s perspective of the body as the hinge between position and space, have their foundation in the 17th century concept of *simple location*. This is the idea that “whatever is in space is *simpliciter* in some definite portion of space” so in simple location “every material body (including the human body) is considered to exist in strict isolation from every other body.”(1997, p.211) This leads to the notion of individual interpretation of and orientation in place. In other words, if each body exists in isolation (separate) from every other body, then each body is having its own experience. During the interviews I conducted at the Headlands Center for the Arts in the course of this research, artist Robin Lasser noted that one of the essential means for her to perceive a place was through her body. Her interpretation of place is often oriented through what she “takes in through the body” including sounds and smells.¹¹

¹¹ See DVD 5, *What Makes a Space a Place?*

In trying to define the body's place in space, it is essential to comprehend that the body's relationship to place exists on several levels including the physical, as in the case of simple location and physical isolation. In addition to the physical is the cerebral, incorporating the analytical and conceptual relationships to space, as well as individual perception and perspective in relationship to other objects.¹² Yet, place is not defined merely by one's physical and psychological relationship to space. Place is also a compilation of an individual's cultural and emotional connection to a particular space. While exploration of the physical and analytical need for humans to develop a relationship to space helps to define the power and necessity of place, it is the cultural and emotional need that forms the foundation for understanding what creates a *sense of place*.

“We do not live in space. Instead, we live in places. So it behoves us to understand what such place-bound and place-specific living consists in. However lost we may become by gliding rapidly between places, and however much we may prefer to think of what happens in a place rather than of place itself, we are tied to place undetachably and without reprieve” (Casey 1993, preface xiii).

¹² A.N. Whitehead argued this position in his pivotal work, *Science and the Modern World*. “You are *in a certain place* perceiving things. Your perception takes place where you are, and is entirely dependent on how your body is functioning. But this functioning of the body *in one place*, exhibits for your cognisance an aspect of the distant environment, fading away into the general knowledge that there are things beyond. If this cognisance conveys knowledge of a transcendent world, it must be because the event which is the bodily life unifies in itself aspects of the universe.”(1953, p.213)

Our emotional and sometimes idealistic attachments create values for aspects of place through our personal memories and associations. Yi-Fu Tuan, a geographer who is often referred to as one of the founders of humanist geography, refers to such attachments to place as *topophilia*, or love of a place.¹³ Tuan defines topophilia (1977, p.17) as the relations, perceptions, attitudes, values and world view that effectively bond people to place. Each individual relates to the environment around them in varying ways, with differing intensity, and these bonds and connections derive from different sources. Yet, at the most basic level, we learn to love what has become familiar. This phenomenology of place can be expanded to a cultural level when the attitudes, views, and values become a collection of shared social references and beliefs. Moving out from the individual to the community, which functions as an emotional and analytical collective, value can be placed on specific locations that hold significance for groups of people. An example would be a 'sacred site,' often centrally located within the community where religious and cultural rites occur. Or within nomadic communities, sacred sites often define territories or place-markers for quests or journeys. In a modern, Western context, the sacred site could be likened to the town-square or central plaza. Even vast enclosed shopping malls such as Bluewater, which are often viewed as non-places, could hold significance as places for specific groups such as teenagers or senior citizen walking groups who often utilise such

¹³ It should be noted that the literary review revealed that the majority of works focused on the positive aspects of place. Additionally, all of the project participants viewed the concept of place in a positive light. One trajectory for additional future research could be an exploration of the negative aspects of place, particularly related to memory and history.

locations primarily for social gatherings. When project participant, Seyed Alavi, produced the place-specific public artwork, *Where is Fairfield?* (1995), he designed part of the piece to occur at the local shopping mall because the high school students he was working with felt that the mall was one of the most important places in Fairfield. The Mall of the Americas, outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota has its own theme park and was one of the first shopping malls in the USA to have a senior citizen group regularly utilise the interior of the mall for walking. Whether nomadic or rooted, the cultural and social significance subscribed to any given place becomes part of the foundation for the structure of a community.

Radiating out from the individual, through community, into greater society, the concepts of shared values and beliefs hold true for defining place. History, from the individual to the shared, is also a significant indicator of place. Locations such as Gettysburg, Normandy, or Hastings hold significance not just as historic battlefields but also as social and cultural markers.¹⁴ These *places* were turning points in individual's lives as well as the greater societies involved. The events associated with these locations, marked the lives of everyone affected by those events, whether they were physically at the location or not. Lives can even be affected whether they were even born during the time of the event or not – for as history has indicated, a single event can influence the world in perpetuity. Such events not only have the potential

to influence our sense of place, but our identities as well. As geographer John Short notes,

“Place is space that is occupied. The identity of self, group and nation is bound up with ideas and representations of particular space(s).... The more detailed the definitions of identity, the more they are associated with particular places. The difference between us and them is often based on location. What makes it *there* is them and what makes it *here* is us.” (2001, p.16)

So, just as such events mark individuals and cultures, they also mark individual sites, thus creating places.

Our society is filled with references to place and our connection to specific localities. A primary connection is often one of mythical proportions – home. Home is the first place, the space that forms the foundation for an individual’s social and cultural understanding and connection to place. Universally, home is associated with comfort, nourishment, protection, stability, and guidance. Even if an individual comes from a violent or dysfunctional household, the *ideal* of home – of what home *should* be, remains the same. Home is the beginning, the starting point from which we venture forth into the world. To lack this primal place is to be homeless, not just in the literal sense of lacking

¹⁴ Another aspect of such places is tourism and Lucy Lippard’s *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* provides an in-depth exploration of tourism and the consumption of place.

a permanent sheltering building but also as being without any effectual means of orientation in a complex and disconcerting world.

According to philosopher Gaston Bachelard, we experience places (particularly intimate places) through daydreams and through memories of our first home. It is through our relationship to those memories; often cast in the realm of daydreaming, that all future places are affected. According to Bachelard,

“We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original values as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.”(1994, p.6)

The first house (home, dwelling) of a child is their first cosmos, their first universe and their foundation for experiencing all other places. As such, each of us will have our own unique interpretation of space as dictated by individual versions of home, personalised memory of experience, and the continually evolving, daily compilation of additional experiences and dreams. Home as a core theme of place, is also addressed by Tuan. In an examination

of time in experiential space, Tuan utilised the analogy of an office worker leaving work at the end of the day to illustrate one connection to home.

“At the end of the day the office worker puts on his coat and prepares to return home. Home is now in his future in the sense that it takes time to get there, but he is not likely to feel that the return journey is a forward movement in time. He returns – tracing his steps back in space and going back in time – to the familiar haven of the home. Familiarity is a characteristic of the past. The home provides an image of the past. Moreover in an ideal sense home lies at the center of one’s life and center connotes origin and beginning.” (1977, p.128)¹⁵

These perceptions, attitudes and values that formulate an individual’s comprehension of home can serve as a foundation for understanding the connection between topophilia and the conscious and subconscious bonds that connect people to places. Understanding these connections helps to unravel the phenomenology of place and move towards understanding how a place-specific public artwork can engender that often illusive “sense of place”

While there may be universal themes through which place can be approached, including the aforementioned ideas of home, community, or nature; the countless variations of personal experience within such ‘universal’ topics

¹⁵ Neither Bachelard nor Tuan address the possible differences gender might play in memories, dreams, and ideals of home. The significance of the influences of gender on perceptions of place merits a level of investigation that is outside the realm of this research. Refer to works such as Rendell, J., Penner, B., and Borden, I. (eds), *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* and Massey, D., *Space, Place and Gender*.

dictate against any prescriptive approach to place-specificity. Thus, we are drawn back to the original point of departure for this chapter: that before one can initiate an investigation of the role of place in new genre public art, it would seem necessary to establish a common definition of place. However, how can one develop a common definition of place if place is so intimately linked to the individual? If there really is no common definition or finite perception of place, what is the focal point of place within public art practice?

A public artist working within a place-specific model can, at best, only put forth their own version of that place; a version that inherently is a unique interpretation of the place given the individualised reference to place that, according to Bachelard, each of us carry within us. Rather than a (seemingly unattainable) common definition of place, perhaps it is a common framework of relationships to place that can draw artist and audience into a familiar arena of understanding a specific place – a framework that could include the relationships between place and the body, history, memory and dreams as explored in this chapter. Such a framework could allow for the numerous interpretations of place-specificity that are inevitable when individuals come together in the same space, each possessing their own possible versions of that space as a place. The project participants from the Headlands interviews were asked directly, what they thought made a space a place.¹⁶ While their responses were quite varied and reflective of their unique personal histories, experiences, and perspectives: none the less, each participant referred to

similar humanistic qualities of place – relationships with others in a particular space and personal connections that infuse a space with a sense of a soul.

II. On Site and Place

Over the last few years, place-specificity has become a recognized term in public art discussions. However, within many texts the phrase *place-specific* is often interchanged with *site-specific*, implying that the two terms are synonymous. Given the distinctively human and bodily understanding of place, there is an evident need to distinguish between site and place in the contest of public art.

Place-specific public art often needs to be viewed differently than site-specific public art. In the same way that Suzanne Lacy called for a new perspective on criticism regarding new genre public art (beyond the aesthetics and into engagement, action, effects, etc.), place-specificity requires a different perspective from the artist and the viewer than site-specific works. One cannot just regard the topography of the site and the physicality of the work. One must explore the sociality of the space. This is not to denounce site-specific work. It exists as its own sector of practice. The importance of the distinction is that it offers direction for how to create, interpret and appreciate such works. To cite just one example: Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas*, (2002) at Tate Modern was an awe-inspiring site-specific work. However, if one were to claim that it was a place-specific piece, then the viewer might find *Marsyas*

¹⁶ See DVD 5, *What Makes a Space a Place*

lacking. In various interviews, Kapoor spoke of the turbine hall as a site for the work and viewed *Marsyas* as a monumental work for a monumental space. The piece was intended to symbolically depict the flaying of Marsyas the satyr by the god Apollo in Greek mythology. Kapoor indicated that while the colour of the polypropylene symbolised the flaying of the satyr, the symbolism did not extend to the shape of the work or the nature of the location. The work was so vast that it could not be seen in its entirety from any point inside the hall. Kapoor's position was that he created what the space and the object demanded. Noting that the turbine hall is a "notoriously difficult space", Kapoor claimed that the scale of the work was not always about its size and that *Marsyas* was big because the space required "a big thing." Kapoor never indicated that he intended *Marsyas* to be a place-specific piece. He drew no connections between the work and the location's history, use, memory, or community. Rather he viewed the work as *in* and *of* the space. This was not a site-specific work that one walked around; rather, it is a site-specific work that one walked through. On the Tate produced video that follows the development, creation and installation of *Marsyas*, Kapoor even wondered aloud about the possible afterlife of *Marsyas*. While he could not imagine what other site could contain the work, he was open to the idea of reinstalling it somewhere else if the opportunity was presented.



1. Anish Kapoor, "Marsyas" 2002, The Unilever Series, Installation at Tate Modern
Photocredit : Marcus Leith and Andrew Dunkley, © Tate Photography

The following section of the thesis further explores the distinction between site-specific and place-specific artwork and how the differences allow for varying interpretations of location. The distinction between site and place also affects the relationship of the artist to specific locations, approaches to creating the individual works, and the development of connections to specific audiences.

Towards the Further Expanded Field

Strolling down Pinckney Street in Charleston, South Carolina during the Spoleto Festival USA in 1991, one would have come across number 45, a single story abandoned brick building, former site of Mike's Garage. A single post with the phrase, *Places with a Past*, marked the site as part of a city-wide public art project. Within the vaulted space sat a huge mound of folded clothing, seven tons of work shirts and trousers in various shades of indigo. The piece was *Indigo Blue*, a temporary 'place-specific' public artwork created by Ann Hamilton.



2. *Indigo Blue*, Ann Hamilton, *Places with a Past*:
New Site Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival, New York, 1991

Indigo Blue was a work that, like much of Hamilton's work, reflected the value of manual labour. The initial inspiration for the piece came from indigo, a crop which was introduced by Eliza Lucas Pinckney in 1744 and was

cultivated in Charleston. Hamilton used indigo in a contemporary context as the colour of workers' garments and selected the site, a former auto repair shop located on Pinckney Street. Hamilton filled the former garage with 48,000 blue shirts and trousers (14,000 pounds) that were folded and stacked, layer upon layer, to create this homage to blue-collar workers. The viewer would have been informed that *Indigo Blue* was a work about place and was part of a public art project in the accompanying catalogue¹⁷, but how was the categorisation of the piece derived? What does it mean for a work to be place-specific (verses site-specific) and why was the work considered public art and not sculpture or installation?

Over the past four decades, there has been continual debate to define the terminology to describe the increasingly diversified genres that were often inadequately grouped under the single, generalised heading of sculpture. From the minimal sculptures and happenings of the 1960's, one can trace the roots of installation, earthworks, interventions, and public art. Yet, ask any number of artists to define the term *installation*, and one is likely to receive an equal number of varied interpretations; adding the phrase *site-specific* only compounds the confusion. In the early development of the field, installation often referred to three-dimensional sculptural elements that either created an environment (often in a gallery), such as the works by Christian Boltanski, or

¹⁷ Jacob, M.J. (curator), *Places with a Past: New Site Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival*, New York, 1991.

large-scale works that incorporated and/or interacted with the environment like those of Christo. As the discipline became more prevalent, the boundaries of what artists referred to as “installation” began to deteriorate. Installation has grown into a hybrid discipline with multiple histories including architecture and Performance Art (de Oliveira). Contemporary installations can incorporate video, performance, and viewer participation. Some installations, like those of Frank Wilson or Hans Haacke utilise the museum as a medium for their installations. In *Give & Take* (2001), a collaborative exhibition between the Serpentine Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum, Hans Haacke was given unprecedented access to the Museum’s collections to create his gallery wide installation, *Mixed Messages* (2001), at the Serpentine Gallery.¹⁸

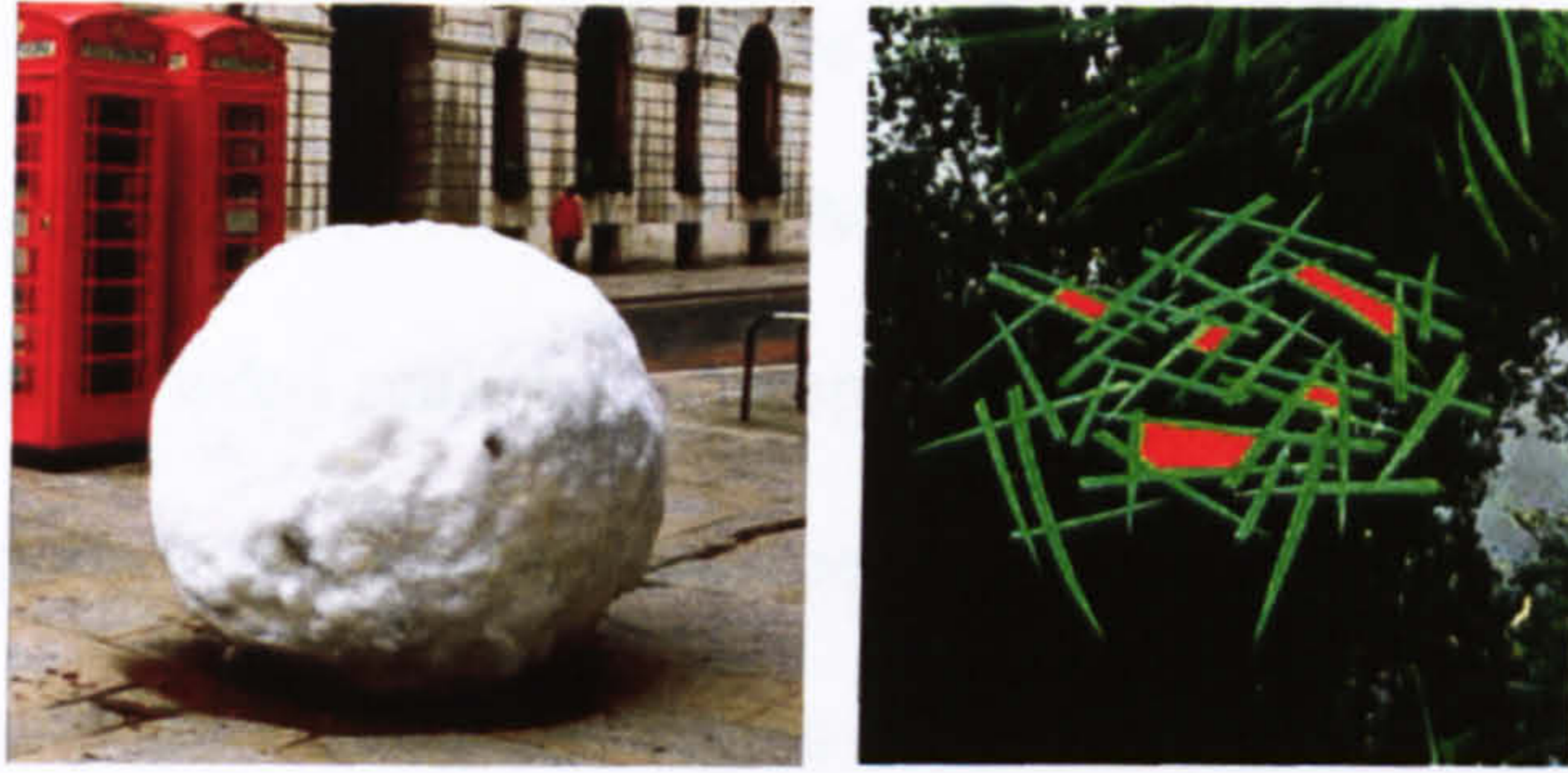
In my own experience, I have seen a wide range of works identified by the artists as installations, including an ‘installation’ in an artist’s studio which consisted of a landscape painting and a rock on the floor. However, stretching the definitions of installation to include such pieces denigrates the overall impact of the genre and does little to help define the unique qualities of works that fall between our understanding of traditional sculpture and installation. In the mid-1990’s, as I witnessed more and more artists struggling for a phrase that defined their ‘not quite’ installation installations, I developed the term *component sculpture* to describe such in-between works and began using it to

¹⁸ Haacke was also given access to the collection of the Museum of Childhood; Bethnal Green, London.

describe such works in the exhibition signage and catalogues of shows I was curating. I categorised component sculptures as generally small-scale projects, installed primarily in galleries or museums that had moved off the pedestal while retaining an aphoristic quality, but did not expand into the multi-layered structural complexity inherent in the realm of installation.

Throughout the 1990's, as installation and environmental works continued to increase in notoriety, frequency, and complexity, the term *site-specific* in relation to such works fully entered the lexicon.¹⁹ Site-specific installation often refers to works that respond to the topography of a site. This site can be in both interior and exterior locations. British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy was one of the contemporary forerunners of site-specific installation during this period. Much of Goldsworthy's work also proved that installations need not be large to inspire awe. Well known for such pieces as his delicate leaf and berry installations floating on ponds, constructed entirely from materials found onsite, Goldsworthy photographs his works for documentation and representation in the gallery.

¹⁹ The concept of site-specificity in contemporary art can be traced back to influences generated through the work of minimalist artists in the 1960's; however, the association of the term to installation and public art did not become commonly recognised until later years.



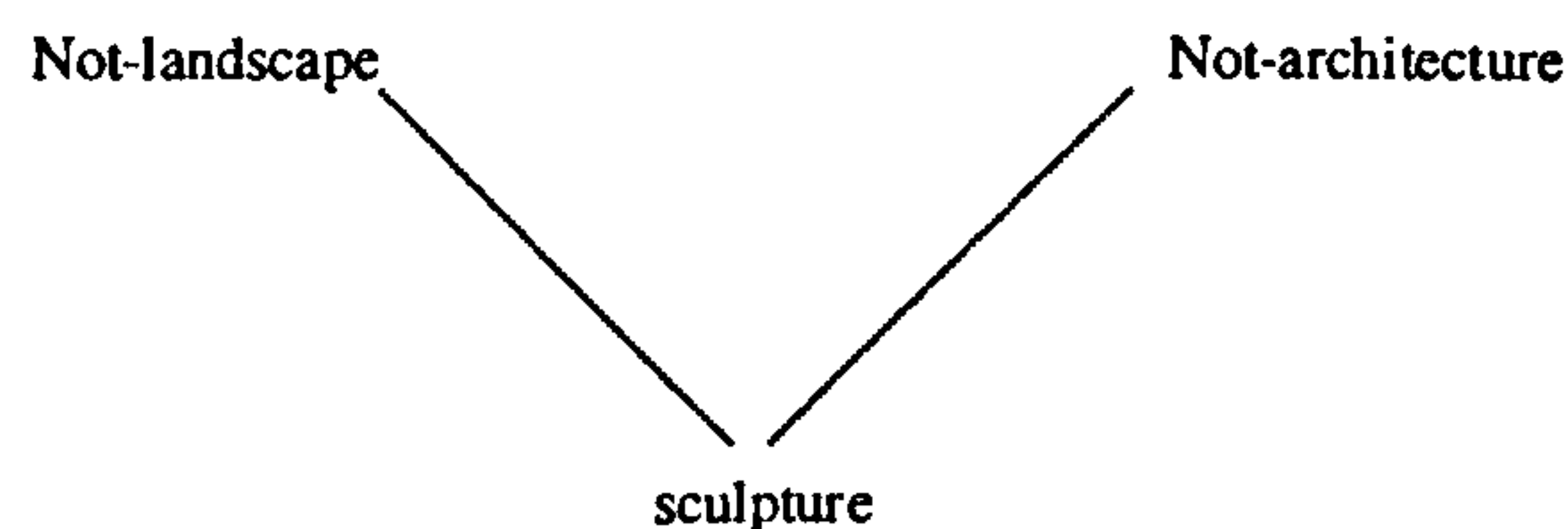
3. *Snowballs in Summer* (2000) *Iris Blades and Rowan Berries* (1987)

Goldsworthy, like sculptors Richard Long and David Nash, also collects material from sites of installations and reinstalls that material within a gallery or museum context.²⁰ While some artists are reworking their installations so that they can be returned to a more traditional gallery or museum setting, many others are continuing to look outside the museum walls as works grow in scale, become bearers of messages with political and social context, and/or are connected to specific locations or settings. Mary Jane Jacob noted that, “...the use of exhibition locations outside the museum has been motivated not only by a practical need for space, but also by the meaning that such places convey and contribute to the work of art, the freedom they allow for innovation, the potential they offer for public accessibility, and the psychic space they afford artists and audience.” (1991, p.50.) Here Jacob alludes to the growing importance of place within the contextualisation of the developing direction of art beyond museum boundaries.

²⁰ Some of Goldsworthy’s more recent works, such as the *Snowballs in Summer* (2000) series are examples of works that do not simply exist outside of the museum context, responding to its site – in this case an urban context, but that also generates reaction because they are

The struggle to define and categorise installation and site-specific work has been an ongoing endeavour since Minimalist artists began redefining the relationship between sculpture and space in the 1960's. Perhaps one of the most comprehensive models developed to address the radical shifts in post-modern sculpture during the 1960's and 1970's was created by Rosalind Krauss. In the 1979 article, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Krauss addressed a number of issues regarding the inadequacy of the historically recognised terminology of modernist sculpture to encompass contemporary works that had moved off the pedestal, into the gallery and out to the environment. Krauss began her model (*diagram 2*) from the point that modernist sculpture, such as works like Robert Morris's gallery installed 'quasi-architectural integers' and outdoor-exhibited mirrored boxes, "had entered the full condition of its inverse logic and had become pure negativity: the combination of exclusions." Krauss described this condition as entering into a category that "resulted from the addition of the not-landscape to the not-architecture." (p.37).

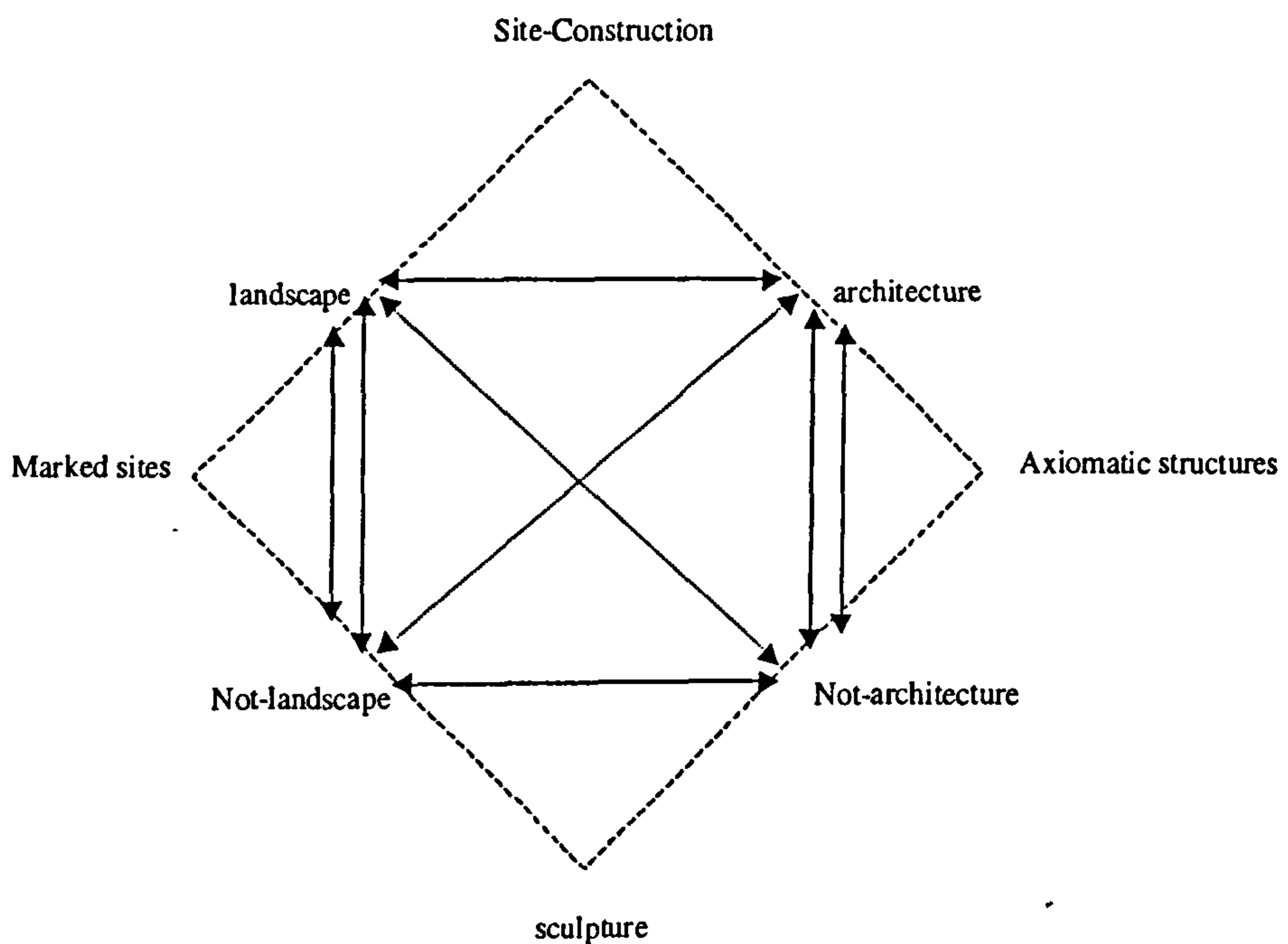
diagram 2.



seemingly out of place. Such site-specific inversions continue to push at the boundaries which define site-specificity.

Working from this base, Krauss continued to expand this model of exclusions (*diagram 3*) through a binary model²¹ so that not-architecture became another way of expressing landscape, and not-landscape became architecture. Continuing a logical expansion of these sets of binaries the model is “transformed into a quaternary field which both mirrors the original opposition and at the same time opens it.”

diagram 3.



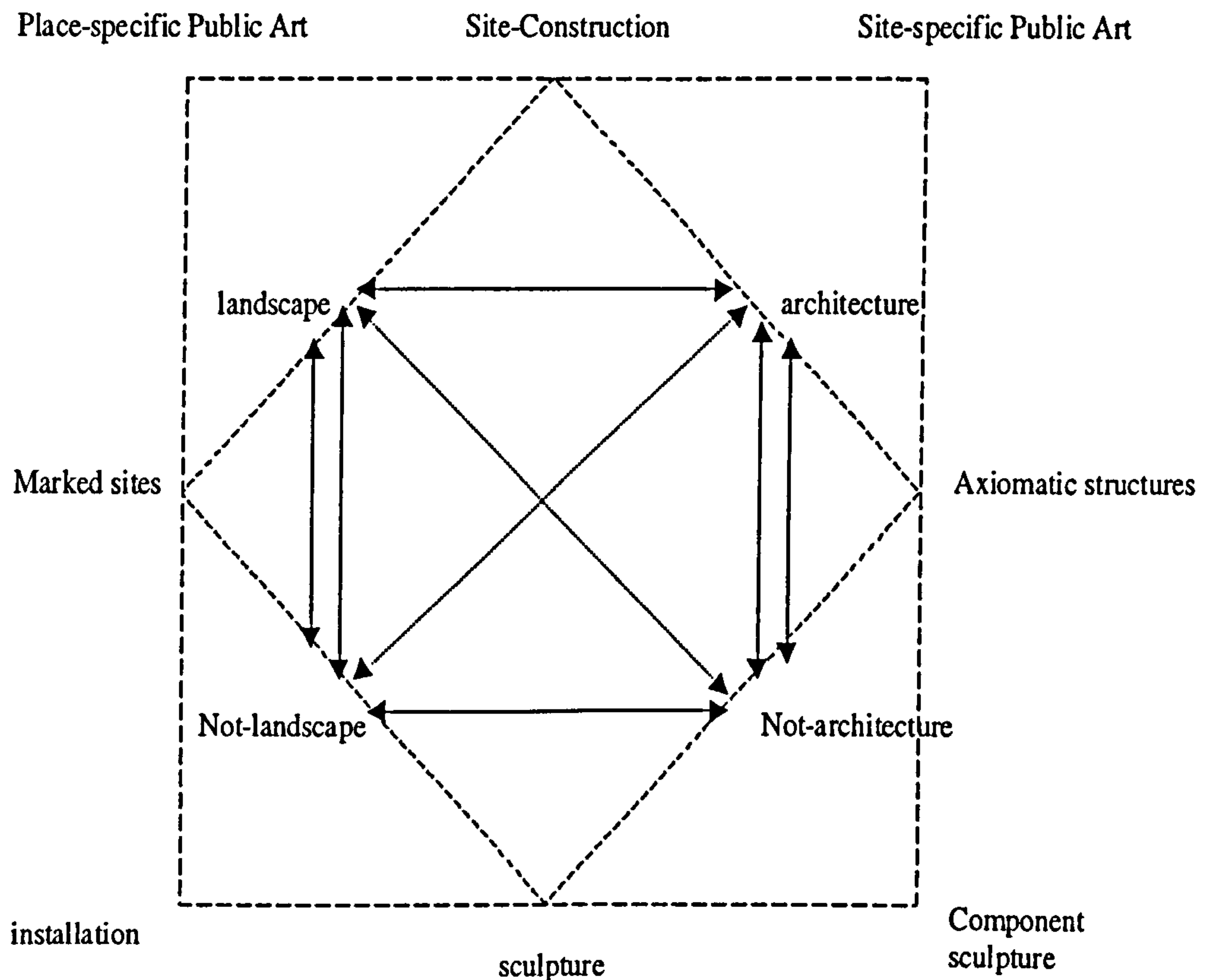
²¹ Krauss based the expansion on a method known as a Klein group when utilised mathematically and it has various other designations, such as the Piaget group, when utilised by structuralists involved in mapping operations within the human sciences (1979,p.37).

This model, which Krauss referred to as the 'expanded field,' was a means for defining works that had moved beyond the historically recognised boundaries of modernist sculpture. Utilising Krauss's model, large-scale constructions by artists such as Alice Aycock, Robert Irwin, and Mary Miss which were both *landscape* and *architecture* become *site-constructions*; earthworks such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or temporary works such as Christo's *Running Fence* which were both *landscape* and *not-landscape* are *marked-sites*; and interventions into architectural spaces as seen with works by Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt which were both *architecture* and *not-architecture* fall into the category of *axiomatic structures* (or self-realised structures).

Krauss developed the *expanded field* model in 1979 and since then the boundaries of that field have continued to expand and develop. In the 1980's and 1990's the development of new categories occurred and installation art rushed to the forefront as artists continued to push at the perimeters of the art canon. Artists continued to move beyond the gallery confines and the museum walls and further into the public realm. Earthworks were moving out of the desert and other remote locations and into town commons and public parks. Post-modern constructions took hold in city centres and public plazas, some as self-contained works and others as contemporary monuments. The evolution of installation and public art has moved beyond the *expanded field* model. One could attempt to locate these various 'new' developments within Krauss's model; however, attempting to do so, leaves one wrestling with similar issues

of historicism as those that inspired Krauss to initially develop her model. “Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference.” (1979, p.31) In order to avoid the historicism trap and to help define some of these movements and continually developing genres within the logic of the *expanded field*, I have further expanded Krauss’s model.²²

diagram 4.



²² Within the expanded model, the axioms would continue outwards, as represented by the \leftrightarrow symbols, to include the additional categories.

If one is to extend the same logic utilised by Krauss, this *further-expanded field* (diagram 4), could more aptly define public artworks by such artists as Buster Simpson, Nancy Holt, and Isamu Noguchi whose public works are often *site-constructions* and *axiomatic structures* as *site-specific public art*; environments created by Damien Hirst, Joseph Beuys, and Louise Bourgeois which contain sculptural elements and the marking of site (that site often being within a gallery or museum context) are *installation*; multi-faceted sculptural work, by artists such as Annette Messager or Jessica Stockholder that bridge *sculpture* and *axiomatic structures* become *component sculpture*; and finally, public works created for and from specific locations such as Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993) or Sheila de Bretteville's *Biddy Mason – Time and Place* (1991), incorporating *site-constructions* and *marked sites* are classified in this expanded model as *place-specific public art*.



4. Sheila de Bretteville, *Biddy Mason – Time and Place* (1991), Los Angeles, CA

De Bretteville's piece is a good example of a place-specific work whose development was influenced by the history of the location. This permanent

public artwork, located in downtown Los Angeles, is an eight by eighty-two foot sculpted timeline in a wall created to honour Bidy 'Grandma' Mason, a former slave who became a midwife, landowner, and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (the first African American church in Los Angeles). Located at the site of Mason's original homestead, the wall includes engraved squares of text and photographic images that trace Bidy Mason's life and the parallel history of the city over the course of eight decades (1820-1900).

As with Krauss's original model, the *further expanded field* only extends to a limited specific degree in order to incorporate the art practices that are within the range of this investigation. The model does not include such genres as digital and cyber arts, as these fields are beyond the scope of the research. The *further expanded field* is not representative of a genealogy for place-specificity and new genre public artwork²³, though it does bring to light some of the hereditary connections to modernist sculpture and installation. This model, formed from Krauss's original work which is based in structuralism, could appear at odds with the overall approach the research incorporates which is more eclectic and personal respective to place-specificity. As a structuralist model, it does not readily incorporate place-specific works which are about process or performance and are not based in site-constructions. Such a model would need to be multidimensional in order to attempt to specifically

²³ A genealogical perspective of place-specificity and new genre public art is examined later in this chapter.

categorise all the variations of contemporary public art work such as performance, intervention, and works based in virtual places such as Internet based works. The development of such a model could merit a thesis in and of itself and it is beyond the parameters of this project to specifically map those variations. The intent is not for the *further expanded field* to serve as an exhaustive, scientific, or structuralist methodology; but rather to provide a platform for developing an understanding of the geneses of new genre public, as well as, a foundation for an examination of the conceptualisation of place and an investigation of place-specificity within the context of new genre public art practice from a more open-ended perspective.

New Genre Public Art

Public art in the past forty years has undergone diversification and transformation. The discipline has expanded greatly from the monuments and statues of fallen war heroes that once held a prominent place in the public domain. Public art has mirrored the changes and movements of other artistic disciplines including abstraction, minimalism, and pop art. In the latter part of the 20th century, artists from a variety of backgrounds began working in ways that were more socially and politically influenced. These artists did not limit themselves to strictly visual media. They engaged in performance, intervention, and community actions. The focus of their work covers a broad range of contemporary issues including sexism, racism, toxic waste, recycling, multiculturalism, war, homelessness, and domestic violence.

In identifying and describing this style of public art, Suzanne Lacy coined the phrase *new genre public art*,

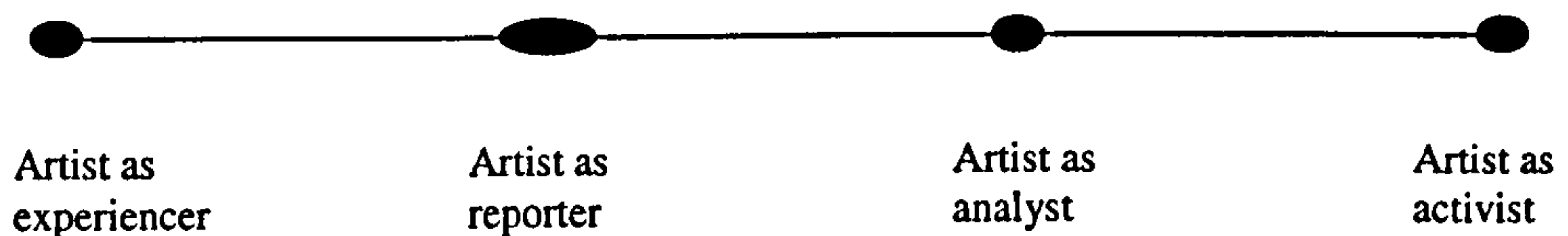
“to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called ‘public art’ – a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art – visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate

and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement.” (1995, p.19)

It is this engagement which distinguishes new genre public art as a movement. With engagement as a defining characteristic, one trajectory for the research is an investigation of the connections between engagement and place-specificity within new genre public art. However it is also important to develop an understanding of the significance of engagement within new genre public art. One point of departure for developing an understanding of the connections between engagement and new genre public art is to examine the changing roles of the artist within the field and the ways that those roles affect audience involvement and interpretation.

In the essay, *Debated Territory* (*Ibid.*, p.174), Lacy offers an innovative perspective for a critical view of new genre public art and the practice of engagement. Her model (diagram 5) is two-fold; offering a different view of both the artist and of the audience. The artist model is a continuum, which is conceived of as neither fixed nor discrete.

(diagram 5)

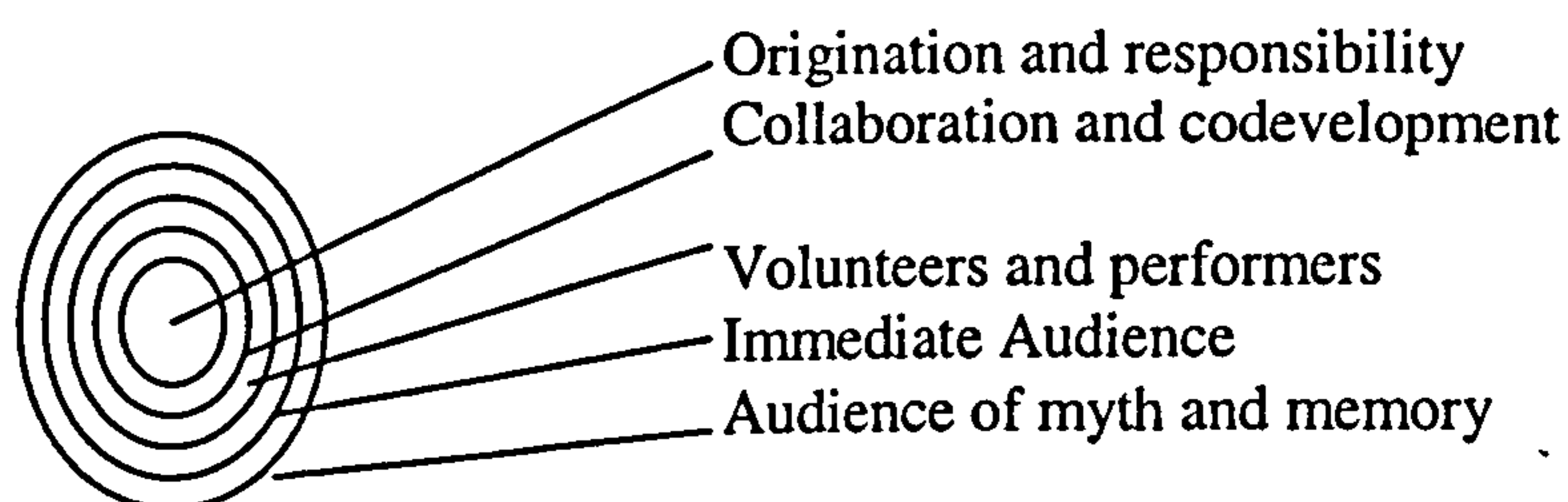


This model views the artist in a role outside of the more traditional creator of experience as represented by a visual object and instead places the artist in the role of ‘the experiencing being.’ Along the continuum, the artist may be a reporter, gathering information to convey to others. This conveyance may be a reflection without any assignment of value, or it may convey a more conscious selection of information.

Lacy states that, “in these first two modes of working-experiencer and reporter – we see an emphasis on the intuitive, receptive, experiential, and observational skills of the artist.”(*Ibid.*, p.176) The role of reporter is often followed by analysis. In the role of analyst, the aesthetics of the work is often more related to the conceptual aspects of the work, or the relationship to the imagery rather than the physical work itself.

The last role in Lacy’s continuum is that of activist. Seeking to become a catalyst for change the artist assumes the role of ‘citizen-activist.’ In this role the artist must learn a variety of skills including collaboration, crossing of disciplines, and developing varying audiences. The other half of Lacy’s critical model (diagram 6) focuses on a unique perception of audience.

(diagram 6)



Audience in this model moves beyond specific identity categories and demographics such as race, class or gender. Instead, the model concentrates on the relationship of the audience, in various capacities, to the work. Audience is interpreted as collaborators, volunteers, viewing public with direct contact to the work, and in subsequent roles with the project's afterlife through documentation and in the audience's memory of the work. Beginning with the original concept, the model poses a means to examine the effect of the work on those who interact with the process. While the aim of Lacy's model is to create a method of critique that allows for a non-hierarchical and fluid approach, it is quite complex, particularly when issues such as methodology, use of media, interactivity and contextualization are added. The construct also separates the artist directly from the audience; examining the roles the artist may experience instead of the connections between the artist, the work, and the audience. Despite these limitations, both of Lacy's models illustrate some of the considerations that are pivotal to the new genre public art practice.

Many of the artists working within this movement are active in community-based projects and highlight the contemporary trend in public art of focusing on improving society rather than simply regenerating the physical environment.²⁴ These artists are more concerned with improving and contributing to the quality of life than promoting some aesthetic quality. Many

²⁴ This change in emphasis also reflects the trend in the shift from site (understood as topography) to place (with an emphasis on experience) as discussed in the thesis.

have moved from the loftier pursuit of enriching lives to the more fundamental aspiration of actually saving lives. This movement is evident in the work of such artists as Richard Bolton, whose 1992 multimedia installation, *Subject: Male Violence*, presented a forum for viewers to express their experiences of domestic violence. Bolton compared the projection of violence in the media with the real conditions of male violence, providing visitors with access to a range of books, magazines, newspaper clippings, and videotapes. The videotapes also included interviews with women who worked on battered women's hotlines and with former batterers (who have since become counsellors) who talked about what had lead them towards violence. Other artists include Tim Rollins and K.O.S., who works collaboratively with special education students (K.O.S. – kids of survival) in a South Bronx public high school in New York, producing theme-based murals relevant to the ongoing issues of the immediate community.

HaHa, a Chicago-based collaborative, created the project *Flood/Diluvio: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare* (1992-94). The project was a storefront hydroponics garden that served as a model for a community garden whose focus was growing food for individuals with HIV. The storefront also served as an education and meeting space and was run by the HaHa artists (Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof) and community volunteers. As part of a larger new genre public art exhibition, entitled "Culture in Action" (Chicago 1992), the *Flood/Diluvio*

project outlasted the exhibition by over two years. *Flood/Diluvio* formed the basis for a new centre which opened in 1996 to provide a food pantry, grocery centre, classrooms, offices for counselling and outreach on HIV and AIDS awareness, and the Flood hydroponics garden. While the interests of new genre public artists are as varied as the artists themselves, there is a strong trend in the field to not just move the artwork out of the galleries and museums and into the communities, but to also create a forum which inspires a call for change. This type of 'art in action' is a rallying cry within the movement and offers insight into the intentions of many of the artists who participate in this process of art-making.

Regardless of the method (temporary public project, site-specific, ephemeral work, et cetera), the artist's intent "establishes the values premised within the work and [these] assembled values are the artist's construction of meaning." (*Ibid.*, p.181) Lacy will caution us that by addressing the issue of intention, critics must acknowledge their own personal and philosophical position before they embark down the path of evaluating a 'materialised belief system.' While such an honest approach might provide an intriguing debate, it is plausible to question intention without a prior personal disclaimer. Questioning intention is a valuable strategy for evaluating new genre work. Regardless of political ideology, one can ask, how does the artist understand and address the intended site, place and/or audience? Additionally, what process does the artist utilise? How does the artist work with the forum? And how is that forum a means to

communicate between the artist and the audience? This questioning of intention returns us to the heart of new public art – engagement. Engagement does not displace intention even if the audience’s experience and interpretation becomes the site of memory as indicated in Lacy’s audience model. Engagement is a method while intention is a motivation. Again, without having to declare one’s personal philosophy, we can ask; how does the artist work with the community? How does the work enable the visitor/viewer/participant to insert themselves in the work? How does the work become part of the memory of the audience? Viewing the field through such questions illuminates how new genre public art is forcing radical shifts in the preconceived ideas of audience, interaction, and social discourse. Within the diverse manifestations of the field, such questions also bring one to consider whether the more traditional evaluative aesthetic, didactic and monetary issues still apply. While these questions are indicative of the critical debate prevalent in new genre public art, within this research, they serve only to provide a structure for understanding the current parameters that define the field and the direction in which it is evolving. The intent of the research is not to find answers for these specific questions, but to utilise them as a means of reflection in considering the role of place-specificity within the genre.

New genre public art, new public art, cultural interventions, temporary public art, process oriented projects, community-based public art; which-ever term or

category one chooses to apply within this continually evolving field, a crucial feature of the movement remains engagement.

With engagement established as a primary new genre public art characteristic, the research turned towards the practice (developing the think-tank, curating the video documentation, developing thematic connections) in order to continue along this trajectory and investigate some of the connections between engagement and place-specificity and how those connections influenced the development of the works created by the participants involved in the research project.

***FINDING PLACE: COMPASS READINGS, INTERPRETING THE MAP,
ASKING FOR DIRECTIONS, AND THE ART OF GETTING LOST***

Destinations and Points of Departure

Fares are low and a host of vacation deals are just a mouse click away, so despite political unrest and economic uncertainty, we continue to pack our bags and board countless planes, trains, buses and boats. We travel for business and pleasure; from town to town, state to state, country to country and in our journeys we seek the excitement of the new and the comfort of the familiar. In November 2002, I spent fourteen hours on a plane travelling from London to Hong Kong – half way around the world to go from one island to another; two international cities, two financial and commercial capitals. Similarities abound. Glass and steel skyscrapers define the cities' centres. Aging buildings of brick and mortar reflect a rich history of architectural styles in the tinted windows of their contemporary neighbours. Street markets thrive in spite of indoor shopping malls and chain grocery stores, as vendors hawk their wares – fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, flowers, “name-brand” T-shirts and Nike shoes. Regardless of the season, the sight of folded umbrellas peeking out of handbags, backpacks, and coat pockets are reminders of an omnipresent threat of rain, despite weather forecasts to the contrary. Signs for HSBC, Marks and Spencer, and the Gap stand prominent on the high streets of both cities. Ride the engineering marvel that is the world's longest escalator, transporting commuters from the apartment highrises of Mid-level to downtown Hong Kong and one can pick up a double decaf caramel latte from Starbucks as easily as one could after emerging from the London

Underground at Oxford Circus. Certainly, differences between the two cities are numerous. The typography is distinctly different. Primrose Hill is a mere gopher mound compared to the Peak, and the Thames is certainly a different kind of waterway from Hong Kong Harbour. And while decades of British colonialism have greatly influenced Hong Kong's social landscape, the island's culture continues to increasingly incorporate influences from mainland China. Yet, with the continual rise in global migration, international commerce, and cross-cultural influences, in twenty years' time will the typography be one of the few remaining distinctions between London and Hong Kong?

Such place-related social and cultural global trends are indicative of our changing times and can be reflected in the range of concerns that face artists who turn to place-specificity within their socially engaged public art practices. While artists encounter a broad range of questions depending on their artistic focus, political attitudes, and personal perspectives a number of specific questions were repeatedly raised by the project participants during the course of this research. These questions include: Can place-specificity be used within public art to link individuals to places, people and events around the world or, is place-specificity a by-product of local distinctiveness? Must a place-specific work speak only to the unique issues of one locale in order to remain place-specific? If a place-specific public artwork does attempt to address global concerns, can we remain unique in our sameness? While the

participants could only offer their personal perspectives on these issues (often related to their own versions of place), several common place-specific themes developed that were also reflective of the trends that emerged in the literature review. These trends include the potential role of place in uncovering and preserving history and memory, developing relationships, and addressing issues of globalization and local distinctiveness.

1. The Many Roles of Place-specificity: Scenic Overlooks

Some places stand on their own – the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, the Pyramids of Egypt, the white cliffs of Dover. We don't need signs indicating Kodak picture spots or public artworks to draw our attention to the significance of these places. The physical immensity of these locations has held back the invasion of urban sprawl and globalization. Such places are rich in history and mythology. They have been well studied and documented. They have been featured in fiction, movies, plays, paintings, and photographs.

Yet countless other less grandiose places of cultural and environmental significance are under threat by the industrial and economic need for more “raw” space. As project participant James Marriott observed, by removing the history and the stories of a place, one annihilates those places. Rather than add to the layers of use and history, the area is purged or displaced. Such displacement leaves the area stripped of any social connection or community

concern and as such is vulnerable to becoming a commercially driven placeless site – a parking garage, strip mall, highway overpass. While these latter places are part of contemporary culture (though one could argue whether they are a necessary or desirable part), through place-specific public art, the humanity of such places can be, at least, partially restored.

When London's Westway extension was developed, the motorway overpass cut a wide swath through many residential neighbourhoods including Notting Hill, Westbourne Park and Ladbroke Grove. Homes were razed and concrete pillars and asphalt were laid over the exposed earth like a huge scar across the land. Over time, there has been a concerted effort to reclaim the area for community use. Buildings and parks have been constructed under the Westway and include a skateboard park, artist studios, commercial buildings, social services facilities, a sports centre, a child care centre, and a covered market. Yet despite these efforts, the area still maintains a soulless quality. Sections of the development remain isolated and prone to crime, particularly after business hours when even the most utilised areas become all but deserted. The Westway's development association has been seeking proposals for public art as part of a plan to infuse the area with a sense of community. Such efforts address the question raised during the think-tank conversations by Jane Trowell; can you fight *anyplace* with place? This concern is echoed by Miwon Kwon when she makes the point that in order to avoid one place becoming part of an undistinguishable chain of places ("one place after

another”) an artist needs to incorporate a practice that “can turn local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks.” (2002, p.166)

So, one of the roles of place-specificity in new genre public art is that it can serve as a means to highlight, preserve, and present the unique social aspects of a specific place – the history, memories, stories, uses, people, nature – which might otherwise have been ‘displaced’ by corporate development, urban sprawl, and general neglect. It can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and revitalise placeless regions, as evident with such works as the previously mentioned²⁵ Bidy Mason project in Los Angeles which transformed a nameless alleyway into an area of community pride, essentially fighting anyplace with place.

II. Asking for Directions: Placing Oneself in Community

If new genre public art is a practice based on engagement, then another role of place is that it can serve as a platform for that engagement to occur. According to theorist, Doreen Massey, when we think of place we need to be “thinking in terms of relations” and this perspective “forces you to think about conceptualisation.” Place is that link between the social and the spatial, while site focuses primarily on the spatial.

²⁵ See page 121 for illustration and description

“What is significant about thinking in terms of relations in a geographical analysis is that social relations are, integrally and inseparably, both social and spatial. On the one hand, our conceptualisation of space itself is as social-relations-stretched-out... On the other hand, equally, there can be no social relation which does not have a spatial form.” (2002, p.137)

From this socially related perspective, one place-specific role that rose quickly and strongly to the forefront of the research was that of *relationships*. Whether it is the relationship to a particular space, an event in a particular place, relationships to each other, or relationships within ourselves; our response to place is directly related to the relationship we bring to, develop in, or derive from a particular location. Place creates a web of relationships through which we can deepen our connections to self, family, community, and the environment. These connections occur on various levels and there appears to be no place that exists without some imprint of its previous use, change or evolution. Therefore, the ground beneath one’s feet may serve as a core sample of an individual’s psyche; the layered strata of memory, history, and experience. During the course of the conversations and interviews, the participants in this project often spoke of being motivated by the desire to create a connection or relationship to their audience. Place is the point of entry that many of these artists utilise to invite the viewer into relationship with their public works. It is the terra firma from which both the artist and the viewer can communicate, question and explore not only the nature of the

relationships between the work and the place, but also the nature of the relationships we have with each other.

Adding to the significance of relationships is the ability of place-specificity to make the issues addressed within a new genre public artwork personal. The work has the potential to become about *this* place, not just any place, allowing the audience to invest in the work on a personal level. Place helps to transform the relationship between the viewer and the work from encounter to experience; thus embodying the work with a greater personal relevance for the viewer. The work becomes for and about the audience rather than strictly a representation or manifestation of an individual artist's perspective or motivation. When Seyed Alavi was invited to develop a public art project for the city of Fairfield (California), he turned directly to the community as his starting point. Alavi spent countless hours with high school students, city officials, local business people, senior groups, and local artists to develop the series of events that became *Where is Fairfield?* (1995).



5. road sign



student video project – asking “where is Fairfield?” in the local mall

Where is Fairfield? was a citywide, community-based, interactive public art project. The work was a collaborative effort of various members of the Fairfield community and was designed to explore the city's sense of identity and to heighten the community's awareness of Fairfield's existing characteristics. The question "Where Is Fairfield?", with all of its subtle layers, was presented to the community through a wide spectrum of media and contexts. Projects included: banners, bookmarks, buttons, engraved bricks, the Fairfield Quilt, Fairfield Living: a City of Fairfield television program, grocery/ retail store bags, a mall video installation, murals by teenagers, the Oral History of Fairfield by high school students, a photography project by college students, an airplane banner, a population sign, postcards, post office cancellation stamp, restaurant flags, a senior centre project, evening slide projections on buildings, and t-shirts (including an infant t-shirt for every baby born in Fairfield that day). "*Where is Fairfield*" also involved gathering information and feedback from individual members of the community and presenting that information back to the community at large. According to

Alavi, the ultimate goal of the project was to inspire a sense of community pride; one which would manifest itself over the long term through a heightened sense of caring for and about the community in all its historical, social and political aspects.



6. cancellation stamp



stamped grocery bag

Many of the social issues that faced this community (elder care, urban sprawl, the demise of Main Street) also face numerous communities across the United States; however, Alavi's direct connection with the people of Fairfield helped translate these common issues into *their* concerns. This type of art practice is particularly effective when artists are addressing global issues within the context of community-based public art.

III. Global visions, local actions

There is no denying it, the world is on the move. Globalization is the rallying cry for market economies around the world. From corporate institutions to sole-proprietors with Internet access, everyone is going global. As geographer, John Rennie Short indicates, "Rarely has a word evoked such feeling... Globalization has become one of the most powerful and persuasive ideas to have captured the collective imagination, sometimes as dream, sometimes as nightmare." (2001, p.7) The business perspective views globalization as a move towards an integrated global economy, while magazines and newspapers use globalization as a turn of phrase to indicate that the world is becoming a homogenous blend of sameness. Globalphobia manifests itself in government conspiracy theories, political protests on May 1st, and blistering editorials whenever a new MacDonald's tries to open up shop in a historic village, undeveloped tropical island or other perceived virgin territory. Regardless of one's social or political position, globalization continues to develop with increasing intensity and cultural impact. Countless books, articles, symposia, and conferences attest to the rise in the academic and social interest in globalization. While there are numerous political, economic, and cultural concerns within the ever expanding debate over the effects of globalization, the focus of this exploration was on the influences of globalization on place-specificity and how such influences translate into new genre public art practice. What impact does globalization have on one's sense

of place? Is local distinctiveness being stamped out with international corporate logos? As we cross borders with greater ease, are we discovering each other or losing ourselves?

Perhaps the more we travel the more we will see where our commonalities lie. Grassroots protests and civil lawsuits over local industries dumping waste products into streams and ponds lead the way to national and international legal precedents. Local concerns are becoming global issues and vice versa. Reversing the thinning of the ozone layer, which contributes to global warming is not just an international concern. When taken to the local level it has the potential to become a personal responsibility. The bumpersticker philosophy of “think globally, act locally” is perhaps one way to localise globalization which can be applied to public art as well.

By focusing on place-specific issues that are linked to global concerns, artists can highlight our cultural or social similarities, common concerns and obstacles, and develop public art projects that can serve as models for change. An example of such a project can be found in the work of Betsy Damon.

Damon is perhaps best known for her Keepers of the Waters²⁶ project in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (1998). However, this international project is actually based on a series of community focused art and environmental

actions that originated in her home state of Minnesota. Working with staff members from the Pollution Control Agency, she and a group of students created an environmental sculpture garden aimed at producing a cleaner water system near Duluth, Minnesota. Through this experience, she learned to bring together scientists who knew about river issues, public officials, and other artists interested in helping communities to consider regional environmental problems in new ways.

While the need for clean, sustainable sources of water is a global issue, different regions and cultures have different relationships with rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water. Damon utilised the collaborative model she developed in Minnesota, but adapted her approach to conform to the social and community conditions of Chengdu. Damon's model for collaboration may have originated in Minnesota, but the execution of the project was uniquely place-specific to Chengdu. The project involved a series of temporary public artworks and interventions developed with local artists. These works were designed to promote community awareness of the poor condition of the Fu River that runs through the city. This river was highly polluted, yet the community still washed their clothes and bathed on its banks, as well as drew water for household use.

²⁶ Keepers of the Waters is a non-profit organization founded by Damon to address issues of clean water and to develop projects which help communities to take action towards renewing local water sources.

One Keepers of the Waters piece involved draping the steps of a Chengdu tea house with white silk. This "waterfall" of silk was saturated with dripping river water that melted from ice chunks in the building's rafters, the white silk becoming stained with the polluted water. In another work, an artist took a series of photographs and in a public display allowed the collection of prints to decompose in shallow dishes of polluted river water.

Working with Damon, a group of local artists created a large ice sculpture using river water in a public square. Brushes were provided to passers-by allowing them to symbolically scrub the tainted ice as it melted into dirty puddles in the summer heat.



7. scrubbing the ice

waterfall of silk

An additional group of artists re-enacted an ancient Chengdu legend in which a great warrior is said to have washed silk in the cleansing waters of the river. But the long white sheets of silk washed by the artists only became stained and brown with the polluted river water.



8. *washing silk*

The Keepers of the Waters project attracted a great deal of interest from citizens and government officials and Damon was invited to return to Chengdu and design a six-acre water garden along the same river. The Living Water Garden became the first inner city ecological park in the world with water as its theme. The public park is located on the Fu and Nan rivers and is a fully functioning water treatment plant, a giant sculpture in the shape of a fish (a symbol of regeneration in Chinese culture), a living environmental education centre, a wildlife and plant refuge, as well as a place for the community.



9. *The Living Water Garden, aerial view*

Completed in 1998, the garden is now on the national tourist registry and has become the most popular park in the city. Using Damon's design, the park was built by the local Chengdu Fu & Nan Rivers Comprehensive Revitalization Project, a five-year plan to rebuild Chengdu's infrastructure to support its growing population for the next two centuries. On a daily basis, two hundred cubic meters of polluted river water move through the natural treatment system and emerge clean enough to drink. While this amount of water is not enough to affect the water quality of the entire river, the aims of the park are educational. Visitors can walk through the park, surrounded by the many birds, butterflies and dragonflies that have taken up residence. The treatment system was designed to be easily visible and understandable, allowing individuals to observe the river water becoming cleaner and cleaner as it moves through the system.



10. *aeration system, bio flow forms* *wetland ponds with water-purifying plants*

Other features of the park include an underground parking garage, environmental education centre, and a circular stone amphitheatre facing the river for concerts and events. The floodwall has been opened up in two places where steps give visitors direct access to the river.

Such a huge project requires a tremendous time commitment from the artists and the collaborators involved. Being the “foreigner” on the team can often complicate the situation. The members of PLATFORM often turn down invitations to do place-specific projects outside of the Thames basin (their self-defined locality and the region in which they have been based for almost eighteen years), because they experience what James Marriott describes as “mission creep.” According to Marriott’s definition, this is a sense that PLATFORM is being covertly brought into a community to quick-fix a problem and then disappear. Jane Trowell also raised this issue during the London conversations when she asked the group how they would feel if a notice was put up announcing a meeting of artists who were coming into the

community to make public art. Trowell wondered if there might be feelings of suspicion, intrusion, or resentment from the community.²⁷

In conversations I have had with Damon, she seemed keenly aware of the precarious nature of being an outsider, coming into a community to “fix” a problem. Her solution was to approach the project on several levels. She worked in collaboration with artists from the community, encouraging them to express their vision of the water issues. She lived in the community, learned the language, and committed to the time required to develop relationships. On the Keepers of the Water website, Damon is quoted as saying,

“I believe that a group of committed people can address any challenge concerning water, and solve the difficulties in ways that respect the dynamic Universe and every individual. The key to our success is relationships! My work is action, action that motivates, connects, and possibly at times, changes lives, which I hope invites or offers the possibility of connection.”(2002)

Since the completion of the Living Water Garden, Damon has extended the Keepers of the Waters program to Beijing. From Fall 2000, she has been working with local artists and water officials to develop several projects that will address the issues of clean water and be reflective of the community and the specific place of each project. Current projects are also underway in Portland, Oregon and Duluth, Minnesota. Damon’s Keepers of the Waters

²⁷ See DVD 1, *A London Conversation*, chapter 2, *Community*.

project is one model for socially engaged public art that can incorporate global issues while addressing the issues of specific places.

IV. Finding Place and the Art of Getting Lost

I am certainly a child of the global generation. I belong to six different frequent flyer programs. I have moved twenty-seven times in thirty-eight years. I am a citizen of one country, the resident of another, and am married to a citizen of yet a third country. I often feel as though I am a member of that tribe of global nomads commonly referred to as *citizens of the world*. Yet as Short reminds us, “Try to get into a country by telling the immigration officials that you are a citizen of the world and see how long it takes.” (pp.77-78) Ours’ is a citizenry of the mind, but it is a notion that is contributing to the development of a global vision. However, the foundation of such a vision is still based on the local.

“The image of the global, the creation of global public opinion through mass-media, the time—space compression of telecommunications and transport improvements that have brought the world together, have all created the preconditions of global citizenry. However, our sense of who we are is shaped primarily by local and national communities....Who we are is still very much a function of where we are.” (*Ibid.*, p.79)

While the foundation for our view of the global may be rooted in the local that does not mean that one's vision is completely predetermined by regional boundaries or permanently mired in a local perspective. Massey refers to places as being porous. As such, places absorb what we bring to them and filter what we take away. The more we travel and experience other places, the more expanded and diverse the view of our own place becomes. A trip down the *Canal du Midi* might alter one's view of the people who live aboard the squatters boats near Tower Bridge or a trip to Venice may influence how one experiences Little Venice in London (or vice versa).

Certainly my own travels have influenced my perceptions and interactions with my current place of London. I often find myself thinking that this place or that place, reminds me of another place. Often it is hard to just be in one place – in essence to be present in place. In his book, *The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton writes of a similar dilemma with his own neighbourhood. He decided to become a tourist in his own community, to allow himself to wander the streets without striding towards a predetermined destination (a counterpoint to his daily trek to his local Tube stop), to get lost and discover new sights and venture into the unfamiliar as a way to find his way back to a renewed interest and enthusiasm for his own place – an enthusiasm that had been diminished over the years by routine and familiarity. De Botton's experiment was similar to those carried out by the French *Situationists* who

were active during the 1950's and 60's. The *Situationists* practiced a theory called *dérive* which literally translates to 'drifting.' According to their theory:

“In a derive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attraction of the terrain and the encounters they find there (in the city).” (Knabb, 1989, p. 50)

This kind of stepping back or getting lost can serve as a way of allowing ourselves to look beyond preconceived boundaries of our place; to see what might be hidden in the layers of place and how it might relate to our daily lives. PLATFORM has utilised similar techniques to expose the hidden layers of the city of London. In the project, *What Lies Beneath Your Feet?* (2000) PLATFORM members lead walks from the source of the River Fleet in Hampstead Heath to Blackfriars Bridge where the Fleet joins the River Thames. After leaving the Heath, the Fleet is buried under streets and buildings as it flows towards the Thames.



11. *The Fleet in Hampstead Heath*

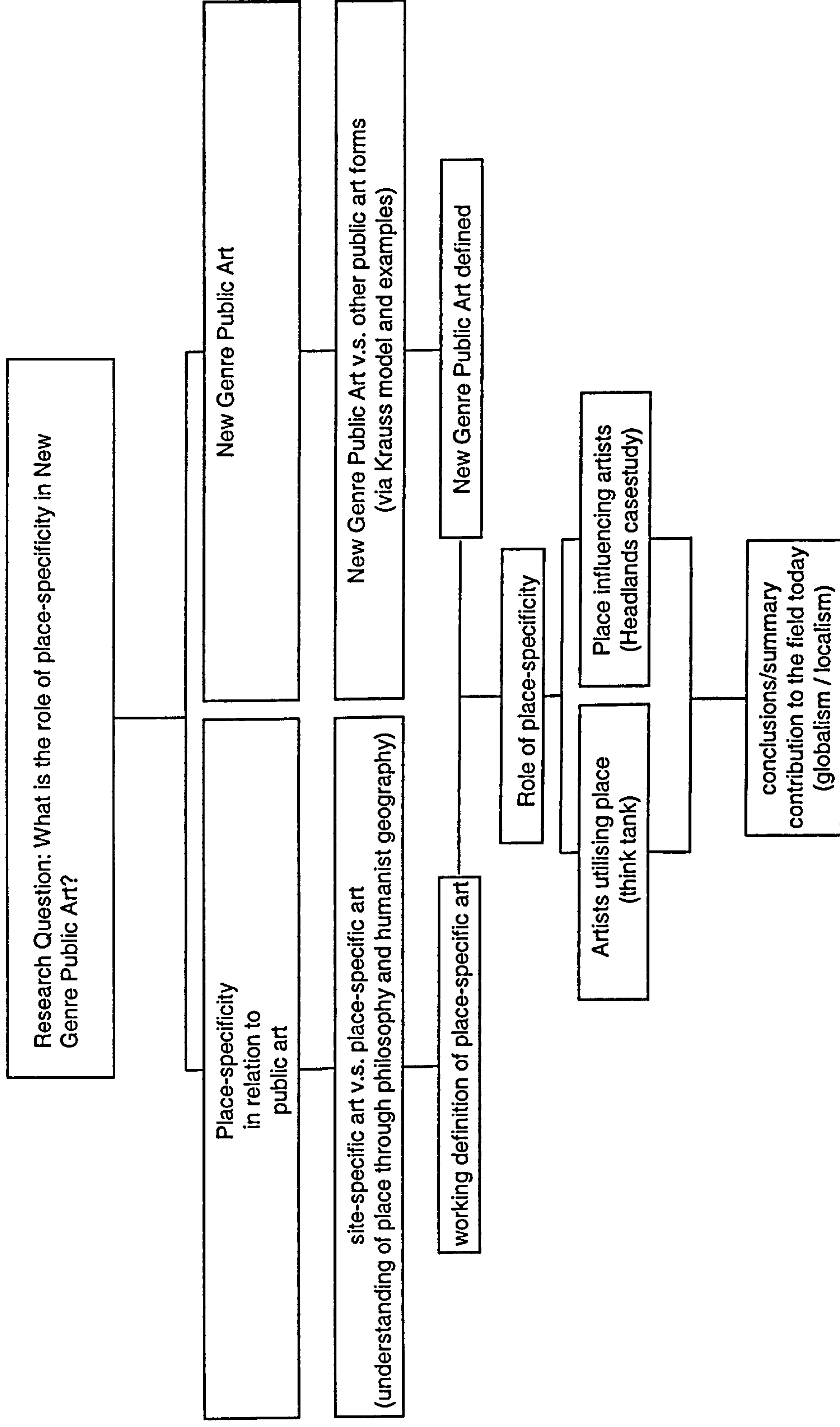


Following the Fleet through King's Cross

Most of the community participants were completely unaware that the Fleet travelled under King's Cross railway station, let alone that the Fleet still existed. As a participant, my own view of that section of London was altered by the event. Place names and street names took on new meanings and I began to wonder what other secret histories were buried just under the surface of the city.

The role of place-specificity in public art is not just to show us nostalgic views of the past. If artists, curators, and writers involved in the public art arena are willing to invest the time and energy to explore the potential of specific places, then socially engaged place-specific public art can connect us to valuable historical information, provide roots to community, inspire personal connections, and provide direction into the future. Utilising place-specificity within a socially engaged public art practice can provide an environment for exploring who we are, what makes us unique, how we are connected, and where our similarities lay. Such a foundation for personal, social, and cultural understanding provides both physical and metaphorical places for us to meet, engage, learn, expand, explore, develop, reclaim, step back and move forward.

Research Process



Reading the Map: Charting an Evaluation

The research, development, and conclusion of any dissertation is a journey of sorts. For some, the way feels far too long and filled with arduous detours. For others, the route may seem fairly direct; an open highway with no traffic in sight. But regardless of careful planning and preparation, each journey will be filled with unexpected events, stalls, and wrong turns along the way to the destination of new knowledge. Following this metaphor, the journey of this thesis project can best be described as one that traversed a scenic route.

All of the elements of this study, conversation as a method, developing the think tank, performing as a participant-observer, and being in residence at the Headlands required a slower pace, the development of personal connections to the thesis subject, fostering relationships, and a longer term commitment from the participants than other possible research approaches. One could have developed a questionnaire, conducted a wide range of interviews, and/or presented a number of case studies of place-specific public art works around the globe; however, such a “motorway” approach may cover a great deal of ground, but (given that one of the key elements to place-specificity is personal connection) probably would not resonate with the same depth of feeling or authenticity.

Rather than cover a vast amount of art historical and philosophical terrain, I have endeavoured to develop a methodology more sensitive to the dynamic and personal nature of place. Research strategies used in this study – the development of relationships, personal perspectives, and longer time commitments from participants,

are all reflective of the very nature of place which develops over time, fosters individual connections, and is influenced by personal points of view.

While each participant in this project could only present their own version of place, the same could be said for a broader more statistical study since one's comprehension of place is so often related to personal experiences. Rather than present a quantitative range of experiences, the project aimed for a qualitative depth of experience. By working with a smaller group in a concentrated and personal format, this study plotted a more detailed perspective of place-specificity from the point of view of eleven participants rather than a more generalised overview of fifty or a hundred participants. Of course, such a broad study could prove very useful for tracking general trends and cultural shifts in relation to place-specificity. However, a concentrated study is also essential for trying to uncover the possible underlying reasons for these trends and shifts.

The dual nature of the participant-observer role provided interesting challenges for this research. Many of these challenges were technical and revolved around the documentation of the practice. The financial constraints of the project required that I served as the main videographer as well as a participant. This condition proved to have some interesting effects. Initially the camera was set up on a tripod to document the conversations, but the participants would move around the room, often completely out of the camera frame and would become disembodied voices. I quickly realised that someone needed to directly operate the camera in order to capture all of the participants on the video during group conversations. However, I often found myself distanced behind the camera and in this position much more of an observer than a

participant. Periodically, I needed to turn the camera over to other participants. This action meant that I also gave up control over exactly how the videotaping was progressing. Some participants had a steadier hand, others liked to experiment with the zoom lens or back lighting. Some footage proved to be quite a challenge in the editing room months later. However, turning over the camera to other participants allowed them to experience the participant-observer role as well and created a more neutral environment. Similar to the give and take required in conversation, passing the camera from participant to participant allowed our discussions to progress more naturally. The camera's intrusive nature rapidly diminished as each individual had an opportunity to move behind the lens and share in the process of documentation. Several participants commented that because they had the opportunity to be both in front of and behind the camera, they felt a greater sense of involvement in the project instead of feeling like test subjects. As the curator of this project, I feel that the distraction of the occasionally shaky footage is far outweighed by the inclusive atmosphere created by sharing the responsibility of video documentation.

While the conclusion of this thesis may be considered an end-point for this particular journey, it also opens up avenues of exploration for aspects of place-specificity in other practices. Other trajectories could include studies of place-specificity within landscape architecture; place-specificity as a theme within feminist art theory with a particular focus perhaps on performativity, and within new media studies such as creating place within cyberspace.

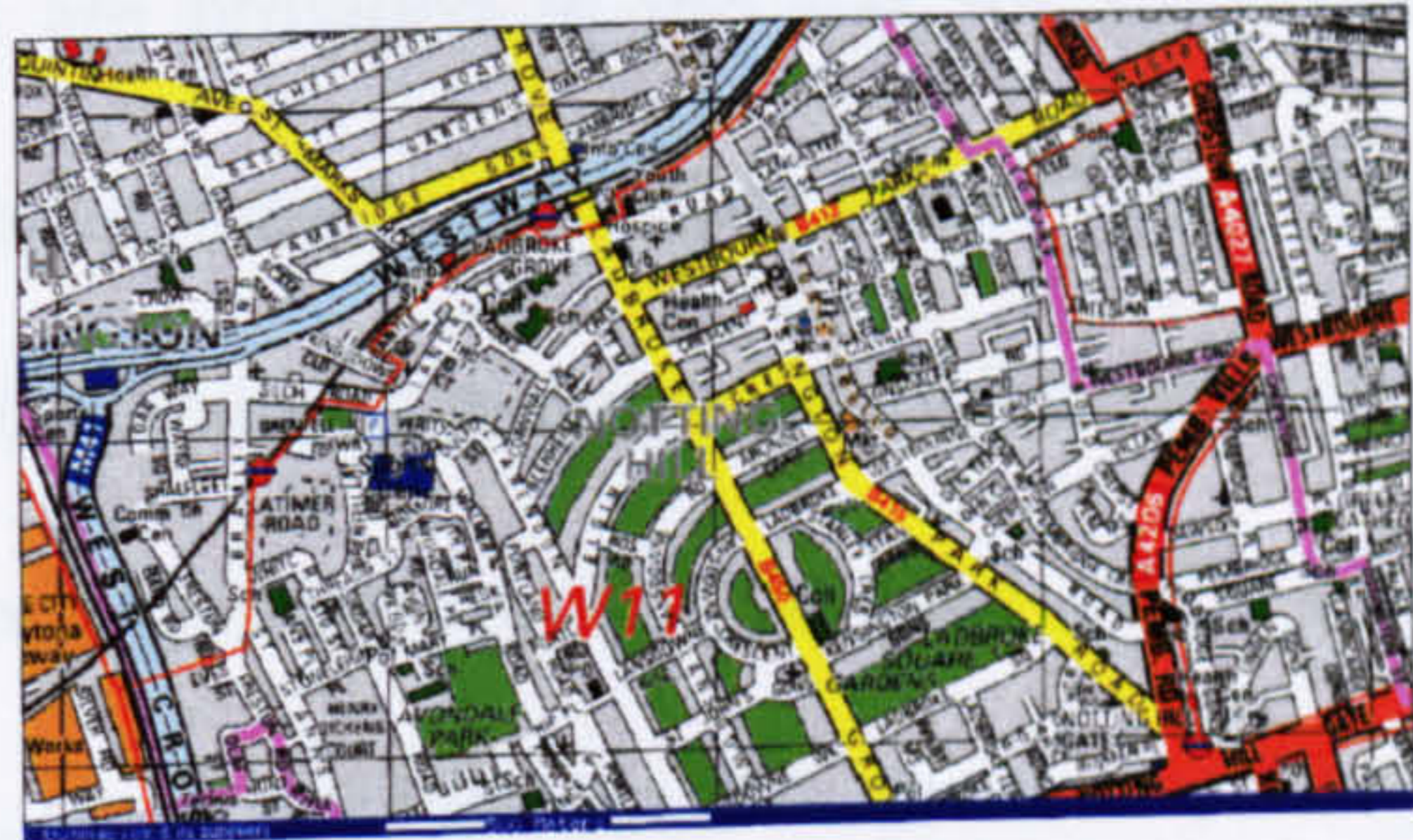
Using this thesis as a point of reference for understanding the distinction of place-specificity within new genre public art practice, one could expand the investigation

into other avenues of consideration including the politics of place within activist art and interventions. This research also provides a platform from which to question the ever expanding boundaries of public art into everyday life – Who is this public artwork for? How does the work address the various audiences for whom it is intended? How does it affect those not necessarily part of the intended audience? What is the role of the ‘public artist’ today? Can this kind of art contribute to today’s communities and/or society as a whole? What is the role of art institutions today in relation to the increase of place-specific work outside the traditional confines of museum culture?

The utilisation of a conversational methodology, developing a think-tank, or fostering of deeper personal connections certainly would not be appropriate methods of enquiry for all studies within art and design practice; however, within the realm of place-specificity and socially engaged public art practice, these methods have served to create an intriguing perspective on the role of place within new genre public art.

Germany's Think-Tank

The description of the contextual projects in the new framework comprises the grade of impact of the research. This study has been implemented in a participatory manner. The DVD based materials is a selected selection of conversational highlights and photo-specific themes that have been during the research. The DVD can be viewed separately or in combination with reading this article in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*.



LONDON – A THINK-TANK IN PROCESS

² The DVD files are in MP4 format and can be viewed on any computer with an internet DVD player. The files have been hosted on YouTube.com for ease of access and work with PowerPoint, iMovie, and WindowsMedia Player for the presentation. Link to the DVD files can be contacted and requested.

Curating a Think-Tank

The description of the curatorial projects in the next two chapters comprises the practical aspect of the research. This descriptive text compliments the accompanying video suite. The DVD based exhibition is a curated selection of conversational highlights and place-specific themes that developed during the research. The DVDs can be viewed separately or in conjunction with reading this section of the thesis (footnotes are provided in the text for suggested points to view the videos). The suite is composed of five disks.²⁸ The first video is *A London Conversation* and highlights a range of topics that were addressed during the week-long London conversations in May 2001. The second video, *A Question of Place*, directly addresses the question of why place is so central to the work of the project participants. The third video, *The Headlands as Place*, proposes considering a hypothetical place-specific project for the Headlands Center for the Arts in California (the site of subsequent meetings after the London conversations) and each participant discusses their views and perspectives on of such a proposition. The first three videos feature the participants from the London think-tank. The final two videos feature additional project participants from California who all have established relationships with the Headlands Center for the Arts. This second

²⁸ The DVD disks are in +RW format and may not be compatible with all commercial DVD players. The disks have been tested on numerous computer DVD players and work with PowerDVD, Quicktime, and WindowsMedia Player. See the troubleshooting insert in the DVD boxed set for instructions and suggestions.

half of the project is discussed in detail later in the thesis in the section, *Headlands Revisited*. Video four, *The Relationship of Place* features six participants reflecting on the ideas, inspirations and influences of a specific place, The Headlands Center for the Arts. The final video, *What Makes a Space a Place?*, is a collect of six versions of the elements of place from the participants in the second half of the project. While each video is a complete work in itself, in conjunction with the thesis, it is suggested that the DVDs are viewed sequentially and in tandem with reading this section of the thesis (follow indication in footnotes).

This chapter is divided into three sections: execution of the methodology, a diary of the week-long event (which to some extent could serve as a practicum for developing a think-tank), and finally critical observations from the first phase of the project.

Method in Action

The initial phase of the research was a test of the methodology to determine how the theoretical use of conversation would work in practice for this project. Since the use of conversation as a method for research is in itself an innovative approach to examining the role of place-specificity in new genre public art, it is important to separate the approach to this project and the tools

that were used to generate new insights, from the actual content and insights produced.

Conversation, by its very nature, is a methodology with built-in resistance to linear structure. While it is possible to structure a conversation to some extent, once it is started, conversation has a natural tendency to branch out unpredictably, creating unforeseen connections between topics. This branching was evident during the test conversation which occurred in Oakland, California in November 2000. A diary of that conversation can be found in appendix II. While the conversation in Oakland tended to stray at times onto topics that did not seem initially related to place-specificity, these tangential discussions eventually wove their way back to the issue of place. In the combined role of curator, participant, and observer, it was at times difficult not to direct the conversation back to place-specificity whenever one of these tangential conversations went on for a long period, especially since the test was designed to last only as long as one evening meal. However, the purpose was to determine how well the methodology would work with minimal restrictions and also to what extent the participants would self-monitor the conversation.

While there was no way to effectively determine whether the participants were editing their comments, the participants appeared to be making a conscious effort to keep the topic of place at the forefront of the evening's

conversation. Individuals would make comments such as, "... getting back to place-specificity..." or "I think this relates to our topic because ..."

To let conversation 'happen' without any kind of structure would have been a risky approach to using conversation as the method. Like the number of nodes in a network, as the number of participants in a conversation increases, the number of potential connections and branching points increases exponentially if left unmanaged. While such an unchecked expansion of ideas and connection could prove quite interesting, for this research there needed to be a balance of expansion, tangents, and refocusing in order to effectively utilise the conversational method for the research topic.

Three noteworthy aspects structured the approach that was used to generate the content of this thesis: The first was a deliberate attempt to create multilayered perspectives of place through the choice of participants in the conversation. The second was to challenge the notion of site and place by setting up contrasts between the familiar territories where the participants worked and lived and the location where they had to interact with the notion of place-specificity. The third was the development of a battery of tools, from in-person conversation to in-depth individual interviews, personal diaries and e-communications, in order to push the boundaries of the very notion of conversation.

The Participants

The choice of participants in a conversation is a crucial element in the conversational output. What individuals bring to a conversation in terms of personal experiences, perspectives, and willingness to participate, are part of the ingredients of a conversation. In order to set up a more fruitful debate about place and space, I deliberately chose a group of participants who approached the subject of place in their work through a diversity of means. Each individual, Seyed Alavi, Shelly Willis, Terri Cohn, Dan Gretton, Jane Trowell, and James Marriott has explored the idea of place-specificity either by creating artworks that addressed the subject of a specific place, by curating art exhibitions that addressed place-specific issues, by writing about place-specific projects, and/or by engaging in a community in order to explore what made a particular space a place.²⁹

Thus the first relevant aspect of the participants' background was the fact that they could all address the same subject of place-specificity from a different perspective. In addition to their diversity of backgrounds and work approaches, I chose the participants in relation to my own background: three of them live and work in the place that represents my past (the United States) and three of them live and work in the place of my present (the United Kingdom). This selection criteria was a deliberate attempt to contextualise my own sense of place in the role of participant/observer.



13. The London participants in conversation, May 2001

By definition, the place where one lives and works is also one's present place. Thus, by setting up a conversation between participants whose 'present place' may represent their interlocutor's 'past place', a richer dialogue may take place. Indeed, the choice of participants allows the conversational process to extract the time-specific aspects of place.

Location as a Tool

In addition to deliberately choosing participants in order to generate a richer dialogue about place-specificity, the location of the conversations was chosen in order to create meaningful tensions between the participants and place. Most people are more comfortable discussing their work within the familiar

²⁹ Specific projects are listed in the artists' biographical section, appendix I.

confines of their “home” environment, which in this project could include an actual home, a studio, a city, or a region. This familiarity can cause a kind of cultural myopia. Contemporary philosopher, Alain de Botton has observed that, “home ... finds us more settled in our expectations. We feel assured that we have discovered everything interesting about a neighbourhood, primarily by virtue of having lived there a long time. It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place which we have been living in for a decade or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind.” (2002, p.247) These blind-spots can be shifted in several ways. De Botton suggests approaching one’s familiar environment as a traveller, observing the intimate details of the street, the people, and the culture in progress. Another means of generating dialogue about place is by introducing one’s home territory to a visitor. Anyone who has served as the ‘tour guide’ for visiting relatives and friends can attest to the fact that one often becomes more observant of one’s environment when faced with the challenge of having to interpret those surroundings for someone else. Conversely, the visitor can often bring new insight to the resident’s perspective of their home territory. A visitor comes with that traveller’s point of view and is generally more open to discovery. These observations were part of the rationale for bringing the Bay Area artists to London and subsequently the London artists to the Bay Area.

All conversations take place in a space. That space can be either a physical place (a classroom, a café, etc.) or a virtual one (chat rooms, instant

messaging, email, etc.). The choice of a conversation's location has implications in that it automatically structures the relationships between the participants and the place as much as between the participants themselves. This is never less true than when the conversation is supposed to address the very subject of place-specificity.

The London conversations took place in a variety of locations which were reflective of different types of places such as home place, work place, and public place. Our first day of conversations took place in my home. The second day's conversations started at PLATFORM's studio that is both a work place and a form of second home for the PLATFORM team. The group then moved on to the café at the Design Museum. This very open and public café was the site of a very candid and emotional discussion regarding place, immigration, and the politics of borders. On subsequent days, the group met for conversations in parks, pubs, restaurants, and on public transport. I had wondered if the participants would be more likely to speak from a greater personal perspective when we were in "home-like" places and in more general terms in public places. However, this particular group generally spoke in very personal terms, regardless of the location. For these participants, the length of time we were able to stay in a particular place appeared to have more of an influence on the degree of personal reflection than the location did.

Other Tools

Conversation as a method can unfold through a variety of means. For most lay-people, the typical conversation is informal and oral, and happens in a multi-participant setting. For this project, however, the paradox was that while letting conversation happen entirely without structure would have been too limiting, conversely imposing too much structure on the conversation would also inherently limit the output.

In order to transcend these limitations, structural constraints were only placed on the choice of participants and the locations. In contrast, conversational approaches were open-ended and free-flowing. For example, the first conversational events had relatively little structure beyond an initial exposition of the project by the author. Also, participants were free to improvise responses to the topic at hand, to specific comments by other members, or to personal concerns.

As the project started to unfold, several conversational tools were layered on top of one another in order to create a richer dialogue between the participants: For instance, in addition to informal group conversations, one-on-one conversations took place between the author and each of the other participants. Personal diaries and multiperson written dialogues through email supplemented the process, and each of these tools brought a different facet to

the overall conversation. For example, group conversation is inherently less structured and more free-flowing, while diaries are inherently sequential and email discussions or chats follow a 'threaded' structure where participants respond to a specific topic one at a time.

Collectively, this variety of tools stretched the very notion of conversation. First of all, the choice of these tools enabled the conversation to stretch through space, either by conducting an in-person dialogue in a 'moving place' (e.g. conducting some of the London conversation in a bus travelling through the city) or by conducting group dialogues through email (thus transcending geography).³⁰ Second, the tools enabled the conversation to stretch through time by allowing the participants to continue the discussion at a later date by contributing observations through personal diaries, emailed responses or written observations, or by revisiting some of the topics diffracted through the lens of their work. Lastly, these tools allowed us to transcend the notion of conversation by challenging the very outputs 'left behind' after the conversation is finished. While most conversations leave only a memory behind, our conversations left behind tangible manifestations in addition to the participants' memories. Videotaped discussions, written diaries and the culmination of this thesis were some of the corporeal results of our conversations on place.

³⁰ It should be noted that email and bus conversations did not prove to be areas for lengthy or in depth conversations. However, they did provide interesting opportunities for the participants to explore varying notions of conversation and to generate ideas for discussions during more conventional, face-to-face conversations.

A Week in London: Diary of a Think-Tank:

Terri Cohn was the first participant to arrive from the United States. Due to scheduling difficulties, the week was designed so participants arrived in succession and as the week progressed more people arrived to participate until mid-week, when all the participants would be together and then after that apex, participants would slowly withdraw until we were back to just one other person besides myself. Terri Cohn proved to be an excellent first participant. As we have been colleagues for years and we both come to the project with similar backgrounds – that of a practising curator and writer – and we had an opportunity to discuss the possibilities for the week. It was a chance for me to think out loud about what my vision for the week would be and to get her feedback. Mostly, she thought what I had planned was exciting and would work well with the goal. My idea was to have a loose outline to keep us moving forward on the topic of place in our work, but to allow for the conversation to flow and meander a bit to see if we uncovered any hidden or unpredictable insights. It was going to be a delicate balance between freeform discourse and ordered chaos. The next day, Shelly Willis arrived and she and Terri moved over to their hotel. This gave them a chance to get to know each other better. They were already acquaintances, having worked briefly in the past at the same college, but had never spent much time together. Each had seen projects and exhibitions that the other had done, but this was a chance to know each other on a more personal level. Friday evening was spent with

Platform at their office while Terri interviewed them for an article she was doing for Sculpture magazine. This was an opportunity not only for Shelly and I to witness Terri in her role as interviewer, but also to see Platform as a team. All three members were present (Jane Trowell, James Marriott, and Dan Gretton) and not only did we get an overview of their philosophy and their previous work, but we also had the chance to see how they interacted together and how each member spoke about the work and the motivation slightly differently. They discussed their process of working, the long periods of time they would dedicate to project (in some cases, years), how they would work out problems and disagreements, and how they use conversation as a means to connect with their audience and each other. In hindsight, it would have been very helpful for all the participants in the project to have had an opportunity to present in the beginning, what they did as artists (writers, curators, administrators), to show samples of their work, and to share a bit about themselves as individuals. Since we were taking this very personal approach of conversation, I think it would have made people feel a bit more comfortable with each other from the very beginning. As it turned out, people did share stories about themselves. They showed their work to each other and they did become more comfortable with each other, but the process was more organic and came out of individuals' needs to know about each other and requests to take time to find out more about each other.

Saturday, Seyed Alavi arrived in the early morning and we began our first conversational session. Not all of the members of PLATFORM were able to attend as they had another project happening that day, so Jane Trowell came as the representative for the group. Throughout the week, Jane was the constant participant from PLATFORM. Also present that Saturday was my husband, Nick Strauss who is the director of strategic planning for an advertising agency. As with our first 'test conversation' in Oakland, I felt that it was important to stay open to unforeseen potential. Seyed's wife, Andrea Brewster was in attendance during our first meal/conversation in Oakland. She is also an artist, and while her genre is not place-specific public works, she did have some interesting insights about place, public art, and the roles of artists in trying to incorporate place in their work. In both instances (incorporating Andrea and Nick into the conversations) the group wholeheartedly wanted them to participate and in turn each contributed a valuable perspective.

I started the conversation with a brief overview of what I hoped the day would be like. That we would have a conversation about place in our work and that the conversation would be free to take its own course as other topics wove their way into and out of our discussion. We then went around the room and introduced ourselves and talked a bit about what brought each of us to this first conversation. Two things happened that set the tone for that day. The first was that Jane assumed by the casual and familiar manner of the American

participants that they were all good friends. This made Jane feel a bit odd and an outsider. Ironically, it was really only I, who had a well-established relationship with the American participants and even that was to varying degrees. In part, it was the familiar manner in which Americans in general approach each other rather quickly, as opposed to the more traditional British approach of getting to know each other for a much longer period of time before they become so casual and relaxed with each other. This difference was discussed in greater detail at the debriefing in San Francisco some months later.

The other incident was that Seyed Alavi decided to take the approach of questioning everyone's motivation for wanting to work with community and place (including his own). While I understood the philosophical approach he was taking, it felt very confrontational to the other participants. Even though he kept repeating that he asks these questions of himself (e.g. Who am I to go into a community to do this work? Why do I think I can impose my belief system on someone else, even if it is in the role of a teacher?). The group, in general got defensive and it was difficult to keep tempers at bay. The situation did eventually diffuse itself. But the tension it incited lingered, especially for Jane towards Seyed. The conversation flowed more freely after we took a break and then moved upstairs into the garden. Our conversation revolved around a question Jane posed about how each of us would feel if we saw a notice that an artist was going to come into our communities and do a project.

Everyone had different opinions and reflected on experiences they have had with projects being in their neighbourhoods and being part of projects. After a couple more hours of discussion, we stopped for the night and went to dinner together. At this point, I think it is important to note that for future projects, I would get more help with the co-ordination of events and details happening around the actual conversation sessions. In other words, I would have a separate events co-ordinator to handle the details of where we were eating, how we were getting there, departures and arrivals of airplanes, equipment for set-up, operating the audio and video equipment during the sessions, et cetera. While limited time and finances did not allow for an assistant in this instance, anyone considering a similar project should strongly consider additional assistance. It would also have helped to have a separate camera operator as I often found myself slightly distanced and protected from the group by being behind the camera. I chose to turn the camera over to other people at times so I could participate more fully and I had to trust that the footage would be all right, if not a bit inconsistent, if someone else was filming without my direction.

The following day, Sunday, we met at the PLATFORM studio where James Marriott joined the group. I think the combination of having James there and being on familiar ground made Jane feel more comfortable. We sat around a large table and James asked if everyone would spend a little time introducing themselves, so that he could feel caught up with the group. He offered to start

and told a story about himself, his background, his upbringing and his motivation as an artist. It was quite a detailed and personal reflection, which set the tone for the rest of the other participants to talk in more detail about themselves, their upbringing and motivations in the arts. Ironically, I found out later that this time it was one of the American participants, Shelly Willis, who was surprised and felt a bit uncomfortable about how open people were talking about their backgrounds. However, this was not evident at the time as Shelly reflected on growing up poor and how she worked with her uncle who made and delivered ice. My feelings at the time, was that the process was quite positive and gave everyone a more solid understanding to some of the influences that each individual brought to their work and that influenced some of their unique perceptions of place. Everyone appeared to be fine after this extended introduction session and we set off on a walk (on of PLATFORM's art methods) so that Jane and James could show us some of the aspects of what made the area (South Bank / Tower Bridge) a unique place. We walked to the café at the Design Museum as James and Jane pointed out different aspects of the changing neighbourhood. The process of walking is an interesting mode of experiencing place. One moves through the physical world experiencing not just the ground beneath one's feet, but also the sounds and smells of the environment. One is moving thorough space, but also through time. There is the time of the journey, but also the act of walking a path that over centuries, others have walked before you. With James and Jane as our guides, we were walking through their version of the place, but we

were also interpreting the place through our own personal experiences, memories, and perspectives.

At the Design Museum the conversation became quite exciting and, again personal as we discussed place, immigration, politics and displacement. We were at the café for over two hours and at varying times individuals became excited, impassioned, teary, and angry. The flow of emotions was quite overwhelming at times and I wondered at certain points if everyone was all right, but they seemed to adjust, to lean on each other, to check in with each other, to stop just before a feeling or topic went too far to cause a breakdown in the conversation. Still, it was emotionally charged and later, I found out that Dan, who heard about it second hand was quite amazed by it and Jane and Shelly felt both encouraged and threatened by the event. Terri was moved to tears at one point when I was talking about immigration issues. Having known Terri for quite a long time, I knew that she was all right and was responding to her own feelings about being Jewish and the injustices that have happened to Jews in regards to internment and deportation. I did check in with her and she said she was fine, but the open display of emotion was some what unnerving for Jane and Shelly. We left the museum and continued our semi-guided walk as James and Jane lead us on a meandering route to the Mayflower Pub. They felt that as we were all Americans, they wanted to take us some place that was reflective of our heritage and that as the pilgrims left England on the *Mayflower* that it was fitting that we should return to the Mayflower (pub).

There, our conversation was less focused on place and more casual. A natural ebb and flow seemed to develop over the course of the week. We would have intense conversations followed by physical activity, food and casual rapport. I had schedule breaks into the sessions, periods of time when each member could have free time and be on their own, but there seemed to be an unconscious meter working during our sessions that would dictate how far and for how long we would pursue and line of discussion.

Monday, I had originally scheduled that we would meet in the late afternoon with PLATORM, James was not going to be able to attend, but Dan was going to be there (there had been some question as to whether Dan was going to be able to participate outside of the initial interview with Terri on Friday night, because of a family crisis). We arranged to meet Jan at Trafalgar Square at 4PM and ride the bus up to Parliament Hill. Initially, I had planned for the American participants to have the morning and afternoon off so that they could recuperate from a long weekend of thinking and talking and being together. However, Seyed had an idea of continuing the conversation on the bus so that the 'place' was actually moving while we talked about place. It seemed like an interesting idea and everyone wanted to go to the British Museum so against my (in hind sight) better judgement, we all hopped on the No. 7 double-decker bus from Notting Hill to Bloomsbury. It wasn't that anything disturbing happened during our day together. We had a fairly casual conversation on the bus that really only remotely touched on place and at the

museum we split up to wander the museum for a few hours until we met up again to take a walk down and through Covent Gardens on our way to meet Jan. The problem was, even though it was a pleasant day, we really needed time completely on our own, with no agenda, to individually reflect on and refuel from the weekend conversations. We met Jane and hopped on another bus to Parliament Hill. The plan was to spend some time on the hill and then we were going to be met by both James and Dan. This was a pleasant surprise for me as it meant that there would be at least one conversation in London where all the 'official' participants would be present. As we were walking up from the bus stop to the hill, Terri had a bit of a breakdown. It was a combination of not eating enough that day and just being too over stimulated by the weekend's events and not having any down time. Also, she and Shelly had stayed up very late each night talking about each day's events so she was poorly rested. There is a delicate balance between the power of conversation to generate new insight, openness, and stimulate new ideas or to be overwhelming and exhaustive. However, Terri persevered, even though I offered to get her a cab so she could go back to the hotel, and after resting on the hill for a bit, she felt better.

Our talk on the hill was interesting. Not so much for its content, but how the group naturally broke into smaller groups and how individuals moved from one group to the other. Terri and Jane talked about the environment and publications in the United States. Seyed and I played Frisbee for a little while.

Shelly and Seyed talked about philosophy and the three of us talked about metaphysics. Jane and I talked about being displaced in London and after a while we moved down the hill to our rendezvous with James and Dan at a local pub.

The conversation in the pub seemed very natural. The easy with which Dan fit into the group dynamic made it feel as if he had been with us from the beginning. Again, the group broke into smaller discussions with people moving around the table entering into one discussion and leaving another with ease. Ideally, this would have been the point where we would have started our week-long conversation together, but as financial and time constraints dictated a different course. This is also a point where it is both interesting and challenging to be a participant-observer. One has to choose which conversation to participate in and for how long. Which conversations do you record on the audiotape? Should you set up the video camera and if so, on which conversation? Additional equipment and assistance would have been very helpful at this point, but given the circumstances I didn't put on the video and chose to audio tape on conversation while I participated in another which did, to some degree, allow me to be in two places at once. Our group moved across the street to diner. Given that we had already had one breakdown and I could sense that others were also somewhat tired and overwhelmed, I let the dinner conversation flow in the same manner as at the pub. After the main part of the meal, when people were more rested and replenished, I turned the

groups' attention to Dan so that he would be able to present an introduction of himself, similar to when the rest of us had met at the PLATFORM studio on Sunday. It may have seemed a bit odd that I waited so long for Dan to do an introduction, but it was a combination of his slipping into the group so easily and the general fatigue of the group when he first joined us that governed my decision. I think it was a wise decision as the group seemed more relaxed and better able to refocus their collective attention as Dan spoke about his upbringing, his motivation for making art and being an activist, and his thoughts on what he had heard from James and Jan about the weekend's conversations and how he felt about joining the group at this point.

It was at this point that I found myself most challenged as a participant-observer. As a whole, this group had been very open, honest, and personal in their conversations with me and each other. They had, over a relatively short period of time, developed a sense of trust with each other and with me, despite various minor breakdowns. I felt that during the entire process, I had actually been the one who had been the most guarded – worrying about the overall welfare of the group, distracted by the details of running the project smoothly and making sure every had what they needed and were in the right places at the correct times – and had not exposed myself to the process as fully as the others. Now this may just be the nature of being a participant-observer; however, I felt that I had withheld from this group that had given me their trust. During our conversation at the Design Museum, we had talked about

issues of displacement and immigration. These are two topics with which I am personally quite familiar and feel very passionate about. At the Design Museum, I did talk about my general views on the subjects, new American immigration laws, and injustices that were currently taking place in the United States under the auspices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). However, I held back my own personal experience with the INS. As we were later walking back from the Mayflower Pub, Shelly was walking ahead of the group with me and asked me if there was something more to the INS story and I told her about my personal experience with the INS. She listened thoughtfully and said that now she understood me a bit better and why I was so interested in place and doing this work. Seeing her make that connection made me begin to wonder if I should have been more forthcoming with the group. I decided if the opportunity presented itself, I would tell them the story. So, of course, after Dan gave us his background, he said to me, "Cameron, I am really interested to know what got you personally involved in this subject of place. What was the process that got you to this point?" I talked a bit about having moved so many times during my 36 years (29 moves at last count) and then about my personal ordeal with the INS and how that contributed to my own sense of displacement and my desire to figure out what makes a space a place so that I as an individual could feel more connected to where I was. It is quite a dramatic story and not appropriate for the context of this thesis, but the point is, that taking that risk to get more personally involved with the group increased the overall level of trust that the group had in me and in each other.

It created a connection that carried over through the next few months till we were able to meet again in San Francisco. At that meeting, we only had one day to go over our thoughts about what had happened in London, as well as, how it had effected our work and thinking since and how we felt about place in our work now. I think, in part because we had all been so open and honest with each other in London, we were able to enter the Headlands conversation almost from where we had left off in London.

Observations Along the Path to Outcomes

One of the keys to being an effective curator is the ability to tap into a range of skills, many of which are not often found in a typical curatorial job description, including a willingness to be flexible, the ability to adjust to changing circumstances, and knowing how to recognise that a disappointment or a mistake may be an opportunity in disguise. All of these challenges presented themselves during the course of this project. A diary of the daily activities during the London think-tank can be found in appendix III and may serve as a useful meditation for other curators and researchers interested in developing a similar structure for conducting research using either conversation or a think-tank as methods.

The selection of the participants was finalised in the early stages of the development of this project. PLATFORM also knew early on that they would

be going to a month long residency at the Headlands three months after the London think-tank. This opportunity allowed for the advanced planning of a second meeting which could serve as both a continuation of the conversation and a debriefing session for the think-tank. The three month period in between the two meetings would give all of the participants, myself included, an opportunity to reflect on the meeting in London and its possible effects on our various perceptions and approaches towards place in our work.

Having the second meeting planned in advance also allowed for more freedom to experiment with the conversational method. While during the course of the week, the conversations tended to stay rather naturally focused on place, there was little anxiety that a certain amount of conceptual territory would have to be covered during the week, as we knew we would be meeting again and if a particular aspect of place was not discussed in London, we still had an opportunity to discuss it in a face-to-face conversation at the Headlands in California.

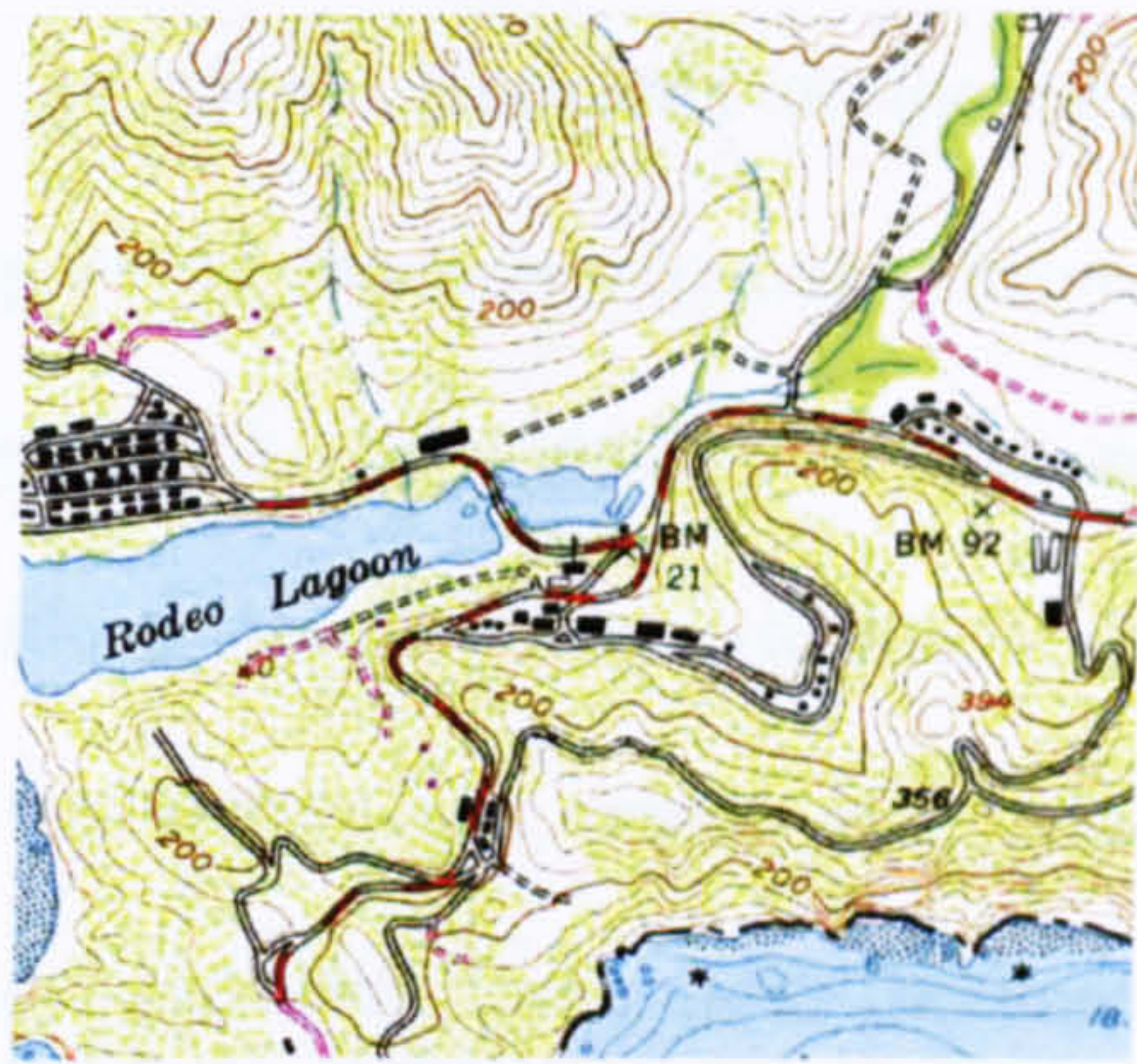
In a sense, the main outcome of the London meeting was that it prepared the participants for the Headlands session. While the email conversations that preceded the London meeting gave the participants an overall sense of who would be participating, we still spent a good deal of time in London getting to know each other and sharing our individual histories in relation to our perceptions of place. This process allowed the participants the opportunity to

trust each other on a deeper level that, over the course of the week, led to more in-depth conversations about place and our personal relationships and influences. We were able to move beyond the 'standard' responses that we routinely gave about our work and began thinking about the underpinnings of our work on a deeper level in response to each other's reflections. Several participants commented on how they would often make statements such as "my work is about time and place," but until the meeting in London, they had never really had to articulate what they meant by "time and place", let alone why they thought those aspects of their work were central to their relationship to audience, site, or other aspects of art making.

The week long London think-tank allowed the participants to expand their thinking both individually and as a group. In essence, the thoughts and reflections regarding place-specificity that developed over the course of the project were seeded with the initial set of questions that were developed during our electronic conversations prior to the London meeting. Those ideas were then planted and began to germinate in London, and were ultimately harvested during an intensive daylong session at the Headlands. In between London and the Headlands, those thoughts and reflections were given time to grow and develop in each of us. Because of the physical time and emotional space the week in London provided the participants, they were able to come together at the Headlands and provide a series of very focused and intensive

discussions about place-specificity within their work that, in general, reached far beyond their articulated concepts in the early stages of the research.³¹

³¹ If viewing the videos in conjunction with this text, view DVD 1, *A London Conversation*, at this point. Following the video, proceed to the next chapter of the thesis, *The Headlands Center for the Arts: the Conversation Continues*.



THE HEADLANDS CENTER FOR THE ARTS
THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

“Places are held in sites by personal and common values, and by the maintenance of those values over time, as memory. As remembered, places are thus conserved, while sites, the forgotten places, are exploited.”

--Jeff Kelley, Headlands Journal 1986-89 (p.34)

The Headlands is a place rich in memory. The strata of time can be easily read on the rocky cliffs that rise up from the western shore. A flock of pelicans, prehistoric wings outstretched in the afternoon sun, glide across the lagoon in their daily migration from Bird Island, a small outcrop of rocks, chalky white from the accumulation of generations of guano. Remnants of the army bunkers still perch on the hill tops waiting for the Japanese who never arrived. Deer roam in small herds along the fire trails and cougars sightings are regularly posted at the visitors' centre with its steeple giving evidence of the building's former life as the chapel for Fort Barry. Park rangers have taken over the nightly patrols and artists fill the barracks. Teens from the youth hostel play football on the former parade grounds – a scraggly swath of green turf struggling to hold back the encroaching eucalyptus. A ring of white duck feathers circles the base of an oak tree; each quill purposefully placed a quarter inch into the soil. Another trail of feathers snakes its way up the stairway that leads to the art centre; zigzagging along the banister, through dried leaves and up into the branches of a low-growing manzanita that shades the stairway. A series of smaller feather installations point the way to the

studio of a visiting artist from Taiwan who has shipped tens of thousands of feathers from his homeland to work with during his residency.

The concept for the Headlands Center for the Arts (HCA) emerged from lengthy public planning conducted by the National Park Service in 1982. The military had relinquished the area to the park service and a series of proposals were put to public debate. In the end, the 15,000 acre Headlands area, located on the north side of the Golden Gate Bridge and only ten minutes from San Francisco, remained virtually untouched. Only the former military buildings were redeveloped to accommodate a variety of non-profit organisations including children's groups, environmental organisations, and community service agencies. The buildings all maintain their same utilitarian exteriors while the interiors have been redesigned to suit the needs of the various organisations.



15. Fort Barry, former barracks which now house non-profit art and environmental organisations

A group of artists and art advocates made of the first core group of board directors who developed the Center and the first staff members were hired in 1986. The Center was re-built primarily by a crew of local artists and students and comprises two of the former barracks which now house the main administrative offices, a lecture hall, meeting rooms, a kitchen, workshop, and studios for resident artists.



16. Headlands Center for the Arts, main buildings

Other buildings which also form the HCA include the former gymnasium which often serves as a performance space and the studio for visiting musicians and dancers. A series of Victorian style houses, which once served as homes for officers, now provide accommodation for visiting artists and some of the staff members. Three outbuildings, just a short distance from HCA, are under redevelopment to provide subsidised studio space for affiliate artists and writers from the San Francisco Bay Area. These artist studio buildings overlook a Nike missile launch pad. Now deemed an 'historic site'

by the parks service, the missile is raised and lowered several times a week for guided tour groups and curious visitors.



17. Artist in Residence housing



Affiliate studios and Nike Missile Site

The De-briefing

The research participants reassembled at the HCA on August 17, 2001 for a day-long debriefing and continuation of their conversation, approximately three months after the week-long sessions in London.³² PLATFORM had been awarded a one month residency at the HCA. All of the USA participants either currently or previously lived in the Bay Area, so the residency served as an excellent opportunity to experience each other's home-front – first the USA participants in London and then the UK artists in the Bay Area. The only member of the original group who could not attend was Shelly Willis. Unable to leave the University of Minnesota for the gathering, she sent her thoughts on the project via email and offered some questions and suggestions that

³² Refer to DVD 1, *A London Conversation*.

helped to direct the structure of the day's meeting. As we only had a day for the debriefing and to continue our conversation about place, Shelly suggested that the conversation take a more structured approach and focus on one or two specific questions. Similar to the research process itself, this approach allowed for a concentration of the broad range of ideas and perspectives that had been developed and explored during the think-tank.

After a reunion lunch in the HCA kitchen, we began our meeting in Jane Trowell's studio, located in the main complex. Each participant took time to share their reflections on the London event and how the project had affected their individual perspectives on place. This was also an opportunity to express personal feelings regarding the process and our interactions with each other during the week in London and subsequent interactions via email and phone conversations. Overall, the reaction to the think-tank was positive and all of the participants felt that it had been a valuable means through which to explore the relationship of place to their individual bodies of work. However, most of the participants experienced very personal emotions during the process. Their feelings about the London experience were very mixed. All of the UK participants commented on how the group may speak the same language, but as two cultural camps, we can at times communicate very differently. For instance, Jane initially thought that all of the US participants were old friends because of their lack of reserve with each other and candid conversational style. She was quite surprised to find out that prior to the think-

tank, the US participants had limited contact with each other. Some participants felt frustrated, initially, by the apparent lack of structure during our first group meeting in London which left them feeling some what emotionally vulnerable, but expressed that later in the week and upon subsequent reflection during the weeks following the think-tank, they appreciated the opportunity to see how our conversations evolved. Other participants felt that the open ended conversational format allowed for greater opportunities to explore the relationships between self and place and that a more restrictive format would be less interesting to participate in. Jane expressed how mixed her feelings were during that week in London and she was surprised by the degree of emotion expresses by the US participants and the amount of internal emotion stirred up within herself. She recognised that she was in a very “intense place” personally at the time (overwork, issues at PLATFORM, life issues) and she brought those conditions with her to the meetings. She felt that her experience would have been different if the think-tank had occurred at a different point in her life. Several other participants echoed this point of view. Each of us entered the space carrying a selection of individual conditions through which we filtered our perceptions, interactions, and reactions to each other, the experience, and the place itself. James felt he did not fully embrace the opportunity to experience the open structure of the think-tank because he was still in his ‘place’ and had all the distractions that go along with that. Both Jane and James commented on how they were more relaxed and open at the Headlands since they were in residence and to some

extent, they could leave their other place behind and not have to worry about it. This comment was reflected in reverse by the US participants who felt that being in the UK was like a residency and they had the space to be more open and less distracted by the day-to-dayness of their lives. There is the potential for a sense of a heightened perception of place when one shifts from familiar locations to new surroundings; a condition that de Botton refers to as a *travelling mindset*.

“Receptivity might be said to be its chief characteristic. We approach new places with humility. We carry with us no rigid ideas about what is interesting. We irritate locals because we stand on traffic islands and in narrow streets and admire what they take to be strange small details... We are alive to the layers of history beneath the present and take notes and photographs.”(pp.246-47)

Seyed’s experience in London was particularly indicative of the travelling mindset. He felt he both approached the place and the project with heightened receptivity. He was completely comfortable with the open format of the conversation as he felt it was reflective of his own practice which he believed left him more open to discovery, details, emotions, reflections. He seemed to be the only participant who did not experience any degree of emotional anxiety during the London think-tank. Contrary to the reactions of many of the other participants, the thought of a more structured format seemed to cause Seyed some distress and his reflections and observations during the Headlands discussions appeared much more constrained than in London.

Following the debriefing, the group took up the challenge of focusing the conversation for the remainder of the day on two questions: *What would you create as a place-specific public art project for the Headlands?* and *Why is place central to your work?* While each participant could only present their individual perspective on the relationship of place to their work, a number of interesting commonalities arose during the discussions. Many of the artists found that uncovering and exploring the history of a specific place was of particular interest in the development of a project. However, which history to choose for exploration was influenced by the individual interests of the artists. The participants assembled in Dan Gretton's Headlands studio for the second half of the day to explore these new questions. Dan's studio overlooked the Nike missile site and he expressed that the vision of that missile rising up from the ground several times a week influenced his desire to learn more about the military history of the place. James was more interested in the history of the facility management of the Headlands: how were operations funded, what were the connections between the social politics of the Headlands, and the energy politics of actually running the place. More specifically; who paid the gas and electric bills, what were the historic ties to oil companies, and how did the HCA fit into the empire of BP and Shell. This conversation prompted Jane to observe that sometimes an individual will have a "bee in one's bonnet" – a specific focus that they take with them everywhere and that they can only observe a place from that perspective. Since James's

work was so focused on issues regarding BP and Shell, that focus would naturally influence his relationship with the HCA as a place.

Both Jane and Seyed were interested in the natural history of the Headlands. However, Seyed felt that he would need to spend several weeks at the Headlands in order for a place-specific topic to reveal itself. Spending a concentrated period of time on site, without a specific predetermined idea of what the project will be, is part of Seyed's artistic process. This time period allows him to uncover the intersections between the history and use of a specific place and his personal connections and interests to that place. Having spent three weeks at the Headlands, Jane had developed a strong connection to the flock of pelicans that performed a daily migration from Bird Island to the lagoon every morning and returned to Bird Island every afternoon. While she was uncertain what her place-specific project would be, she was certain it would somehow involve a sense of history, perhaps stories from a soldier who had served at Fort Barry, and the pelicans.

Terri Cohn had spent the most time in residence at the HCA, having been an affiliate artist for three years. Terri also developed a series of public programs for the HCA during her residency. Terri felt that her public project would stem from a series of explorations she began during her residency which involved collecting stories from residents about their encounters ghosts at the Headlands and researching the archives for evidence of the paranormal history

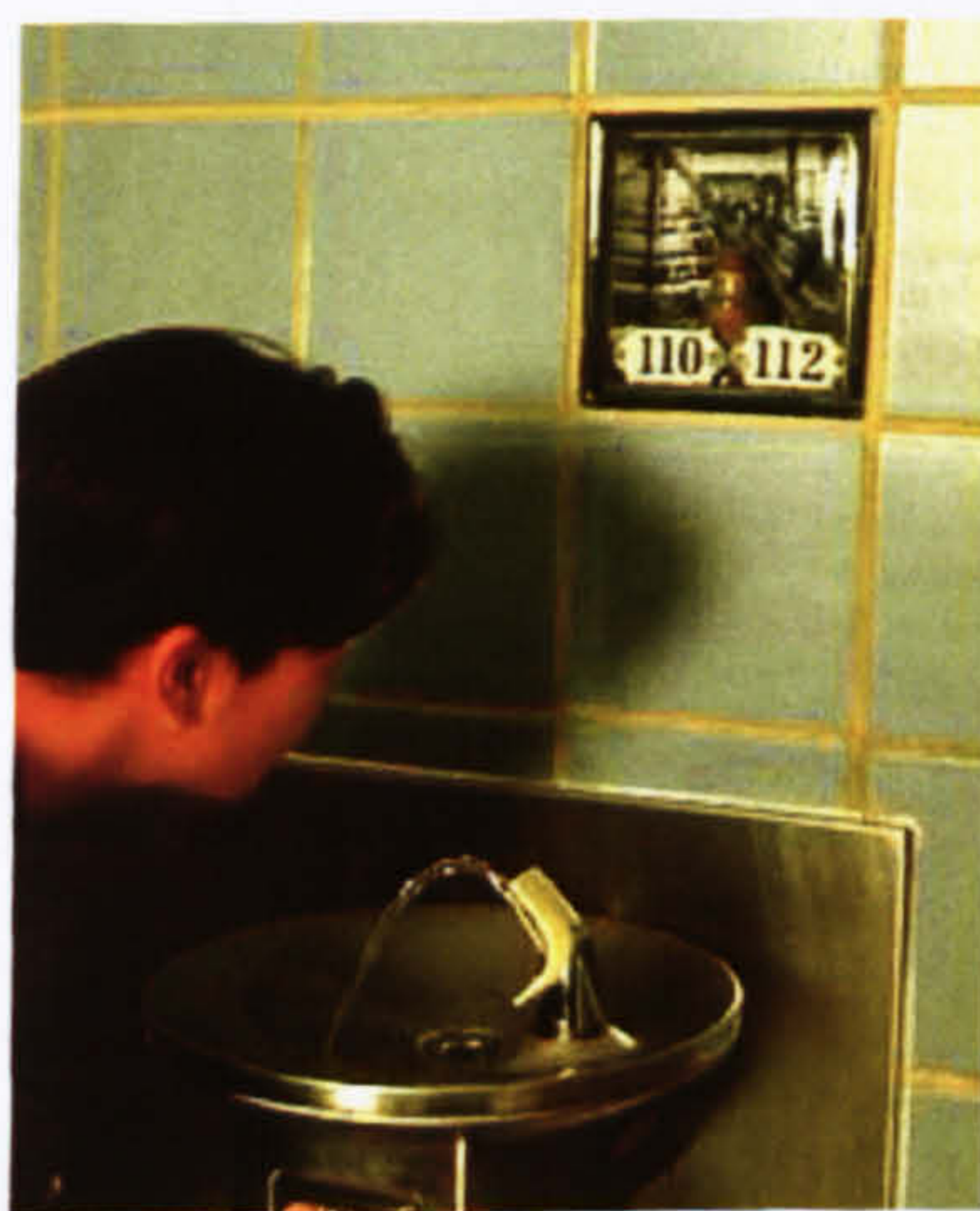
of the place. This interest developed after several artists told her they had found themselves in the presence of a ghost during their residency. Both Terri and Jane's interest in place was indicative of another common theme that developed during our conversations; namely, that place is also a means for exploring personal histories and memories. This method of exploration is another mechanism for developing a relationship with a specific place.

My own interest in the Headlands as a place, stems from the third trend that emerged from our conversations: how artists often use place as a means for connecting not only to a specific place, but also to their audience. A place-specific work by artists Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel is an excellent example of such a project. *Mnemonics*, 1992, was created for the New Stuyvesant High School in New York City as part of the city's one percent for art program.



18. Kristin Jones & Andrew Ginzel, *Mnemonics*, 1992, New Stuyvesant High School, New York City, detail

The project consists of 400 hermetically sealed glass blocks imbedded in the walls of the ten-story school building. Originally eighty-eight of the blocks were used to create reliquaries which told the schools history, year by year. Eighty-eight were left empty, engraved with future years (as many as the school's past) so that over the years, the project would continue to evolve from the collective histories of the student body. The remaining blocks referred to science, history, art and nature from across the globe; containing items such as a sample of water from the Yellow River in China, clay pipes used in 17th century New York, and Icelandic lava. Public art such as this bridges elements of the student body's personal history with the history of a specific place as well as creating a connection to the future of that place. There are also connections to the history of students in the past, some of which could be relatives of current students. The potential of this work is not only to connect an audience to a place, but also to connect an audience to each other.



19. *Mnemonics*, detail

Like the other participants, I felt that I needed more time at the Headlands in order to develop a concrete idea for a place-specific project. I recognised that, like James, I had certain interests that often influenced how I approached most potential place-specific projects. While my interests were not as sharply focused as James's practice that continually returns to BP and Shell, I found that I often approached a project from the perspective of the individuals who are involved with a place rather than the physicality of the place. My interests and understanding of place revolved around the relationships which evolve within a specific place. I was concerned with how individuals use place to create relationships not only with a specific location, but also with other people and with themselves. These ideas would lead me back to the Headlands a year later to further explore the HCA as a unique location combining nature, history, art, community, and complex relationships to place.³³

³³ If viewing the videos in conjunction with this text, view DVD 2, *A Question of Place* and DVD 3, *The Headlands as Place*, at this point. Following the videos, proceed to the next section of the thesis, *The Headlands Revisited*.

The Headlands Revisited

Upon returning to London, I began the process of reviewing and editing the video documentation from the Headlands session. During this time, an additional question began to develop. Over the course of the research, the primary focus had been on how the participants viewed place in relation their work. How did they use place to develop specific projects? What relationship did place have in the development of the content of the work? How do they use place to develop the layers of meaning and connection for their audience? Such questions situated place in a position as something that the participants utilised and influenced. I began to wonder what a counter-position might be. For instance, how does a place-specific project influence an artist? What are some of the long term affects on future public works?

As I continued to edit the Headlands video footage and write about the session, I began to examine my own long-term relationship with the Headlands Center for the Arts and how my experiences and interactions with the activities there had influenced my work. I recognised that there was a sense that the Headlands had played an important role in how I viewed place-specificity, but it was difficult to translate this tangible feeling into a working theory from London. Like many of the participants in the think-tank, I felt I needed to spend some time at the Headlands. *Time to reconnect to my past relationships with the place and time to consider how those relationships have*

influenced my work and to explore what new influences might present themselves if I were in residence at the HCA. I also wanted to examine whether other artists had similar experiences with place-specific projects influencing how they perceived the role of place in later works.

Using the London think-tank as a model, I selected five participants to work with me at the Headlands. I wanted to explore a variety of perspectives, yet still have a manageable number of participants. Also in keeping with the think-tank model, I selected artists, writers, and curators (most of who work across disciplines). The Headlands was the common denominator for this expansion of the research. In addition to seeking participants from a variety of backgrounds, I was also interested in participants who had a variety of relationships with the HCA. The final group of participants represented a cross section of the multiple possibilities of how one can experience the HCA as a place.

The participants included, Ray Beldner, Robin Lasser, Donna Graves, John Wilson White, and Terri Cohn. As with the think-tank and the first Headlands session, I was a participant-observer. A curated selection of the participants' interviews incorporating their reflections and interpretations of the place-specific influences of the Headlands Center for the Arts is part of the DVD suite³⁴.

Ray Beldner has had a multi-layered relationship with HCA. He had a year-long artist in residency (in collaboration with Robin Lasser), worked as the main plumber for HCA, developed and produced some of HCA's fund-raising events, had a month-long residency in the studio space, and currently serves on the artists selection committee.

Robin Lasser was an artist in residence (AIR) for a year in collaboration with Ray Beldner. They did not live in one of the residence houses during this period; however, they had twenty-four hour access to their studios and they lived locally. Robin has also been a regular visitor to HCA for open studios, lectures, and other public events.

Donna Graves was the program director at HCA from 1994 to 1996. She was responsible for the development of public programs that were related to the unique history of HCA, the artists in residence, and contemporary art and social issues that affected the surrounding community. She had also participated in a collaborative project with HCA in her former position as the director of PublicArtWorks.

John Wilson White has had the longest, on-going relationship with HCA. He was an affiliate artist for three years and has been the staff photographer for HCA since the early 1990's. He is also an active environmentalist, whose work often revolves around water issues.

³⁴ DVD 4, *The Relationships of Place*

Terri Cohn was also an affiliate artist for three years. She has also developed a number of public programs for HCA. As a participant in both the think-tank and the original Headlands session, Terri provided additional continuity to the research by participating in this expanded aspect of the project.

The Headlands Center for the Arts has an established process for applying to be an artist in residence or an affiliate artist. The application process occurs once a year and involves committee reviews. Competition is quite competitive and places are limited. However, HCA does provide a few two-week and one month windows in its schedule for proposals from past participants and for special projects. Current program director Linda Samuels was very enthusiastic about my proposal to come to the Headlands as a resident to study the effects of HCA as a place on artists. With the help of artist residence coordinator, Holly Blake, they were able to find a two-week window for this study in what was already a full calendar and in August 2001, I returned to the Headlands as a resident.

Because the residency was limited to two-weeks, I utilised less of the conversational methodology and incorporated more conventional interview techniques. However, since I had known most of the participants fairly well, the interviews felt like the continuation of conversations we had been having over the years regarding the nature of our work, the Headlands, and public art. I scheduled an interview approximately every other day and all of the

interviews followed the same format. The participants would arrive at 11:00 a.m. and we would meet in the HCA kitchen to have a cup of coffee and take some time to reconnect with each other. The London think-tank process had revealed the importance of providing an adjustment period at the beginning of a session. An adjustment period is not only an opportunity to introduce (or in this case reintroduce) the participants to each other, but also provides a more comfortable and trusting environment. After reintroductions, we would then proceed to my studio for the first half of interview. After two hours we would break for lunch and return to the communal kitchen. The second half of interview would occur in different sites depending on an individual's relationship with HCA. This section of the interview also lasted about two hours and I ended each interview with the same question: *What do you think makes a space a place?* This structure worked extremely well over the course of the two weeks. There was an opportunity for the participants to adjust to the process, enough time to explore the topic, a break to refuel, and a chance to physically engage with the place by moving to other locations. This continuity also helped me as a participant-observer. I was able to be more engaged and less worried about details such as planning meals, transportation, and group dynamics. Being able to meet with the participants individually created a good balance with the think-tank process. The interviews tended to be more topic focused with the individuals. However, they were also a bit more predictable.

The first interview was with Ray Beldner. Beldner has one of the most diverse series of relationships with the Headlands among all the participants. Like many artists in the Bay Area, Ray has visited HCA numerous times over the years for the centre's biannual open house. However, his more personal relationship with the Headlands began when he started working as the HCA plumber. In the early days of his career, Ray supported his artwork as a skilled tradesman and his knowledge of plumbing and waterworks is reflected in many of his sculptures and installations that incorporate running water. As a result of this initial relationship with HCA, Ray had access to areas of the centre that were often ignored by other artists. Most of the buildings at HCA have not been extensively renovated and have much of their original plumbing, so over the years, Ray had explored virtually every basement, attic, and crawl space in the complex. He brought that intimate knowledge with him when he was later an artist in residence with Robin Lasser. Ray and Robin spent the majority of their year long residency creating a series of installations in the attic of the main studio building.

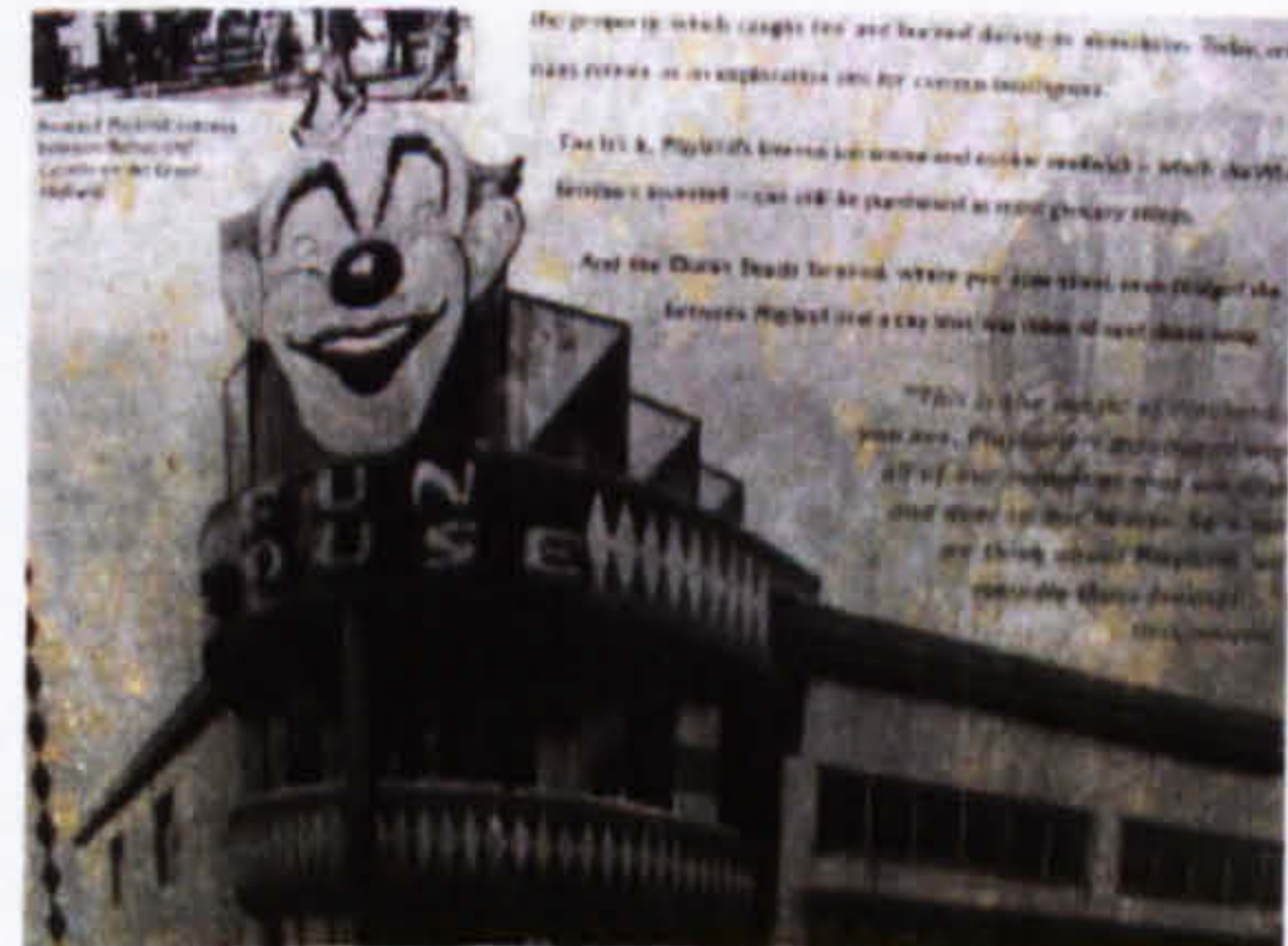
Overall, Ray felt that his experiences with HCA influenced not only his public art projects, but also his current teaching practices. As with many of the participants in both London and the Headlands, Ray felt that a strong influence on his interpretation of the Headlands as a place was connected to the relationships he developed while in residence. He felt that the support and the openness of the staff, their commitment to the mission of HCA, and a

willingness to experiment were all aspects of what made HCA a unique place. After a month long residency in the HCA Project Space, a studio which is occupied by an artist in residence and is open to the public, Ray felt that his relationship with the Headlands as a place was continually evolving. This second residency in 2002 was an opportunity to return as an artist in resident ten years after his previous residency with Robin Lasser.

While the work in 1992 was more focused on the military history of the site, the 2002 residency dealt primarily with the studio as a place and the HCA as an arts centre. In the ten years in between, Ray felt that the Headlands projects had influenced how he perceived the history of a place. He began to look for personal connections, stories from individuals who had worked, lived, or visited the sites of his public art projects. Many of these places had been stripped of their previous history. Beldner's place-specific public art projects *Playland* (1996) and *Shipyard Stories* (1999) reinvested their locations with voices from the past.



20. *Playland Revisited* 1996, San Francisco, CA



detail



21. *Shipyard Stories* 1999, Richmond CA

detail

Robin Lasser was the next artist to come out to the Headlands and we talked about her perceptions of the same period in residence with Ray Beldner. Like Ray, Robin felt that the relationships one develops in a particular place can be as influential as the actual physicality of the place itself. However, Robin also believes that place is something that is carried in the body. Also places carry a sense of being that can be picked up by the body. Robin gave the example of being able to walk into someone's home and know if they had just had a fight because you could sense it in the vibration of the place and that those vibrations become part of the memory of the place. Whether one believes such vibrations exist, this sense of being was one of the intangibles that many of the participants felt about place. Often the artists I talked with were not able to actually describe why a place was 'special' or why a place influenced them, but the artists felt on an intuitive level that a place had impacted their understanding or interpretation of their own work and their relationship to other places.

While all of the participants in the research had very positive experiences with the Headlands as a place, some also had mixed feelings about their time at the HCA.

Terri Cohn was in residence when the affiliate studios were located by the beach, about a half mile from the main HCA buildings. In her three years as an affiliate, Terri's experience was quite mixed. Most of the time spent at HCA was very positive. As a writer and curator, Terri had never really had the opportunity to have a designated studio space and so being an affiliate artist literally gave her room to experiment with her own practice, including developing a body of photographic work. Her negative experiences with the place came from a sense of distance from the community of the Headlands. She felt that at the time, the affiliates were often 2nd tier members of HCA and that they were not actively included in the planning of events and the community life of the artists in residence. Sometimes she felt isolated from the other affiliates because they did not utilise the space when she did and she was often alone in the building. Terri, like many of the participants, felt that a large part of what makes the Headlands a unique place is the community. Yet initially, she was having difficulty locating herself within the organisation and she began to wonder if the reputation of the HCA as a model for an artist community was a myth. Eventually, Terri developed closer connections with the artists in residence and the other affiliate artists by developing a series of lectures by Bay Area artists at HCA. While she was interested in developing a

forum for artists to share their work with the public, one of her primary ambitions with the series was also to bring the two groups of HCA artists together. Terri also noted that the three years as an affiliate artist was a very difficult period in her personal life and that those events coloured her perceptions of the Headlands as a place and her reaction to her time in residence. The idea that the events occurring in one's life can directly affect how an individual relates a particular place was a reoccurring theme amongst many of the research participants. While the natural beauty of the Headlands and her own studio space served as a kind of retreat from the pressures of a changing home life, her sense of a lack of community would sometimes make her feel ambivalent about the Headlands. If she had been an affiliate artist at another time in her life, her reaction to the HCA as a community place may have been very different. Terri's experience, like many of the other participants in the research, is an example of how what one brings to a place (both mentally and emotionally) can be just as influential on our perception of place as those elements that are inherent in the actual physicality of a place. While Terri's experience at the Headlands was mixed, overall she was still very grateful for the opportunity and felt that how she approached projects afterwards were influenced by her time at the HCA.

Donna Graves was the program director at HCA from 1994 to 1996. Prior to coming to the Headlands, she was the director at PublicArtWorks, an organisation that developed public art projects in Marin County. As Marin

County is the same region where the HCA is located, Donna was already familiar with the audience for the public programs at HCA. Donna had a history of developing place-specific project prior to her appointment at HCA. She was part of the planning team that helped develop the Bidy Mason project in Los Angeles.

Donna felt that her experience at the HCA reinforced her commitment to place-specific public art work and the need for developing opportunities for the community in which a project is created to participate in the process. In her experience, the Headlands location was a mixed blessing. Its rugged environment and sense of isolation allowed the artists in residence the retreat from their daily obligations and create space for reflection on their practice. However, regardless of the actual distance from the city (*only twenty minutes by car*), visitors often viewed the Headlands as isolated and audiences were often quite small for the public programs Donna produced. The Headlands *does have a loyal following, but Donna had a difficult time expanding that base audience*. Special collaborative projects with other organisation might increase the audience numbers for one or two events, but sustaining that increased audience was a struggle.

Following her tenure at HCA, Donna's next project for the City of Richmond, CA built on the desire to involve community in more aspects of a place-specific project. The *Rosie the Riveter Memorial* (2000) celebrates the

contributions of the women who built the Liberty Ships at the Richmond Shipyards during World War II. This is a multi-layered project that combined the actual memorial, located on the site of the old ship yards, with the development of a natural reserve, an informational website, and a series of community based educational programs. Through this process, Donna felt that together she, the artists, the community, and the local government have created a place that will have meaning for generations.



22. *Rosie the Riveter Memorial*, 2000, Richmond CA

John Wilson White was the last individual to be interviewed and has had the longest relationship with the Headlands as the HCA official photographer and an affiliate artist. The period of John's affiliate artist residency was a very difficult period in his personal life. He was facing his own inner turmoil with where he thought his career should be, the arrival of a new baby, and his personal struggle to balance his roles as husband, father, provider, and artist. Of all the participants, John had the most difficulty discerning how the HCA, as a place, had a tangible influence on his work. However, like the other

artists who struggled to define just what it was about the Headlands that made it a unique and influential place, he felt certain that it was. Much of John's work is concerned with environmental issues, particularly involving water. So, in that respect, John often views the Headlands as part of a series of places, all of which are involved in the course of the cycle of water which flows into the San Francisco municipal water system from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Initially, John felt he viewed the Headlands nature reserve as a separate place from the Headlands Art Center. However, like many of the participants, the layered relationships between the park and the HCA became interchangeable during the interview and he realised that over time his perspectives on the different aspects of the location: his relationship to nature, the HCA community, his practice as an artist, and his work as the staff photographer all contributed to how he perceived place.

My own interview was conducted by Terri Cohn. Over the years, my relationship with the Headlands had been focused primarily on the artistic aspects of the place. I had collaborated on a number of public art programs with the HCA when I was the curator at another arts organisation in the same county, the Falkirk Cultural Center. My first visit to the Headlands had been fifteen years before, when I first visited the Bay Area and stayed overnight at the youth hostel. I remember arriving in the evening and having to leave by mid-morning, so my initial encounter with the Headlands was rather brief. However, being from the more arid climate of Southern California, I was

struck by how green the environment was. After relocating to the Bay Area, my subsequent visits to the Headlands were always art related. I attended the open house events, went to numerous public programs, and participated in fund raising events. As a curator, I went on several studio visits with the affiliate artists over the years and was well aquatinted with the old studios down by the beach as well as the new studios rebuilt by the Nike missile site. The Headlands as a place had always influenced my work from the perspective of community aspects of place. How do you engage audience? How does the community perceive a particular place? What are the relationships between the artists working at a particular place and the community that lives in that place? When I arrived at the HCA for my residency, I was still viewing the place from an art related perspective. It was not until I was actually in my own studio that I realised my relationship to the place was changing and adjusting to that change took the entire two weeks. I had a difficult time finding the pace of the place and often felt conflicted with a sense of being on the inside yet still on the outside of the HCA community. I was an official artist in residence, but perhaps because I had not gone through the standard review process, I felt a bit as though I had slipped in under the radar to be a resident. Also, I only had two weeks at the Headlands and while I would have appreciated more time to actually settle into the rhythm of the place, the more concentrated period kept me focused on the research. The irony of being so focused on the research was that I was slow to appreciate the main element that draws the majority of visitor to the

Headlands – nature. Despite the fact that I was surrounded by trees, animals, open spaces, and the ocean, two days went by before I realised I had not even been for a walk. Once I realised how focused I had been on my work, I made a conscience effort to observe the Headlands from other perspectives. I forced myself to slow down, to pause as I walked across the parade grounds from my house to the HCA. I went to the Headlands Visitor Center and met some of the park rangers. I walked along the beach and spent time in my studio reflecting not on the research, but my own layered relationship with the place.

My relationship with the HCA as a place continues to evolve. The layers of interaction with the artistic and community-based aspects of the place have informed my understanding of ways in which individuals form relationships to place through inter-personal connections. In part, a place is what we bring to it and what we take away for it. A place is also what it has to offer. The intrinsic aspects of the Headlands – the military history, the natural history, the beauty of the location, and the individuals who make this area a part of their daily lives, all contribute to the complex layering of the Headlands as a unique and influential place.³⁵

³⁵ If viewing the videos in conjunction with this text, view DVD 4, *The Relationships of Place* and DVD 5, *What Makes a Space a Place?*.

KEY TERMS

community art: artwork, often public artwork, that is engaged with a specific community

conceptualism: artwork that is based primarily on ideas and concepts and whose form and material are often secondary concerns

earth art: art that is based on the moving, shifting, and constructing large scale sculptures using earth or natural formations

humanist geography: a geographical exploration of the complexities of human action and what it means to be 'placed' in the world (Adams 2001)

installation art: an artwork or exhibit often fabricated in relation to the specific characteristic of a specific location

local distinctiveness: 'the sum of the points of connection between the place and the person.' (Clifford 1993, p.1)

new genre public art: public art that is based on engagement

new museology: a term that emerged in the late 1980's that indicated a radical questioning of the ideologies, values and methodologies of existing museum culture

place: space which is relational, historical and/or concerned with identity (Augé 1995)

placelessness: the nature of space which is not relational, historical and/or

concerned with identity – may be viewed as being in opposed polarity to place(Augé 1995)

public art: encompassing various kinds of art – sculptures, fountains,

mosaics, stained glass windows, slide-image and laser projections, billboards, murals, performances – having in common that they are designed to be sited or to take place in public spaces

site-specific art: works of art created in relation to particular physical spaces

or topographical conditions – either indoors or outdoors – to such a degree that their character would be changed if moved somewhere else

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Appendix I
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION
(AS PROVIDED BY THE PARTICIPANTS)

LONDON PARTICIPANTS

SEYED ALAVI

Oakland, California

www.netwizards.net/~here2day (for latest projects)

Selected Public Projects

- 2000 *Speaking Stones*, Richmond Community Center; San Francisco CA
Broward County Public Library, Fort Lauderdale FL
Valley Medical Hospital, San Jose CA
Horace Mann Elementary School, San Jose CA
- 1999 *What Do You Think?*, San Francisco CA
- 1996 *Mind Field*, public art workshop, Dublin CA
- 1995 *Where is Fairfield?*, Fairfield CA
- 1994 *Forgotten Language*, Palo Alto CA
- 1993 *Selected Words*, San Rafael CA
Pasadena Metro Project, Los Angeles CA
Neptune's Gate, Manhattan Beach CA
A Sense of Place, Richmond CA

TERRI COIN

San Francisco, California

Selected Publications

"In Which it Stands: Nature, Culture, Public Space," *Women in the American West*, 2003

PLATFORM interview, *Sculpture*, May 2003

"Art in the Public Realm," *Artweek*, April 2001

Selected Lectures, Panel Discussions, Public Events

Public Art: When is it Art?, College Art Association, New York, 2000, panel participant

Haunted Headlands, Headlands Center for the Arts, 1997, collaborative presentation

Public Domain: Artist Working in Non-traditional Ways in Civic Spaces, San Francisco State University, 1996, day-long symposium

An Environmental Imperative for Art, San Jose State University, 1993, panel discussion

PLATFORM: LONDON

DAN GRETTON, JAMES MARRIOTT, JANE TROWELL

founded 1983, Cambridge; since 1986, London-based

Main Projects 1989 to Present

- 1996 -- *90% Crude*
- 1995 -- *RENUE* (Renewable Energy in the Urban Environment)
- 1993 -- *Delta*
- 1993 *Merton Island*
Homeland
- 1992 *Still Waters*
- 1989 *Tree of Life, City of Life*

SHELLY WILLIS

Minneapolis, Minnesota

- 1999 – present Manager, Public Art on Campus Program,
University of Minnesota
- 1989 – 1999 Visual Arts Manager, City of Fairfield
- 1998 – 1999 Gallery Management Instructor, Solano College
- 1993 – 1997 Gallery Management Instructor, Napa Valley College

- 1999 – 1991 Curator / Administrative Director, In Lak'Esh,
Sacramento, CA
- 1987 – 1989 Technical Assistant, Fellowship Program and Artist-in-
Residence Program, California Arts Council
- 1986 – 1987 Technical Assistant, Art in Public Buildings Program,
California Arts Council
- 1986 – 1989 Director, Institute for Design and Experimental Art,
Sacramento, CA
- 1984 Assistant Director, Turner Gallery, Chico, CA

HEADLANDS REVISITED PARTICIPANTS

RAY BELDNER

San Francisco, California

www.raybeldner.com (for latest projects)

Selected Public Projects

- 2002 *Dublin Pride Banners*, Dublin Fine Arts Foundation, Dublin,
CA; five digitally-generated thematic banner designs created
collaboratively with Wells Middle School students
- 1999 *Garden*, Francisco Middle School, San Francisco, CA, 5,000
square foot garden/classroom/laboratory collaboratively
designed and built with students from the San Francisco Art
Institute, Francisco Middle School and landscape architect,
Loretta Gargan
- Shipyards Stories*, Vincent Park, Richmond Redevelopment
Agency, Richmond, CA, two 9' x 3' stainless steel photo/text
plaques commemorating the shipyard workers in WWII
- 1995 *Playland Revisited*, San Francisco Municipal Railway, five
stainless steel sculptures with historic photos and text plaques
(permanent project)

- For Walt Whitman*, International Sculpture Conference, Oakland, CA, Whitman quote carved into asphalt and planted with native perennials
- 1993 *Art Renews*, Los Angeles County, perforated metal and recyclable material
- Nature Remains*, City of Dublin, CA, perforated metal and recyclable material
- Waste*, Trashformations Festival, City of Berkeley, CA, bales of recyclable materials: paper, tin, cardboard, aluminium
- 1991 *The Lay of the Land*, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA, site-generated sculpture made with wood and recyclable materials, collaboration with Robin Lasser (catalogue) 1990
- Nature of Experience*, Millerton Point, Tomales Bay State Park, CA, site-specific nature trail and exhibits

DONNA GRAVES

Berkeley, California

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT: Donna Graves has been the Project Director for the Rosie the Riveter Memorial Project since. Graves is an arts and cultural planner with extensive experience in public art and public history projects. She served as the Program Director at the Headlands Center for the Arts, executive director of Marin County's Public Art Works. She was also a director for The Power of Place in Los Angeles, an organization that gained national recognition for its innovative strategies for interpreting LA's multi-cultural history.

ROBIN LASSER

Oakland, California

ARTIST STATEMENT: My site-responsive work reflects an interest in the interface between nature and culture. My art also reflects a concern with the environment. I am interested in the representation of landscape as a record of human values and actions imposed on the land over time. The photographic images I create are a collaboration between the natural environment, artifice temporarily planted in the landscape (site-specific sculpture built to be

photographed), and the transformative qualities inherent in the photograph. My photo based installations, billboards, and public art pieces also address issues of consumption.

[HTTP://WWW.EATING.UCDAVIS.EDU/](http://www.eating.ucdavis.edu/)

JOHN WILSON WHITE

San Francisco, California

ARTIST STATEMENT: My work for the past few years has been a continuing series of projects which examine the relationship of water users to the watersheds which supply them. I've primarily worked in the Hetch-Hetchy watershed that supplies San Francisco and much of the SF bay area. From 1997-98, I worked in the watershed for Lake Berryessa, which supplies parts of Solano and Yolo County as resident artist with the Putah-Cache bioregion project. The residency culminated in an exhibition at Fairfield City Arts Gallery in 1998.

All of my projects utilize a trans-media approach to creating the objects and images in a finished installation project. Photography is used as a way of organizing my thoughts and observations in the field. In the studio however, the presented form of the fieldwork takes on a life of it's own through use of sculptural and calligraphic forms, often taking advantage of architecture in a site-specific context.