



Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, at Kent State University campus, 1970. (© Estate of Robert Smithson/VAGA, New York; courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.)

GENEALOGY OF SITE SPECIFICITY

Site specificity used to imply something grounded, bound to the laws of physics. Often playing with gravity, site-specific works used to be obstinate about “presence,” even if they were materially ephemeral, and adamant about immobility, even in the face of disappearance or destruction. Whether inside the white cube or out in the Nevada desert, whether architectural or landscape-oriented, site-specific art initially took the site as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features, and so forth. If modernist sculpture absorbed its pedestal/base to sever its connection to or express its indifference to the site, rendering itself more autonomous and self-referential, thus transportable, placeless, and nomadic, then site-specific works, as they first emerged in the wake of minimalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, forced a dramatic reversal of this modernist paradigm.¹ Antithetical to the claim, “If you have to change a sculpture for a site there is something wrong with the sculpture,”² site-specific art, whether interruptive or assimilative,³ gave itself up to its environmental context, being formally determined or directed by it.

In turn, the uncontaminated and pure idealist space of dominant modernisms was radically displaced by the materiality of the natural landscape or the impure and ordinary space of the everyday. And the space of art was no longer perceived as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, but a real place. The art object or event in this context was to be singularly and multiply experienced in the here and now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject, in a sensory immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as *theatricality*),⁴ rather than instantaneously perceived in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye. Site-specific work in its earliest formation, then, focused on

establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and demanded the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion. The (neo-avant-gardist) aesthetic aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like painting and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and the self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods—all these imperatives came together in art's new attachment to the actuality of the site.

In this frame of mind, Robert Barry declared in a 1969 interview that each of his wire installations was “made to suit the place in which it was installed. They cannot be moved without being destroyed.”⁵ Similarly, Richard Serra wrote fifteen years later in a letter to the director of the Art-in-Architecture Program of the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C., that his 120-foot, Cor-Ten steel sculpture *Tilted Arc* was “commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work.”⁶ He further elaborated his position in 1989:

As I pointed out, *Tilted Arc* was conceived from the start as a site-specific sculpture and was not meant to be “site-adjusted” or . . . “relocated.” Site-specific works deal with the environmental components of given places. The scale, size, and location of site-specific works are determined by the topography of the site, whether it be urban or landscape or architectural enclosure. The works become part of the site and restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site.⁷

Barry and Serra echo one another here. But whereas Barry's comment announces what was in the late 1960s a new radicality in vanguardist sculptural practice, marking an early stage in the aesthetic experiments that were to follow through the

1970s (land/earth art, process art, installation art, conceptual art, performance/body art, and various forms of institutional critique), Serra's statement, spoken twenty years later within the context of public art, is an indignant defense, signaling a crisis point for site specificity—at least for a version that would prioritize the *physical* inseparability between a work and its site of installation.⁸

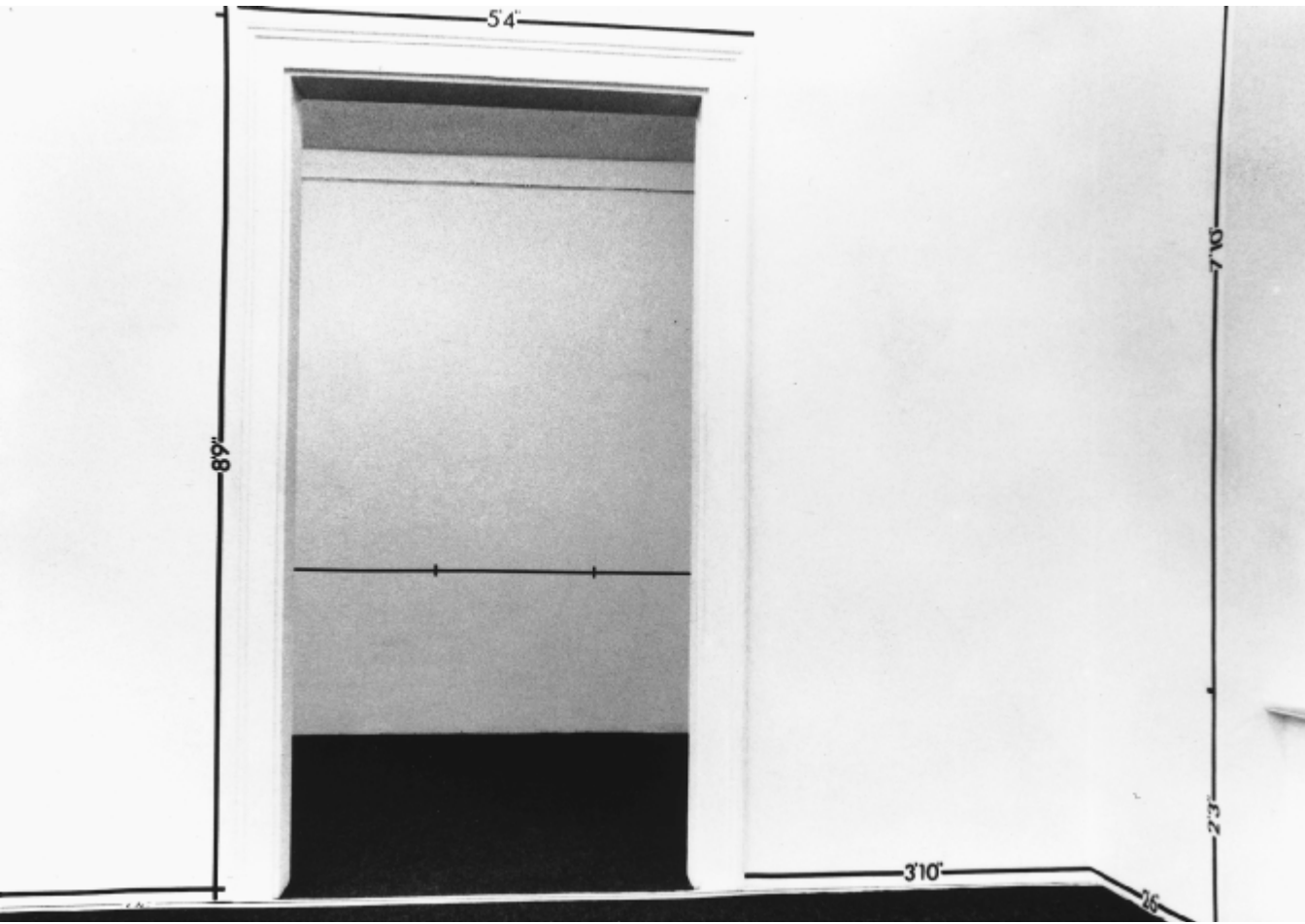
Informed by the contextual thinking of minimalism, various forms of institutional critique and conceptual art developed a different model of site specificity that implicitly challenged the “innocence” of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal viewing subject (albeit one in possession of a corporeal body) as espoused in the phenomenological model. Artists such as Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Robert Smithson, as well as many women artists including Mierle Laderman Ukeles, have variously conceived the site not only in physical and spatial terms but as a *cultural* framework defined by the institutions of art. If minimalism returned to the viewing subject a physical body, institutional critique insisted on the social matrix of the class, race, gender, and sexuality of the viewing subject.⁹ Moreover, while minimalism challenged the idealist hermeticism of the autonomous art object by deflecting its meaning to the space of its presentation, institutional critique further complicated this displacement by highlighting the idealist hermeticism of the space of presentation itself. The modern gallery/museum space, for instance, with its stark white walls, artificial lighting (no windows), controlled climate, and pristine architectonics, was perceived not solely in terms of basic dimensions and proportion but as an institutional disguise, a normative exhibition convention serving an ideological function. The seemingly benign architectural features of a gallery/museum, in other words, were deemed to be coded mechanisms that *actively* disassociate the space of art from the outer world, furthering the institution's idealist imperative of rendering itself and its values “objective,” “disinterested,” and “true.”

As early as 1970 Buren proclaimed, “Whether the place in which the work is shown imprints and marks this work, whatever it may be, or whether the work itself is directly—consciously or not—produced for the Museum, any work presented in that framework, if it does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon

itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency—or idealism.”¹⁰ More than just the museum, the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, museum, art criticism, art history, the art market, that together constitute a system of practices that is not separate from but open to social, economic, and political pressures. To be “specific” to such a site, in turn, is to decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden operations—to reveal the ways in which institutions mold art’s meaning to modulate its cultural and economic value; to undercut the fallacy of art’s and its institutions’ autonomy by making apparent their relationship to the broader socioeconomic and political processes of the day. Again, in Buren’s somewhat militant words from 1970:

Art, whatever else it may be, is exclusively political. What is called for is the *analysis of formal and cultural limits* (and not one or the other) within which art exists and struggles. These limits are many and of different intensities. Although the prevailing ideology and the associated artists try in every way to *camouflage* them, and although it is too early—the conditions are not met—to blow them up, the time has come to *unveil* them.¹¹

In nascent forms of institutional critique, in fact, the physical condition of the exhibition space remained the primary point of departure for this unveiling. For example, in works such as Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* (1963–1965), Mel Bochner’s *Measurement* series (1969), Lawrence Weiner’s wall cutouts (1968), and Buren’s *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973), the task of exposing those aspects which the institution would obscure was enacted literally in relation to the architecture of the exhibition space—highlighting the humidity level of a gallery by allowing moisture to “invade” the pristine minimalist art object (a mimetic configuration of the gallery space itself); insisting on the material fact of the gallery walls as “framing” devices by notating the walls’ dimensions directly on them; removing portions of a wall to reveal the base reality behind the “neutral” white cube; and ex-



Mel Bochner, *Measurement: Room*, tape and Letraset on wall, installation at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, 1969. (Photo by the artist; Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York.)





Daniel Buren, photo-souvenir: *Within and Beyond the Frame*, John Weber Gallery, New York, 1973. (© Daniel Buren.)

ceeding the physical boundaries of the gallery by having the art work literally go out the window, ostensibly to “frame” the institutional frame. Attempts such as these to expose the cultural confinement within which artists function—“the apparatus the artist is threaded through”—and the impact of its forces upon the meaning and value of art became, as Smithson had predicted in 1972, “the great issue” for artists in the 1970s.¹² As this investigation extended into the 1980s, it relied less and less on the physical parameters of the gallery/museum or other exhibition venues to articulate its critique.

In the paradigmatic practice of Hans Haacke, for instance, the site shifted



Michael Asher, untitled installation at Claire Copley Gallery, Inc., Los Angeles, 1974. (Photo by Gary Krueger; courtesy the artist.)

from the physical condition of the gallery (as in *Condensation Cube*) to the system of socioeconomic relations within which art and its institutional programming find their possibilities of being. His fact-based exposés through the 1970s, which spotlighted art's inextricable ties to the ideologically suspect if not morally corrupt power elite, recast the site of art as an institutional frame in social, economic, and political terms, and enforced these terms as the very content of the art work.¹³ Exemplary of a different approach to the institutional frame are Michael Asher's surgically precise displacement projects, which advanced a concept of site that included historical and conceptual dimensions. In his contribution to the "73rd American Exhibition" at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979, for instance, Asher revealed the sites of exhibition or display to be culturally specific situations that generate particular expectations and narratives regarding art and art history. Institutional framing of art, in other words, not only distinguishes qualitative value; it also (re)produces specific forms of knowledge that are historically located and culturally determined—not at all universal or timeless standards.¹⁴

Yet another approach to a critique of the institutional frame is indicated in Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1973 series of "maintenance art" performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.¹⁵ In two of the performances, Ukeles, literally on her hands and knees, washed the entry plaza and steps of the museum for four hours, then scrubbed the floors inside the exhibition galleries for another four hours. In doing so, she forced the menial domestic tasks usually associated with women—cleaning, washing, dusting, and tidying—to the level of aesthetic contemplation, and revealed the extent to which the museum's pristine self-presentation, its perfectly immaculate white spaces as emblematic of its "neutrality," is structurally dependent on the hidden and devalued labor of daily maintenance and upkeep. By foregrounding this dependence, Ukeles posed the museum as a hierarchical system of labor relations and complicated the social and gendered division between the notions of the public and the private.¹⁶

In these ways, the site of art begins to diverge from the literal space of art, and the physical condition of a specific location recedes as the primary element in the conception of a site. Whether articulated in political and economic terms, as in





Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 1973. (Photos courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.)





Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, 1973. (Photos courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.)

Haacke's case, in epistemological terms, as in Asher's displacements, or in systemic terms of uneven (gendered) labor relations, as in Ukeles's performances, it is rather the *techniques* and *effects* of the art institution as they circumscribe and delimit the definition, production, presentation, and dissemination of art that become the sites of critical intervention. Concurrent with this move toward the dematerialization of the site is the simultaneous deaestheticization (that is, withdrawal of visual pleasure) and dematerialization of the art work. Going against the grain of institutional habits and desires, and continuing to resist the commodification of art in/for the marketplace, site-specific art adopts strategies that are either aggressively antivisual—informational, textual, expositional, didactic—or immaterial altogether—gestures, events, or performances bracketed by temporal boundaries. The “work” no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewers’ *critical* (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of their viewing. In this context, the guarantee of a specific relationship between an art work and its site is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship (as demanded by Serra, for example) but rather on the recognition of its unfixed *impermanence*, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation.

But if the critique of the cultural confinement of art (and artists) via its institutions was once the “great issue,” a dominant drive of site-oriented practices today is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday life—a critique of culture that is inclusive of nonart spaces, nonart institutions, and nonart issues (blurring the division between art and nonart, in fact). Concerned to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social,¹⁷ either in order to redress (in an activist sense) urgent social problems such as the ecological crisis, homelessness, AIDS, homophobia, racism, and sexism, or more generally in order to relativize art as one among many forms of cultural work, current manifestations of site specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art historical concerns as secondary issues. Deeming the focus on the social nature of *art’s* production and reception to be too exclusive, even elitist, this expanded engagement with culture favors public sites outside the traditional confines of art both in physical and intellectual terms.¹⁸

Furthering previous (at times literal) attempts to take art out of the mu-



Group Material, *DaZiBaos*, poster project at Union Square, New York, 1982. (Photo courtesy the artists.)

seum/gallery space-system (recall Daniel Buren's striped canvases marching out the window, or Robert Smithson's adventures in the wastelands of New Jersey or isolated locales in Utah), contemporary site-oriented works occupy hotels, city streets, housing projects, prisons, schools, hospitals, churches, zoos, supermarkets, and they infiltrate media spaces such as radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet. In addition to this spatial expansion, site-oriented art is also informed by a broader range of disciplines (anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, natural and cultural histories, architecture and urbanism, computer science, political theory, philosophy) and is more sharply attuned to popular discourses (fashion, music, advertising, film, and television). Beyond these dual expansions of art into culture, which obviously diversify the site, the distinguishing characteristic of today's site-oriented art is the way in which the art work's relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate. Furthermore, unlike in the previous models, this site is not defined as a *precondition*. Rather, it is generated by the work (often as "content"), and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation.



- ◀ Mark Dion, *On Tropical Nature*, in the field near the Orinoco River basin, 1991. (Photo by Bob Braine; courtesy American Fine Arts, Co., New York.)
- ▶ Mark Dion, *On Tropical Nature*, installation at Sala Mendoza, Caracas, 1991. (Photo by Miwon Kwon.)



Mark Dion, *New York State Bureau of Tropical Conservation*, with materials from Orinoco River basin reconfigured for installation at American Fine Arts, Co., New York, 1992. (Photo by A. Cumberbirch; courtesy American Fine Arts, Co., New York.)

For example, in Mark Dion's 1991 project *On Tropical Nature*, several different definitions of the site operated concurrently. First, the initial site of Dion's intervention was an uninhabited spot in the rain forest near the base of the Orinoco River outside Caracas, Venezuela, where the artist camped for three weeks collecting specimens of various plants and insects as well as feathers, mushrooms, nests, and stones. These specimens, picked up at the end of each week in crates, were delivered to the second site of the project, Sala Mendoza, one of two hosting art institutions in Caracas. In the gallery space of the Sala, the specimens, which were uncrated and displayed like works of art in themselves, were contextualized within what constituted a third site—the curatorial framework of the thematic group exhibition.¹⁹ The fourth site, however, although the least material, was the site to which Dion intended a lasting relationship. *On Tropical Nature* sought to become a part of the discourse concerning cultural representations of nature and the global environmental crisis.²⁰

Sometimes at the cost of a semantic slippage between content and site, other artists who are similarly engaged in site-oriented projects, operating with multiple definitions of the site, in the end find their “locational” anchor in the discursive realm. For instance, while Tom Burr and John Lindell have each produced diverse projects in a variety of media for many different institutions, their consistent engagement with issues concerning the construction and dynamics of (homo)sexuality and desire has established such issues as the “site” of their work. And in many projects by artists such as Lothar Baumgarten, Renée Green, Jimmie Durham, and Fred Wilson, the legacies of colonialism, slavery, racism, and the ethnographic tradition as they impact on identity politics have emerged as an important “site” of artistic investigation. In some instances, artists including Green, Silvia Kolbowski, Group Material, Andrea Fraser, and Christian Philipp Müller have reflected on aspects of site-specific practice itself as a “site,” interrogating its currency in relation to aesthetic imperatives, institutional demands, socioeconomic ramifications, or political efficacy.²¹ In this way different cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an institutional framework (not necessarily an art institu-

tion), a neighborhood or seasonal event, a historical condition, even particular formations of desire are deemed to function as sites.²²

This is not to say that the parameters of a particular place or institution no longer matter, because site-oriented art today still cannot be thought or executed without the contingencies of locational and institutional circumstances. But the *primary* site addressed by current manifestations of site specificity is not necessarily bound to, or determined by, these contingencies in the long run. Consequently, although the site of action or intervention (physical) and the site of effects/reception (discursive) are conceived to be continuous, they are nonetheless pulled apart. Whereas, for example, the site of intervention and the site of effect for Serra's *Tilted Arc* were thought of as coincident (Federal Plaza in downtown New York City), Dion's site of intervention (the rain forest in Venezuela or Sala Mendoza) and his projected site of effect (discourse on nature) are distinct. The former clearly serves the latter as material source and inspiration, yet does not sustain an indexical relationship to it.

James Meyer has distinguished this trend in recent site-oriented practice in terms of a "functional site": "[The functional site] is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and discursive filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). It is an informational site, a locus of overlap of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places and things. . . . It is a temporary thing; a movement; a chain of meanings devoid of a particular focus."²³ Which is to say, the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist. Corresponding to the model of movement in electronic spaces of the Internet and cyberspace, which are likewise structured as transitive experiences, one thing after another, and not in synchronic simultaneity,²⁴ this transformation of the site textualizes spaces and spatializes discourses.

A provisional conclusion might be that in advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual—to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, vir-

tual. Of course, even if a particular formulation of site specificity dominates at one moment and recedes at another, the shifts are not always punctual or definitive. Thus, the three paradigms of site specificity I have schematized here—phenomenological, social/institutional, and discursive—although presented somewhat chronologically, are not stages in a neat linear trajectory of historical development. Rather, they are competing definitions, overlapping with one another and operating simultaneously in various cultural practices today (or even within a single artist's single project). Nonetheless, this move away from a literal interpretation of the site, and the multiple expansions of the site in locational and conceptual terms, seem more accelerated today than in the past. The phenomenon is embraced by many artists, curators, and critics as offering more effective avenues to resist revised institutional and market forces that now commodify "critical" art practices. In addition, current forms of site-oriented art, which readily take up social issues (often inspired by them), and which routinely engage the collaborative participation of audience groups for the conceptualization and production of the work, are seen as a means to strengthen art's capacity to penetrate the sociopolitical organization of contemporary life with greater impact and meaning. In this sense the chance to conceive the site as something more than a place—as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group—is an important conceptual leap in redefining the public role of art and artists.²⁵

But the enthusiastic support for these salutary goals needs to be checked by a serious critical examination of the problems and contradictions that attend all forms of site-specific and site-oriented art today, which are visible now as the art work is becoming more and more unhinged from the actuality of the site once again—"unhinged" both in a literal sense of a physical separation of the art work from the location of its initial installation, and in a metaphorical sense as performed in the discursive mobilization of the site in emergent forms of site-oriented art. This unhinging, however, does not indicate a reversion to the modernist autonomy of the siteless, nomadic art object, although such an ideology is still predominant. Rather, the current unhinging of site specificity indicates new pressures upon its practice today—pressures engendered by both aesthetic imperatives and external histori-

cal determinants, which are not exactly comparable to those of thirty years ago. For example, what is the status of traditional aesthetic values such as originality, authenticity, and uniqueness in site-specific art, which always begins with the particular, local, unrepeatable preconditions of a site, however it is defined? Is the prevailing relegation of authorship to the conditions of the site, including collaborators and/or reader-viewers, a continuing Barthesian performance of the “death of the author” or a recasting of the centrality of the artist as a “silent” manager/director? Furthermore, what is the commodity status of anticommodities, that is, immaterial, process-oriented, ephemeral, performative events? While site-specific art once defied commodification by insisting on immobility, it now seems to espouse fluid mobility and nomadism for the same purpose. Curiously, however, the nomadic principle also defines capital and power in our times.²⁶ Is the unhinging of site specificity, then, a form of resistance to the ideological establishment of art, or a capitulation to the logic of capitalist expansion?

Guided by these questions, the next chapter examines two different conditions within which site-specific and site-oriented art have been “circulating” in recent years. First, since the late 1980s, there have been increasing numbers of *traveling* site-specific art works, despite the once-adamant claim that to move the work is to destroy the work. Concurrently, refabrications of site-specific works, particularly from the minimalist and postminimalist eras, are becoming more common in the art world. The increasing trend of relocating or reproducing once unique site-bound works has raised new questions concerning the authenticity and originality of such works as well as their commodity status. Secondly, now that site-specific practices have become familiar (even commonplace) in the mainstream art world, artists are traveling more than ever to fulfill institutional/cultural critique projects in situ. The extent of this mobilization of the *artist* radically redefines the commodity status of the art work, the nature of artistic authorship, and the art-site relationship.