

Theatre essay: site specific performance



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Site Specific Performance: How has the nature of site-specific performance as a hybrid art-form influenced approaches to site-specific work in Britain over the last decade?

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Site-specific performance emerged out of the radical artistic milieu of the late 1960's and early 1970's that also gave birth to site-specific work generally. It represents perhaps the most ambitious and revolutionary re-interpretation of theatre and performance devised in the twenty-first century. Site-specific performance has influenced site-specific work in Britain in the past ten years in many ways. This dissertation examines three especially strong influences: (1) site-specific performance and its use of audience (2) site-specific performance and its internal debate as to whether site-specific art is site-exclusive or site generic, and (3) site-specific practitioners' theory of the selection of sites. Before these three principal investigations are discussed the dissertation briefly reviews the history and origins of site-specific performance and its key practitioners.

The first major section of this dissertation investigates and analyses the relationship between site-specific performance and its audience. The questions and debates that have arisen from the novel and intimate participation between site-specific performers and their audiences have had considerable influence upon site-specific work as a whole. Site-specific performance understands the audience as a vital element of the total production and not merely as paying members of the public who are isolated from the creative process. Many performances depend intimately upon the

energy and mutual fascination of the subject that exists between performers and audience. Often the audience are part of the performance itself. This intimacy points to a basic philosophical and professional principle of site-specific performance that reacts against the perceived coldness, frigidity and elitism of traditional theatre buildings and instead maintains that theatre and performance ought to be a socially-levelling enterprise. The dissertation therefore asks the prominent questions: Can audience self-identity be altered by a performance? And: Can original and multiple spectator identities be created by site-specific performances? The answers to these questions have been influential throughout the whole of the site-specific world.

The second-subsection of this section explores the relationship between site-specific performance and the community from which its audience is drawn.

The success of site-specific performance theorists and practitioners in showing the great extent to which the community in which a performance is situated affects the ambiance and attitude of the audience echoes throughout the site-specific world and informs it of vital lessons.

This investigation of community and audience also highlights how site-specific performance can work to bring theatre to the masses in an inclusive format that protests against the elitist forms of the past. The final sub-section of this section reviews some of the problems – variability and limitations of audience for instance experienced by site-specific performers with respect to audience and then suggests how these may teach valuable lessons to the rest of the site-specific world.

The second major section of the dissertation examines the key debate in the literature of site-specific performance as to whether such performances

should be site-specific or site-generic. That is, whether such performances should be free to tour and travel or not? The answers and discoveries furnished for this question by site-specific performers are relevant and influential upon this same debate which penetrates the whole of the site-specific community. This debate reaches to the philosophical centre of site-specific performance and threatens to bring about a fundamental change within the genre. At the heart of the issue is the question of whether a particular performance, conditioned as it is by the particular environment in which it is created, can be moved either physically or spiritually to another site. Vehement arguments have been made on both sides of the debate, with many pro-tour performers refuting Richard Serra's famous dictum that '*to remove the work is to destroy it*'. The dissertation considers as one solution the theoretical postulate of a 'pure' model of site-specific performance from which various performances deviate in healthily diverse ways. The dissertation then considers in depth the proposal of Wrights & Sites whether that the solution to this dilemma might depend upon a change in terminology and vocabulary of site-specific performance. Such a shift of terminology provides site-specific performance with a greater subtlety of definition and self-identity and therefore overcomes the apparent impasse suggested by the site-specific site-generic dispute.

The final major sub-section of the dissertation considers the 'use of space' by recent site-specific performers and the influences of this use upon site-specific work as a whole. The 'space' within which a theatrical performance may take place was given its most radical revision and progressive drive in the twentieth-century by the practitioners of site-specific performance. '

Space', in terms of performance, had before the advent of site-specific theatre been confined near exclusively to traditional theatre buildings and to their conventional shapes. The outstanding achievement of site-specific performance has been to vastly extend the range and types of space and venue in which a theatrical performance can take place. The dissertation considers the implications for performance of such a radical break with the past, as well as looking at the notions of 'uninhabitable space' and 'cultural space'. The discoveries made about 'space' by site-specific performers are relevant for the whole of site-specific work in Britain.

The dissertation concludes with an evaluation and summing-up of all the previous discussion and with an analysis of the future influence of site-specific performance upon site-specific work as a whole.

SECTION 2: SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE HISTORY

It is important to know something of the history of site-specific performance when seeking to determine its influence upon site-specific work in the past decade in Britain. Such a glance at the history illuminates the evolution of ideas within the genre and shows how they came to take their present form in the twenty-first century.

Site-specific performance originated as an outgrowth of site-specific artwork movement that began in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Site-specific artwork was a form of art that was created to exist in a certain space and was conditioned in form by the environment and space of that place. At the centre of the site-specific artwork movement was an attempt to take art out of what was perceived to be the affected and pretentious atmospheres of

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the galleries and theatre buildings and to transpose them upon a wider variety of outdoor and indoor venues. One useful definition of site-specific performance is that of the Dictionary of Video Art which states ‘ *Locations and environments may have some kind of drama or meaning for ordinary people but this has no significance for the bourgeoisie until interpreted by the heightened sensibilities of the director* ’. In other words, the purpose of site-specific performance and its reason for existence is to make the public aware of the artistic merits of ordinary buildings and spaces that have always been of interest to ordinary men but passed over by the elitist and institutionalised artists of the past. Site-specific performance often ‘ *involves a (more or less) political decision to work against the dominant discourse of London, its theatre buildings, and its theatre tradition* ’. Site-specific performance is about a fundamental reorientation of space away from its traditional understanding in British theatre.

Site-specific performance has emerged out of this general artistic milieu in the works of artists and directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Deborah Warner, Gof Brith, Janet Cardiff and in festivals or production companies such as Grid Iron, Wrights & Sites and the Edinburgh Festival. Other recent practitioners include Mac Wellman, Meredith Monk and Anne Hamburger. From the first list two names in particular have been pivotal to the development of site-specific theatre: Peter Brook and Deborah Warner. Peter Brook was one of Britain’s greatest theatre directors and much of this greatness came from his radical style and use of stage – both of which are seen as pre-cursors of modern site-specific performance. Brook was deeply influenced by the Theatre of Cruelty by Antonin Artaud and this led

to dramatic productions such as Jean Genet's *The Screens* in 1964 and Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* in 1964 – a huge success after its sharp and revolutionary break with theatre style to that time. Brook brought a new philosophy to the theatre that imbued it with a new sense of potential and manipulation of space and environment – shown well in his productions of Seneca's *Oedipus* and *The Empty Space*. More recently, Deborah Warner has made further developed these early origins of site-specific performance with radically different productions such as *Titus Andronicus* (1987), *Richard II* (1995) and *Julius Caesar* (2005).

SECTION 3: SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE: AUDIENCE

(A) Audience: General

Perhaps the single greatest contribution of site-specific performance as a hybrid art-form to site-specific work as a whole has been the radical transformation and re-constitution of the concept of audience and of how audiences experience live performance. When site-specific art first emerged in the late 1960's it appealed to audiences primarily because of the novelty of the form and the novelty of the viewing experience. Nonetheless, site-specific art, whilst novel in itself, did not go on to make any profoundly novel contributions to the nature, identity and constitution of its audiences. Site-specific work had not yet developed a site-specific critique or paradigm, and this was left in large measure to the pioneers of site-specific performance. The great advantage and breakthrough achieved by modern site-specific performance is that it draws the audience into an intimate participation with that performance; the audience become an essential part of the

performance itself. Notable historical examples have included Siren's *Crossing's Trace and Flight* (2000), Wrights & Sites *The Quay Thing* (1998), Anne Marie Culhane's *Night Sky* (1997) and The Whalley Range All Stars' *Day of the Dummy* (1999).

Consequently, with site-specific performance, both performers and spectators reach a profounder depth of empathy and understanding with the performance that they have witnessed, than with traditional theatre and even from site-specific work as a whole. In this sense, site-specific performance represents an evolution of the general site-specific art-form towards a level of greater spectator-involvement and identity. The philosophy and theory that underpins this evolution has much to do with a reaction against the perceived coldness and unnaturalness of the traditional theatre (where the audience are always separated from the performers) and its tendency to promote the values and aims of elite members of society above the aspirations of the ordinary citizen. Site-specific performance however can be said to be an 'equalizing art-form': it holds as a basic philosophical principle the belief that the members of the audience are of equal importance and significance for the meaning and successful execution of a particular performance as the performers themselves. As such, site-specific theatre and performance have taught and continue to teach practitioners of site-specific work generally – be it site-specific conceptual art, community art, installation art, public art etc., that the greater the participation and sense of involvement of the audience, the greater will be the efficacy of that performance upon both performer and viewer. Site-specific work therefore has much to learn from the techniques, literary interpretations, scene-designs and so on of site-specific performers.

This use of audience by site-specific performers has achieved for the first time, according to Fiona Wilkie, ' *the sense of a collective audience identity, a knowing audience that constructs itself appropriately as an interpretative body via a cumulative framework of contemporary framework experiences* '. Thus, site-specific performance asks of the audience members themselves certain basic existential and artistic questions. For instance: how is an audience's sense of self forged? How and in what ways is an audience's purpose decided? The extent to which site-specific performance achieves this intensive audience self-interrogation is perhaps unrivalled in all twentieth-century performance art-forms and promises to be one of the few genuinely unique artistic discoveries of recent years.

Traditional theatre maintains a clear space between audience and performer no matter how elated or ecstatic a spectator may feel during a traditional performance he is always nonetheless still a mere spectator with no direct influence upon the direction or outcome of the performance. Site-specific performance radically reverses the audience situation and role and instead makes them central actors in the performance itself. Site-specific performance also raises the questions of: Can audience self-identity be altered by a performance? And: Can original and multiple spectator identities be created by site-specific performances? On the first question it is noted by authors such as Williams and Kwon that the unique process of audience participation in site-specific performance often leaves the audience with changed perceptions of identity once the performance is completed. On the second question, it is also clear from the growing literature that now surrounds site-specific performance that the form has the potential to create

new audience identities as well as to leave different groups of the audience with different identity perceptions at the end. From these various observations of audience participation in site-specific performance it is evident that site-specific work has benefited and learnt an enormous amount about the role of audience and its possible stages of transformation. Moreover, the far more diverse nature of members of site-specific performances alters the mood and atmosphere and perceptions of that audience. Rather than being an elite experience attended by only one class of people with, broadly speaking, a single artistic attitude and expectation, the audience is instead a diverse melting-pot of different classes and professions of people.

(B) Audience & Community

Site-specific performance has also raised for general site-specific art the notion of the importance of the community in which a particular performance or art exhibit takes place. One particular site-specific performance company, *The Olimpias*, base their work upon questions of site ownership and in line with the theme of disability. According to Petra Kuppens, company director, site-specific performance ought to be '*attentive to the local community and its ways of inhabiting its environment the company (The Olimpias) work with the community to take new forms of site, re-interpret the site, keep its history and presence alive*'. 'Community' then is a crucial extension of the audience and the site factors involved in a site-specific performance. It is the community about a specific work that is most intimately affected by a performance since that performance throws new light on and reinterprets that community's existence in a particular way. Site-specific performance can

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help to re-invigorate and breathe life into a community by making it more aware and perceptive of the sites that it occupies. So too the site-specific performances of Wrights & Sities 'interested in the place and in the people who meet us in this place'. The company Welfare State International have also expressed a '*commitment to drawing in local energies and leaving behind a residue of skills and confidence after the company's withdrawal*'. For many companies then site-specific theatre is a performance that takes place in the living space of a particular community and is enacted alongside and within the working life of the community. Thus there is an experiential authenticity that is unique to site-specific theatre.

(C) Issues With Audience

Nonetheless, some writers such as Jan Cohen-Cruz have argued that taking theatre from established buildings in specific places to a specific-site does not necessarily create a more intimate audience environment or sense of identity or multiple identities. On this Cohen-Cruz states: '*Space is always controlled by someone and exists somewhere, so it is inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessible to everyone. one must question whether access to a broader audience really is a difference between performance site-specific and in theatre buildings.*' Cohen-Cruz's quotation is useful because it sounds a note of caution to site-specific performers who automatically assume that by merely creating site-specific performance of any sort they will immediately achieve a deeper or more profound sense of audience participation and diversity than would be found in a traditional theatre. Site-specific performance is a relatively new art-form that is treading into new territory – especially with respect to the understanding of audience

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participation and identity. It is therefore to be expected that a certain exuberance and robust enthusiasm amongst its performers may sometimes lead to idealizations of the potential of the art-form; that is, a tendency to assume that site-specific performance is a panacea for all limitations experienced by traditional-theatre audiences in past centuries.

It is prudent therefore to agree with writers such as Fiona Wilkie that the potential audience range and diversity of a site-specific performance is decided not only by the nature of the genre itself but by the particular features of the site itself. Access to such site-specific performances depends nearly entirely upon the location and type of site chosen for a particular performance. If, for instance, the site chosen for a particular performance is an abandoned warehouse or factory floor close to several housing estates or residential areas then it is likely that that performance will be accessible to many people who would be traditionally excluded from a theatre experience. If, however, a site-specific performance is held in a country-estate or at the top of a commercial tower-block then it is far less likely that the audience that attends will be as diverse and kaleidoscopic as at the performance of in the abandoned factory or warehouse. For instance, the site-specific performance company Kneehigh Theatre have reflected how their performance of *Hell's Mouth* in the Clay District of Cornwall – a poor and dilapidated area – encouraged a far broader section of the community to attend than would have done the traditional theatre. In Kneehigh's words: '*In Hell's Mouth last summer, bikers from the area performed the English/Cornish skirmishes in the Mad Max style Cornwall of the future. This theme ... and reasonable ticket prices, encouraged a strong local percentage*

of audience, who would not normally see the company's work or theatre of any sort '. So too the breadth of the audience of any site-specific work will be determined also by the theme and nature of the performance. A site-specific performance that deals with an esoteric or abstruse subject will not guarantee for itself a broad audience simply by virtue of the fact that it is a site-specific performance.

Several site-specific performance companies have sought to maintain the diversity of their audiences in the following ways. *The Lion's Part* company, for instance, seek to '*escape the bureaucracy of the theatre building*' by providing free access to all performances and free financially also. In Fiona Wilkie's eloquent phrase:

' The notion of the performance moves away from the high-brow associations of the theatre and closer to reaching a public well-versed in the popular culture of gigs, festivals and celebrations. It emphasizes the significance of the spatial encounter and is conceived as a whole experience for the spectator '

Wilkie here identifies a key strength of site-specific performance: its ability and capacity to synthesize myriad different forms of contemporary art, culture and society and to fuse them into a relevant and meaningful whole. Moreover, site-specific performance has the unique advantage of being able to manipulate space in whatever way it likes. A traditional theatre is severely limited in the sense that its performance can only take place within the predetermined and set dimensions of the theatre building; these dimensions remain the same for every new production no matter how different such

productions might be from each other. The space and dimensions of a site-specific performance are however determined and limited only by the space and dimensions of the site itself and they therefore have a far greater range and flexibility than traditional theatre. For instance: a windmill, an abandoned factory, a coffee shop, a doctor's surgery, a former nuclear silo all offer different and unique experiences of space for the audience. So too, a site-specific performance may even have two separate audiences: one that pays admission and is conscious of the performance and another that attends the event for free and is an integral part of the performance itself. To take an example: when Grid Iron held the site-specific performance *Decky Does a Bronco* in numerous children's playgrounds some audience members bought tickets whilst the children (attending free) that played in the playground were urged to continue their activities and so became part of the setting and the performance itself. Ben Harrison, director of *Decky Does a Bronco*, recalls how children came to and fro different parts of the performance depending upon the level of excitement raised for them by a particular moment or scene from that performance; when bored the children would retire to the quieter parts of the park. In Harrison's useful phrase, this double audience 'adds to the complexity of the event'.

SECTION 4: SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE: 'SITE-SPECIFIC OR SITE-GENERIC?'

Site-specific performance has contributed significantly to the site-specific as a whole on the pressing question of whether site specific art should be site-specific or site generic. That is, whether site-specific work should remain rooted in at the exact site of its creation or whether the idea created in a particular site may be transferred to other similar sites. This question is

perhaps the most vociferously argued debate in site-specific work at present. At stake is the philosophical and intellectual basis of the movement itself. Site-specific work emerged in the late 1960's as an art-form that made a unique use of site and site features to influence the shape and form of the design: these sites were usually highly different or unique from all others and so each sculpture, art-work or performance had its own unique characteristics. Traditional site-specific artists of this old-school therefore refute the idea that the idiosyncratic features of a particular site can simply be uprooted and transferred to another site – no matter how similar to the original. In Richard Serra's famous phrase '*to remove the work is to destroy the work*'. In other words: once a site-specific art-piece has been torn from its original context it loses the one thing that made it powerful and unique. Nonetheless, in recent decades such notions of the immovability from and inseparability of a site-specific work from its original setting have been assailed by artists driven by market forces and institutional changes in attitude. In one critic's words: '*Site specificity has become a complex cipher of unstable relationships between locations and identities in the era of late capitalism.*' Miwon Kwon's work *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Location Identity* is of enormous importance in elucidating the contours and features of this shift in the direction of site-specific art.

The internal movements of site-specific performance have done much to inform and influence the wider site-specific art of the last decade. In site-specific performance the key question of recent years has been: Can site-specific performance travel? Or: Does 'Site-specificity' mean 'site-exclusivity'? Within the site-specific performance community this debate as to

exclusivity of site has been argued with near equal tenacity by both opponents and supporters. Thus, in many ways, the debate appeared recently to have come to a standstill. One way found by site-specific performers to step beyond this impasse has been to define levels of site-specificity. For instance the company Red Earth has stated:

‘ Some projects are completely site-specific, i. e., they could not take place anywhere else without losing a strong thread of meaning and connection; while other more flexible projects may work around a certain sense of place, i. e., the spirit or concept at the heart of the project would work in several – but not all – locations’.

This quotation then suggests that the term ‘ site-specific’ has a degree of inherent relativity and flexibility. At one end of the spectrum, the term stands for certain performances that are absolutely rooted in the exact and unique site and community features in which they are set; for such performances there is no possibility of moving their ideas to different sites. At the other end of the spectrum, certain performances can be moved from site to site if they preserve or enhance the ‘ spirit’ or primary idea that began the original performance. Between these two poles are various types of site-specific performance whose transferability rests upon ambiguous or dubious principles. Justin McKeown of the Whalley Range All Stars suggests that this relativity should be defined in terms of site-specific performances that are ‘ *directly derived from a chosen site* ’ and therefore have to remain at that site indefinitely, and on the other hand between performances that can be transferred since they acknowledge and expand upon ‘ *the inherent meanings within a site* ’. Paul Pinson, of Boilerhouse, has argued further that <https://assignbuster.com/theatre-essay-site-specific-performance/>

the relativity of site-specific performance is conditioned by the way that the company engages with the space that it occupies at a particular site. Pinson suggests further that a performance can be partially site-specific and partially of another genre and that this hybridity therefore justifies a company to tour its performances. Pinson states: *' You can recreate a work in response to a number of different sites, which is totally valid in itself and is an element of site-specificity but is different from making a piece of work in response to one specific site.'*

The site-specific or site-generic debate and its plethora of interpretations have raised questions about the present 'purity' of site-specific performance. Above all: is it possible for theoreticians and practitioners of site-specific performance to find or derive a 'pure' model of site-specific performance, against which hybrid forms of this model might be compared? That is: can one set up construct an ideal paradigm of site-specific performance and then show how variations of this paradigm are beneficial in their individual ways? Miwon Kwon has suggested that one definition of this pure model might be *' To make a truly site-specific piece means it sits wholly in that site in both its content and form, otherwise if moveable, it becomes more about the site as a vehicle.'* Variations from this pure model are healthy natural growths from the other-model; the work of site-specific theoreticians is to define these variations and to ascribe to each of them independent areas of operation.

An alternative to this model of deriving variations of site-specific art from a pure or perfect model is to invent a new terminology for the art-form. Wright & Sites have suggested that the terms *' In theatre building '*, *' Outside*

theatre’, *Site-Sympathetic*’, *Site-Generic*’ and *Site-Specific*’ be used to describe the various degrees of theatre performance. The first two of these are clearly beyond the pale of any generally accepted definition of site-specific performance. Interestingly however Wrights & Sites propose a three-fold division of the genre of site-specific performance. The advantage of such a hierarchy is that it allows greater freedom and subtlety of description when deciding to which exact genre a performance of site-specific work belongs. The term ‘site-specific’ is accordingly reserved for performances that have a profound and absolute relationship with the specific site in which the performance is prepared and enacted. Such performances work only at one site, never tour or travel, and do not use pre-existing props or scripts. Nonetheless, one major problem of such a terminology is the difficulty of assigning the large number of performances that seem to fall between the categories of ‘site-generic’ and ‘site-specific’.

These disputes about definitions and terminology that have arisen in the particular field of site-specific performance are of considerable relevance and have been of considerable influence upon similar disputes in site-specific work generally. The central question of the debate – can site-specific performance tour – is equally relevant to all other types of site-specific work, be it sculpture, community art, painting and so on. By adopting a similar terminology to that of site-specific performance site-specific work generally might clear up many of its own internal disputes.

SECTION 5: SITE-SPECIFIC: TYPES OF SITE

Internal debates within the literature of site-specific performance as to *what kind of site* to select for its performances has had considerable influence over similar decisions within site-specific work generally.

What then can site-specific work generally learn from site-specific performance? Above all, perhaps, is the extensive and comprehensive analysis and exploration of the medium of space undertaken by leading site-specific performers. Richard Schechner has stated that '*theatre places are maps of the cultures where they exist*' and Hetherington that '*Certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity*'. Artistic manipulation of space is vital to successful site-specific performance, and the unique development in this quest has been the exploration of alternative types of space and site in which to perform site-specific theatre. Theatre had for centuries been largely confined to theatre buildings of one sort or another; the advent of site-specific theatre saw the use of a plethora of different venues for performance from coal mines, to hospital wards, to libraries, to coffee shops and so on *ad infinitum*. These ventures into alternative sites for performance raised amongst scholars of site-specific performance the key questions: What are the consequences of such diverse selection of sites? What association will each site bring to the site-specific genre? What are the common themes that bind such eclectic choices of venue? On the last question, some attempts have been made by figures such as Hetherington to classify these venues in groups: for instance, parks and children's play areas can be classed with beaches as 'public spaces'. Cohen-Cruz has argued that such spaces allow site-specific performers to use space that is normally thought of as 'publicly inhabitable' to entice passers-

by to attend the performance therefore symbolising for the performers the theme of 'making performance accessible'. The spaces found in venues such as museums, churches and galleries are used somewhat differently however. In contrast to 'p