

MIWON KWON

ONE PLACE AFTER ANOTHER

SITE-SPECIFIC ART AND LOCATIONAL IDENTITY





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

1

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

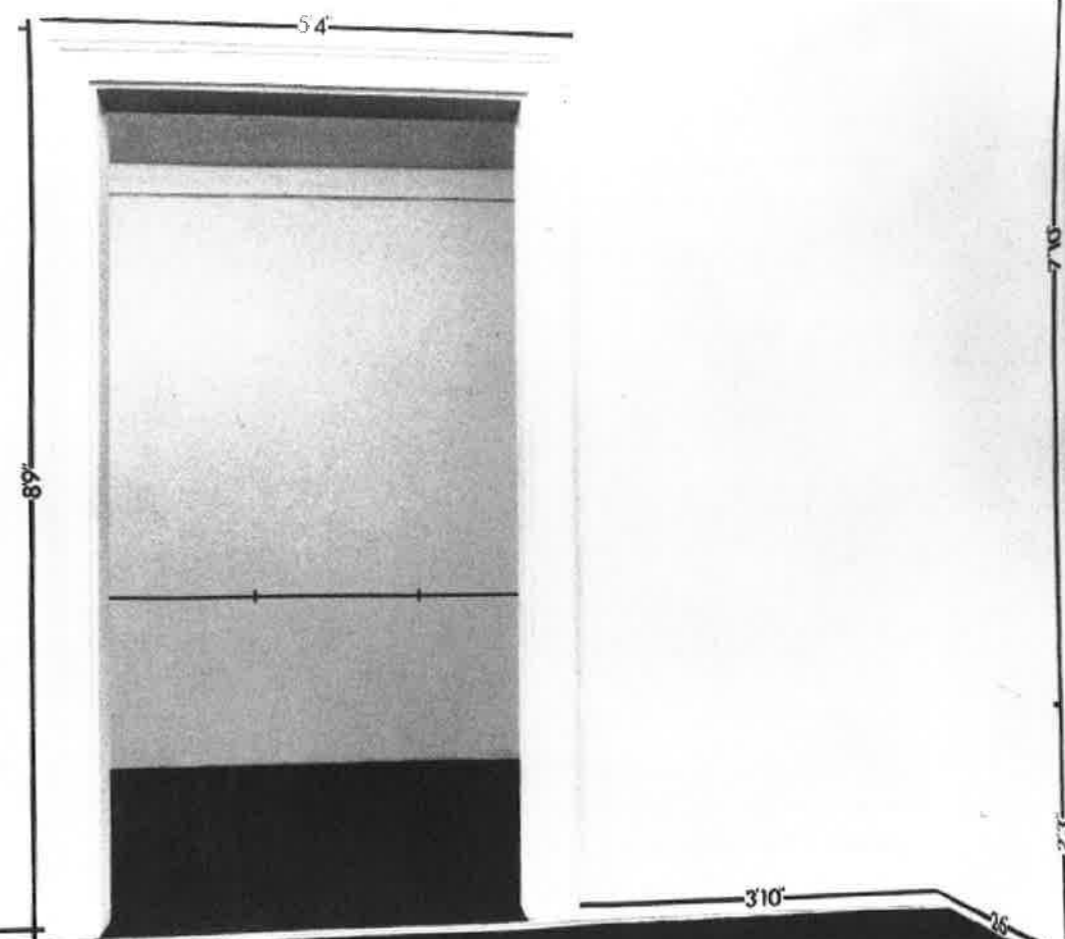
Informed by the contextual thinking of minimalism, various forms of institutional critique and conceptual art developed a different model of site specificity that implicitly challenged the "innocence" of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal viewing subject (albeit one in possession of 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

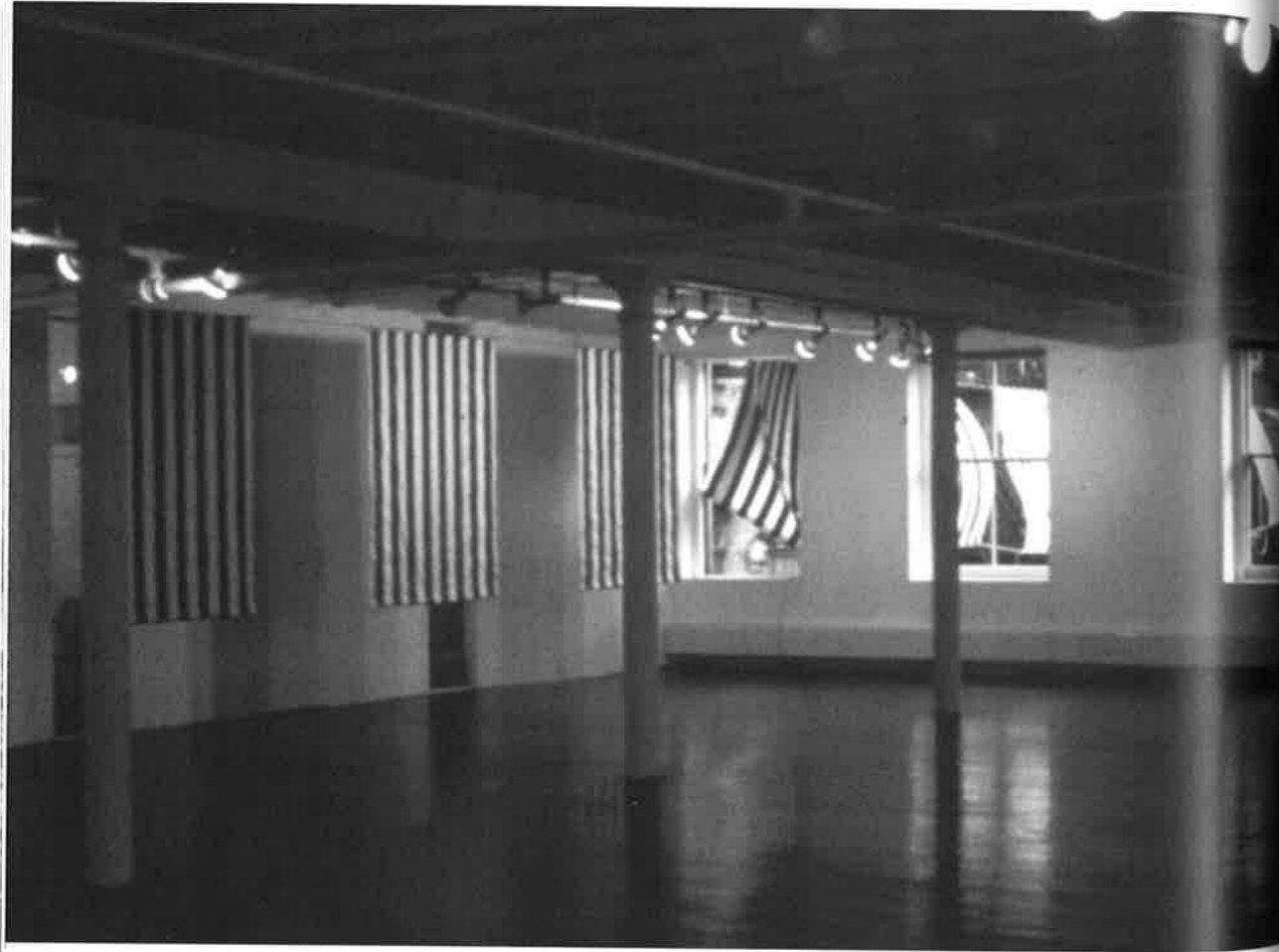
itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency—or idealism."¹⁰ More than just the museum, the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, museum, art criticism, art history, the art market, that together constitute a 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-



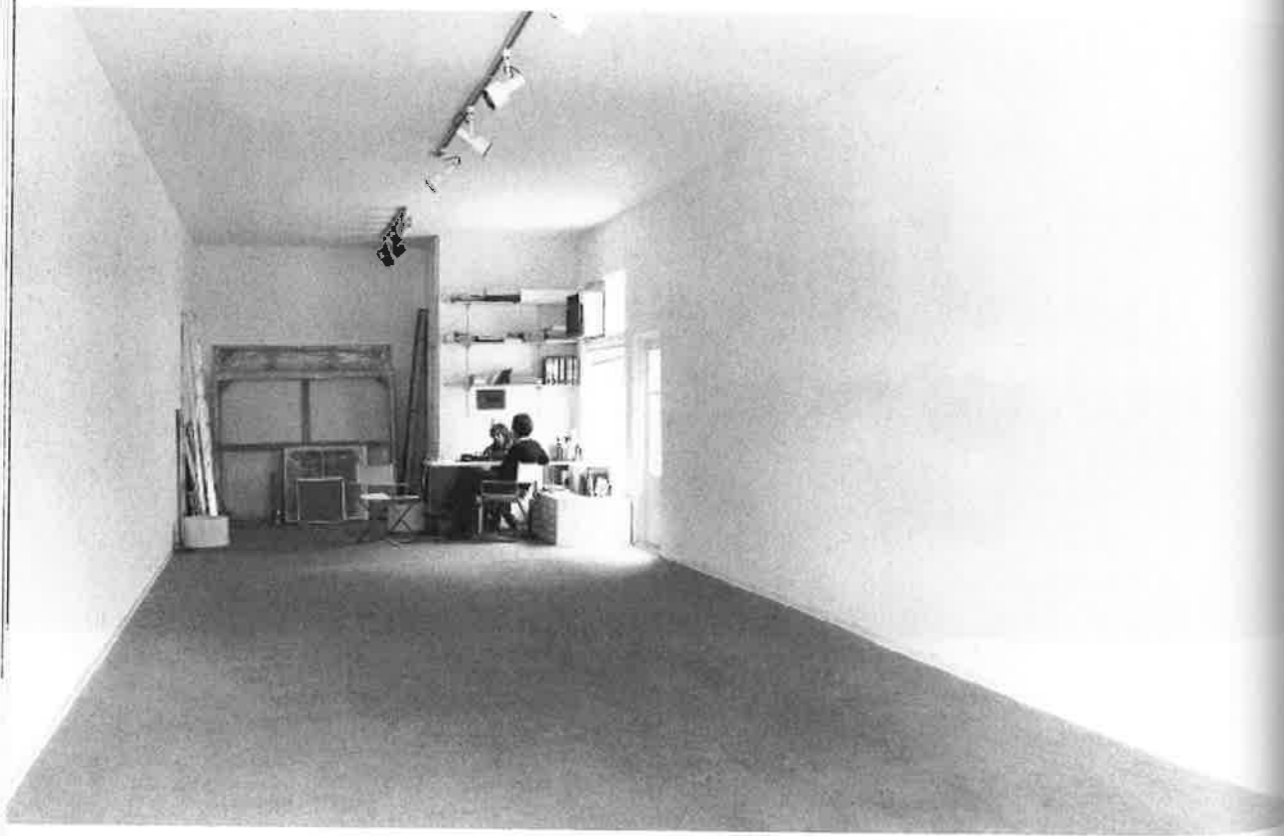
Mel Bochner, *Measurement: Room*, tape and Letraset on wall, installation at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, 1969. (Photo by the artist; Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York.)



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.)

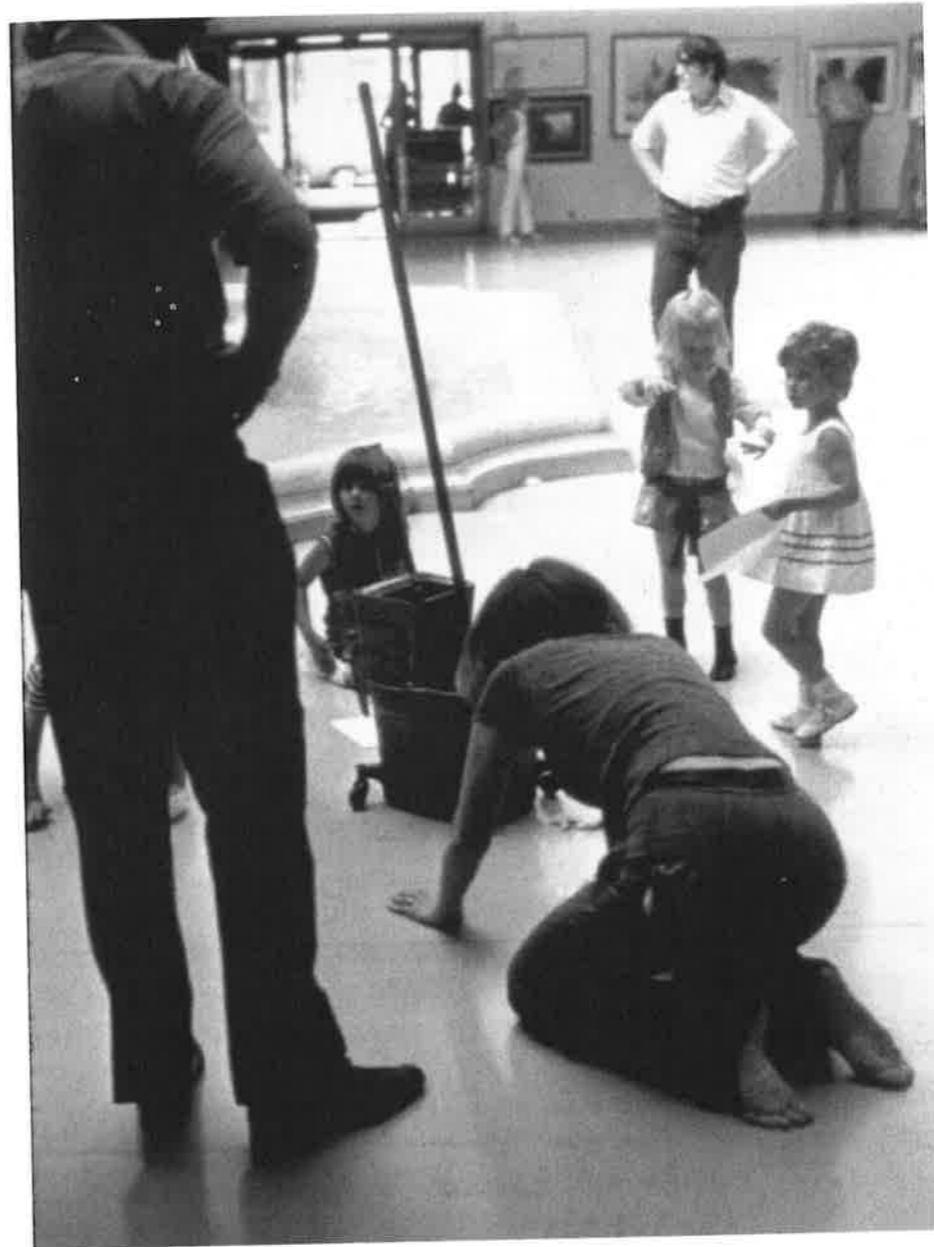
from the physical condition of the gallery (as in *Condensation Cube*) to the system of socioeconomic relations within which art and its institutional programming find their possibilities of being. His fact-based exposés through the 1970s, which spotlighted art's inextricable ties to the ideologically 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, expository, 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.



- ▲ Barry Le Va, *Continuous and Related Activities: Discontinued by the Act of Dropping* (1967), felt and glass, installation at Newport Harbor Art Museum, California, 1982. (Photo courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.)
- ▼ Barry Le Va, *Continuous and Related Activities: Discontinued by the Act of Dropping* (1967), felt and glass, reconstructed for the exhibition "The New Sculpture 1965–75: Between Geometry and Gesture" at the Whitney Museum, New York, 1990. (Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art; Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee.)

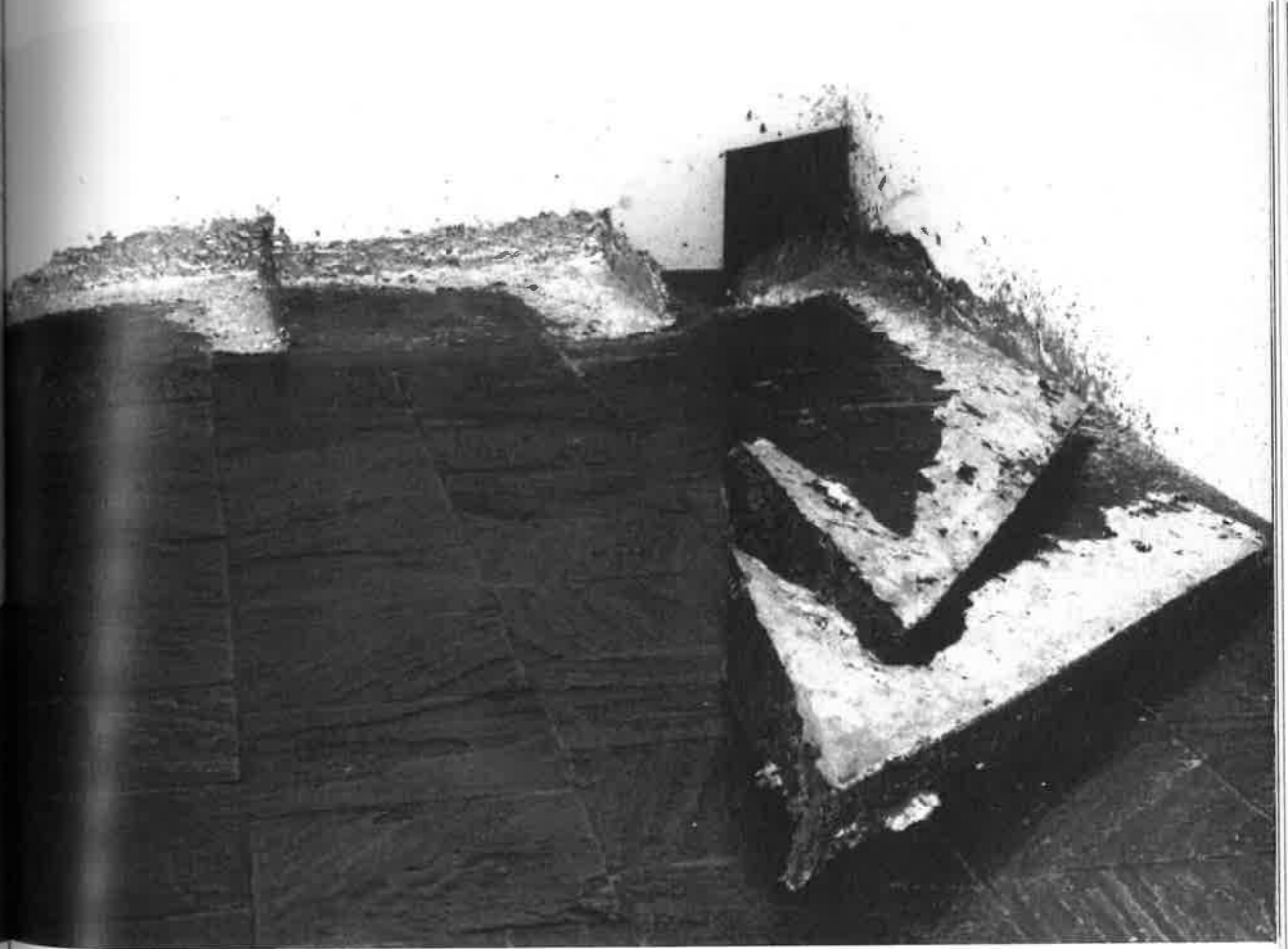
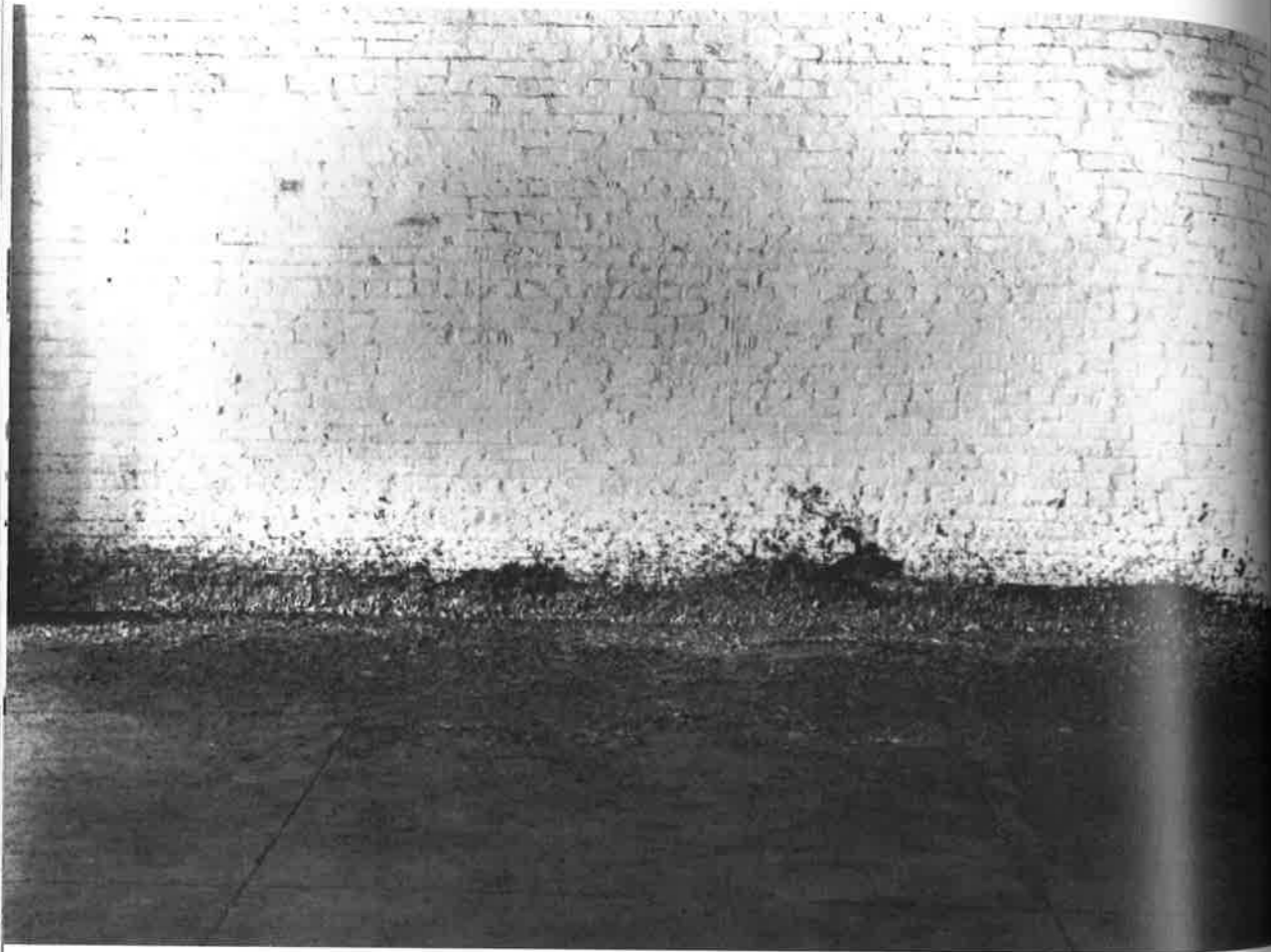
UNHINGING OF SITE SPECIFICITY

Mobilization of Site Specificity

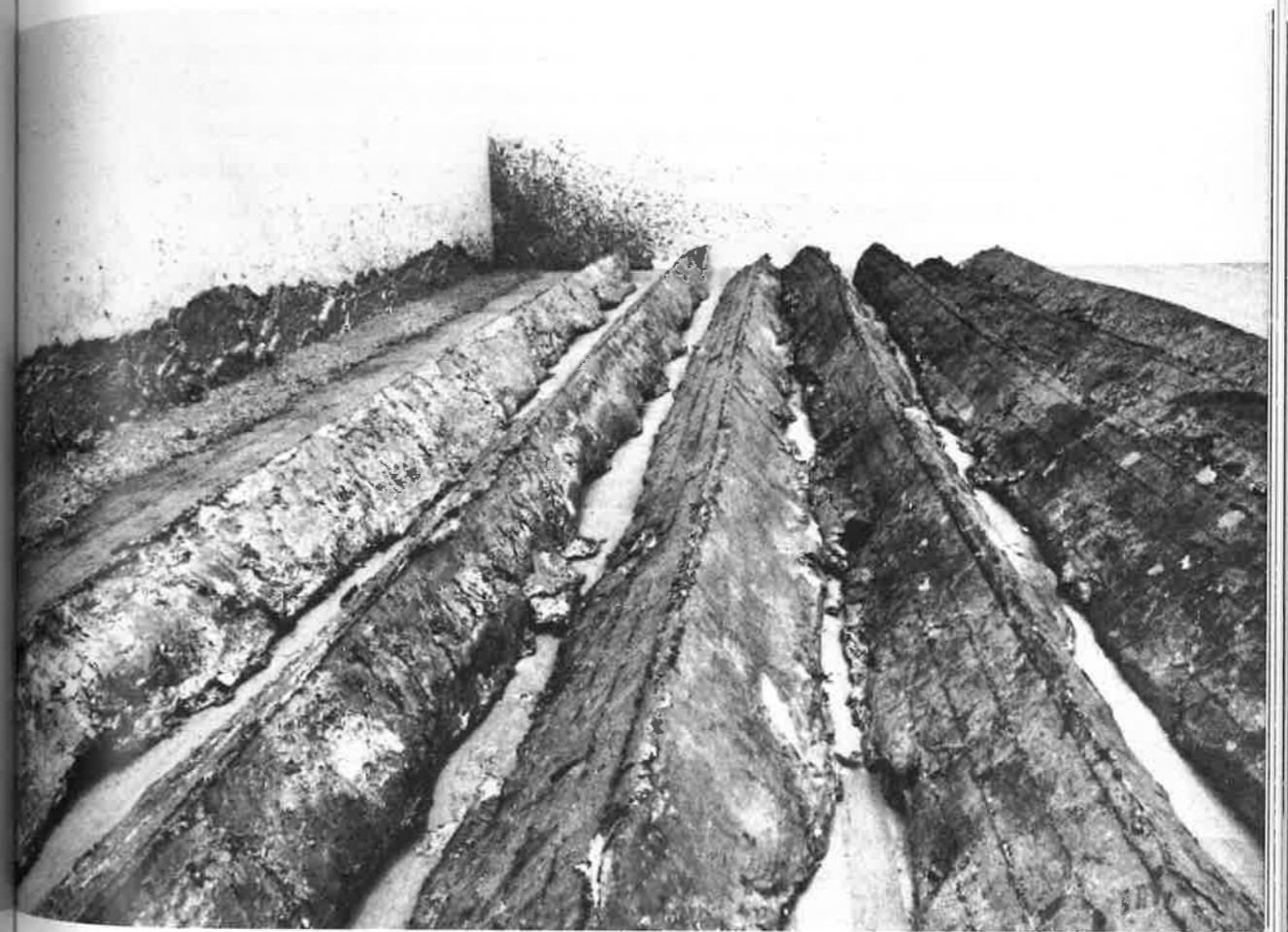
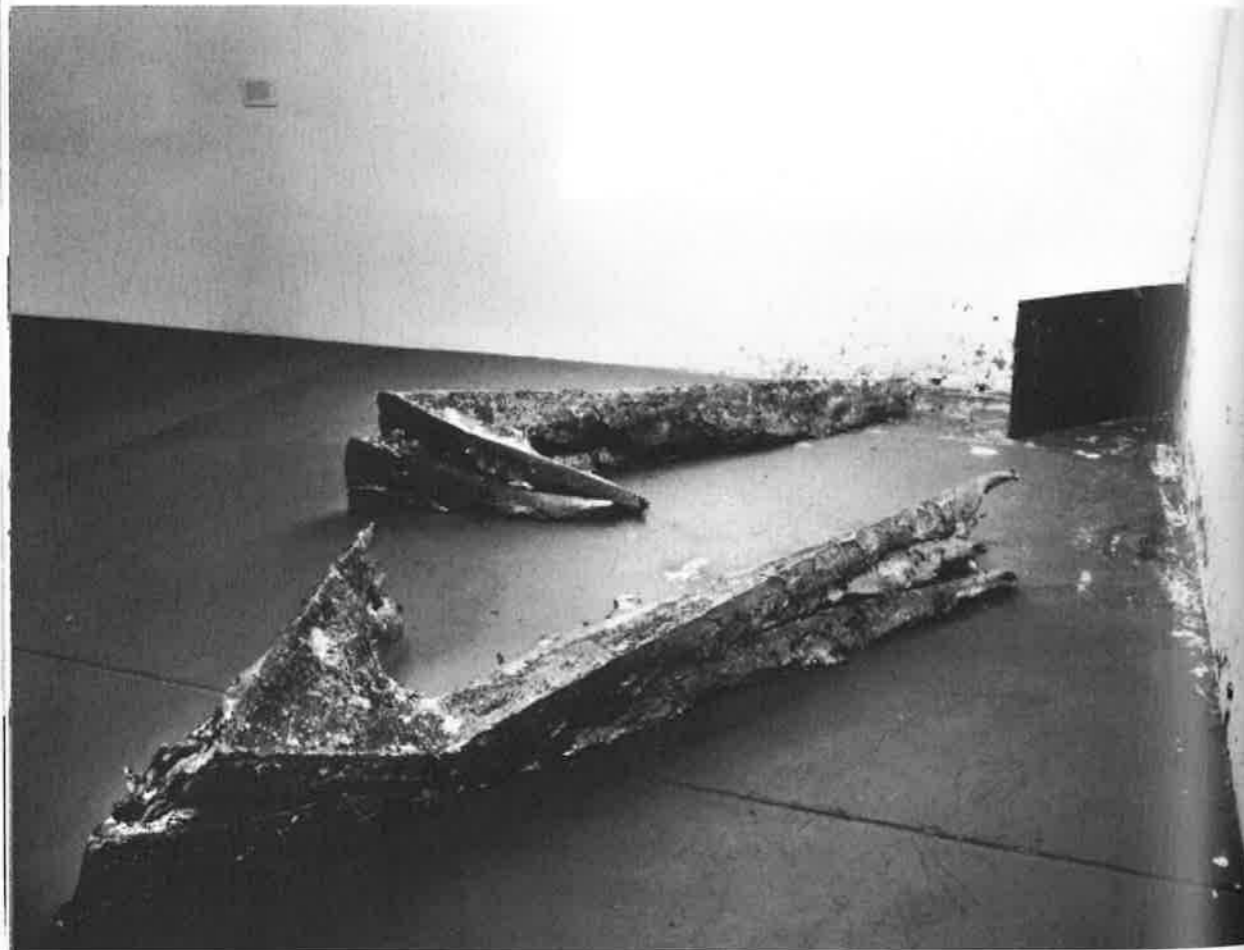
The "unhinging" of art works first realized in the 1960s and 1970s is provoked not so much by aesthetic imperatives as by pressures of the museum culture and the art market. Photographic documentation and other materials associated with site-specific art (preliminary sketches and drawings, field notes, instructions on installation procedures, etc.) have long been standard fare in museum exhibitions and a staple of the art market. In the recent past, however, as the cultural and market values of such works from the 1960s and 1970s have risen, many of the early precedents in site-specific art, once deemed difficult to collect and impossible to reproduce, have reappeared in several high-profile exhibitions, such as "L'art conceptuel, une perspective" at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (1989) and "The New Sculpture 1965–75: Between Geometry and Gesture" (1990) and "Immaterial Objects" (1991–1992), both at the Whitney Museum.¹

For exhibitions like these, site-specific works from decades ago are being relocated or refabricated from scratch at or near the location of their representation, either because shipping is too difficult and costly or because the originals are too fragile, in disrepair, or no longer in existence. Depending on the circumstances, some of these refabrications are destroyed after the specific exhibitions for which they are produced; in other instances, the recreations come to coexist with or replace the old, functioning as *new* originals (some even finding homes in permanent collections of museums).² With the cooperation of the artist in many cases, art audiences are now being offered the "real" aesthetic experiences of site-specific copies.

The chance to view again such "unrepeatable" works as Richard Serra's *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969–1970), Barry Le Va's *Continuous and Related Activities: Discontinued by the Act of Dropping* (1967), or Alan Saret's *Sulfur Falls* (1968) offers



- ◆ Richard Serra, *Splashing*, lead, at Castell Warehouse, New York, 1968, (© Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.)
- ▶ Richard Serra, *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969–1970), lead, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1990 (destroyed). (Photo courtesy the artist.)



- ◀ Richard Serra, *Splash Piece: Casting* (1969–1970), lead, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1990 (destroyed). (Photo courtesy the artist.)
- ▶ Richard Serra, *Gutter Corner Splash: Night Shift*, installed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995. (Photo by Ivory Serra; The Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Jasper Johns.)

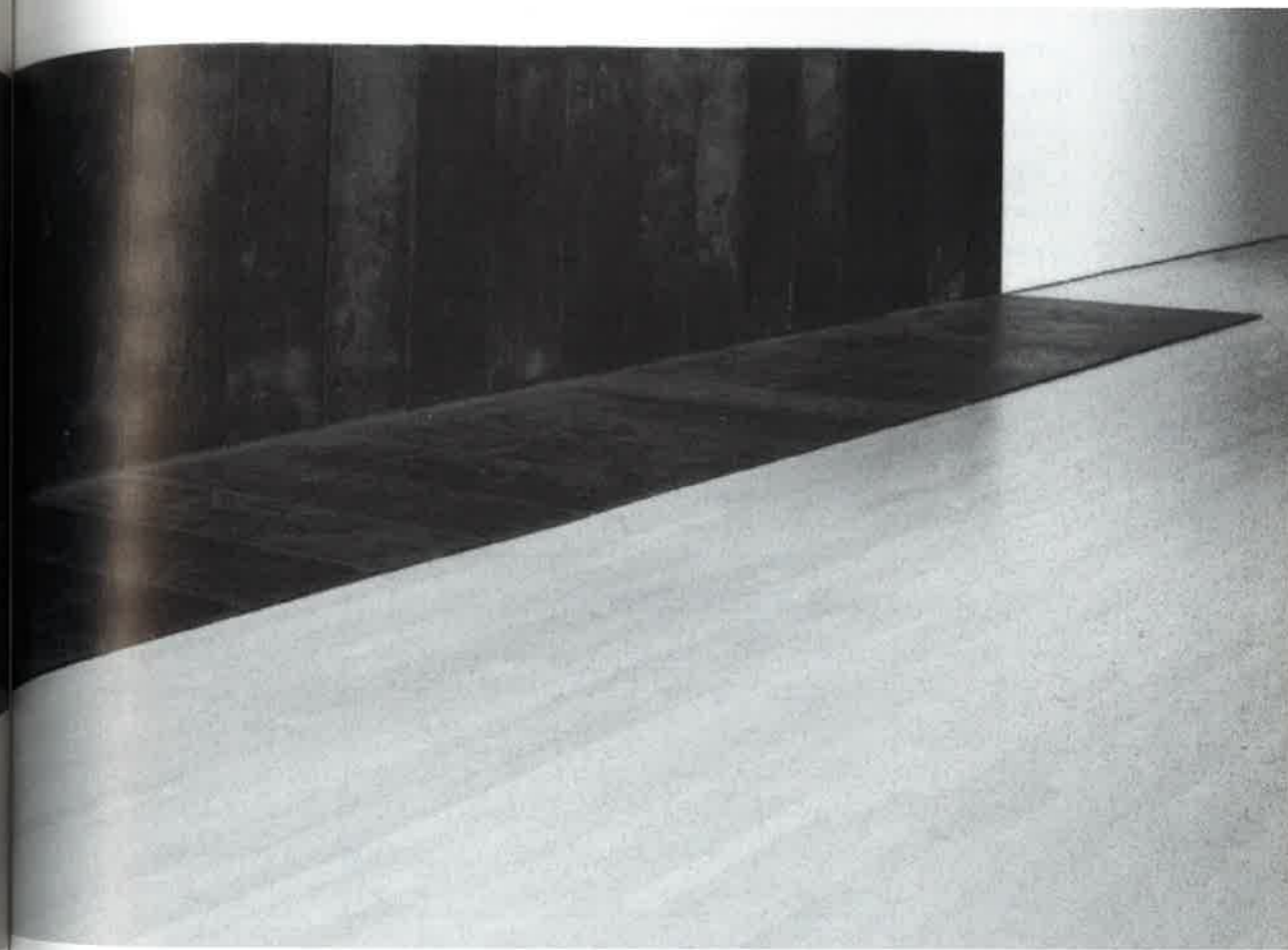
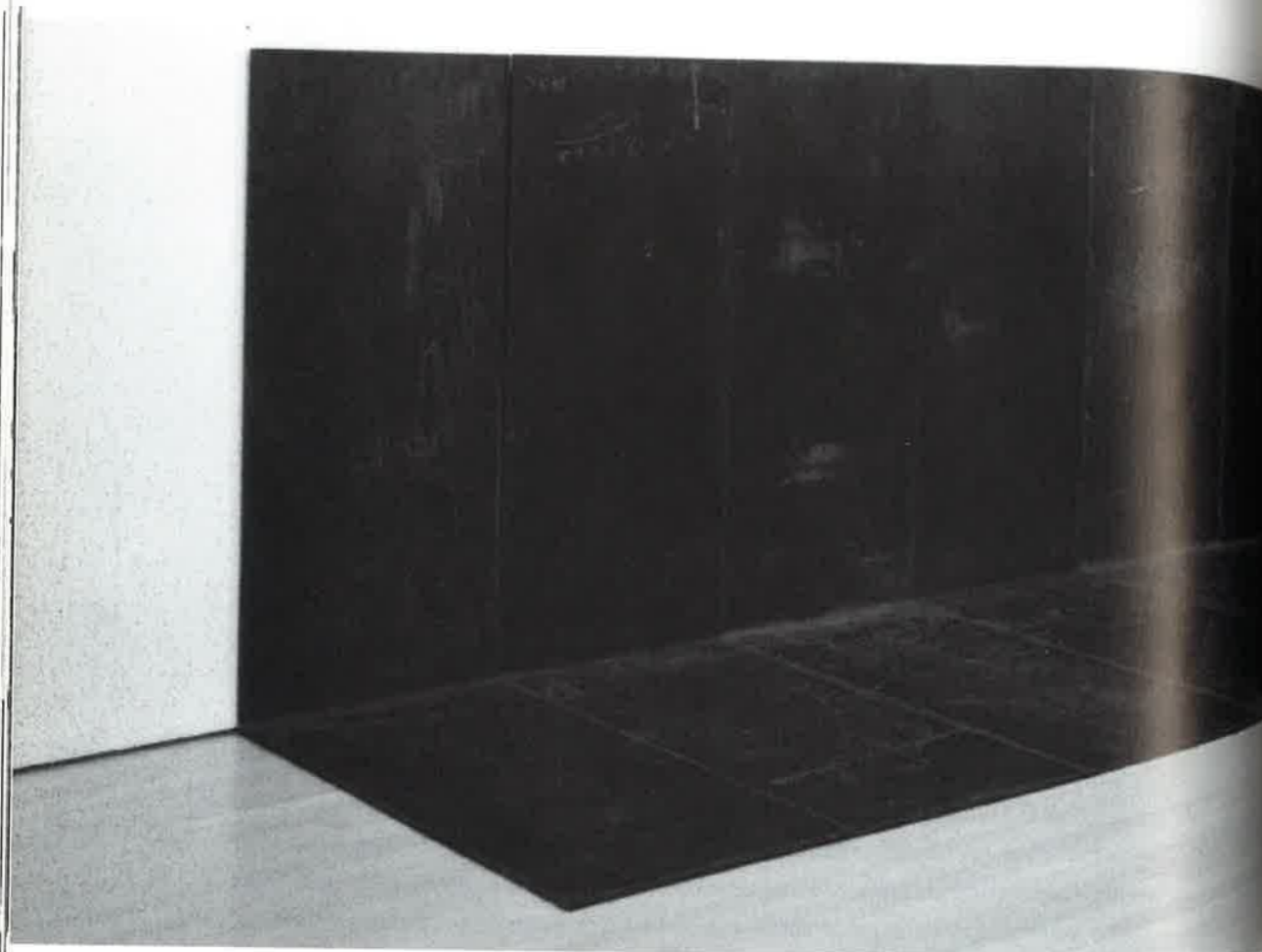
an opportunity to reconsider their historical significance, especially in relation to the current fascination with the late 1960s and 1970s in art and criticism. But the very process of institutionalization and the attendant commercialization of site-specific art also overturn the principle of place-boundedness through which such works developed their critique of the ahistorical autonomy of the art object. Of course, with much of postminimal, proto-conceptual art work under consideration, there is an ambiguity between ephemerality and site specificity; but both asserted unrepeatability, which is the point I am stressing here.³ Contrary to the earlier conception of site specificity, the current museological and commercial practices of refabricating (in order to travel) once site-bound works make transferability and mobilization new norms for site specificity. As Susan Hapgood has observed, "the once-popular term 'site-specific,' has come to mean 'movable under the right circumstances,'"⁴ shattering the dictum that "to remove the work is to destroy the work."

The consequences of this conversion, effected by object-oriented *de*contextualizations in the guise of historical *re*contextualizations, are a series of normalizing reversals in which the specificity of the site in terms of time and space is rendered irrelevant, making it all the easier for autonomy to be smuggled back into the art work, with the artist allowed to regain his/her authority as the primary source of the work's meaning. The art work is newly objectified (and commodified), and site specificity is redescribed as the personal aesthetic choice of an artist's *stylistic* preference rather than a structural reorganization of aesthetic experience.⁵ Thus, a methodological principle of artistic production and dissemination is recaptured as content; active processes are transformed into inert art objects once again. In this way, site-specific art comes to *represent* criticality rather than performing it. The "here and now" of aesthetic experience is isolated as the signified, severed from its signifier.

If this phenomenon represents another instance of domestication of vanguardist works by the dominant culture, it is not solely because of the self-aggrandizing needs of the institution nor the profit-driven nature of the market. Artists, no matter how deeply convinced of their anti-institutional sentiment or how

adamant their critique of dominant ideology, are inevitably engaged, self-servingly or with ambivalence, in this process of cultural legitimation. For example, in spring 1990 Carl Andre and Donald Judd both wrote letters of indignation to *Art in America* to publicly disavow authorship of sculptures attributed to them that were included in a 1989 exhibition at the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles.⁶ The works in question were recreations: of Andre's 49-foot-long steel sculpture *Fall* from 1968 and of an untitled iron wall piece by Judd of 1970, both from the Panza Collection.⁷ Due to the difficulties and high cost of crating and shipping such large-scale works from Italy to California, Panza gave permission to the organizers of the exhibition to refabricate them locally following detailed instructions. As the works had been industrially produced in the first place, the participation of the artists in the refabrication process seemed of little consequence to the director of the Ace Gallery and to Panza. The artists, however, felt otherwise. Not having been consulted on the (re)production and installation of these surrogates, they denounced the refabrications as "a gross falsification" and a "forgery," despite the fact that the sculptures appeared identical to the "originals" in Italy and were reproduced as one-time exhibition copies, not to be sold or exhibited elsewhere.

More than merely a case of ruffled artistic egos, this incident exposes a crisis concerning the status of authorship and authenticity as site-specific art from years ago finds new contexts today. For Andre and Judd, what made the refabricated works illegitimate was not that each was a reproduction of a singular work installed in Varese, Italy, which in principle cannot be reproduced anywhere else anyway, but that the artists themselves did not authorize or oversee the refabrication in California. In other words, the recreations are inauthentic not because of the missing site of their original installation but because of the absence of the artists in the process of their (re)production. By reducing visual variations within the art work to the point of obtuse blankness, and by adopting modes of industrial production, minimal art had voided the traditional standards of aesthetic distinction based on the handiwork of the artist as the signifier of authenticity. However, as the Ace Gallery case amply reveals, despite the withdrawal of such signifiers, authorship and authenticity remain in site-specific art as a function of the artist's "presence" at




Carl Andre, *Fall* (1968), installed at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo for the exhibition "Selections from the Guggenheim Museum," 1992. (Photo by David Heald, © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, Panza Collection.)

the point of (re)production. That is, with the evacuation of "artistic" traces, the artist's *authorship* as producer of objects is reconfigured as his/her *authority to authorize* in the capacity of director or supervisor of (re)production. The guarantee of authenticity is finally the artist's sanction, which may be articulated by his/her actual presence at the moment of production-installation or via a certificate of verification.⁸

While Andre and Judd once problematized authorship through the recruitment of serialized industrial production, only to cry foul years later when their proposition was taken to one of its logical conclusions,⁹ artists whose practices are based in modes of "traditional" manual labor have registered a more complex un-

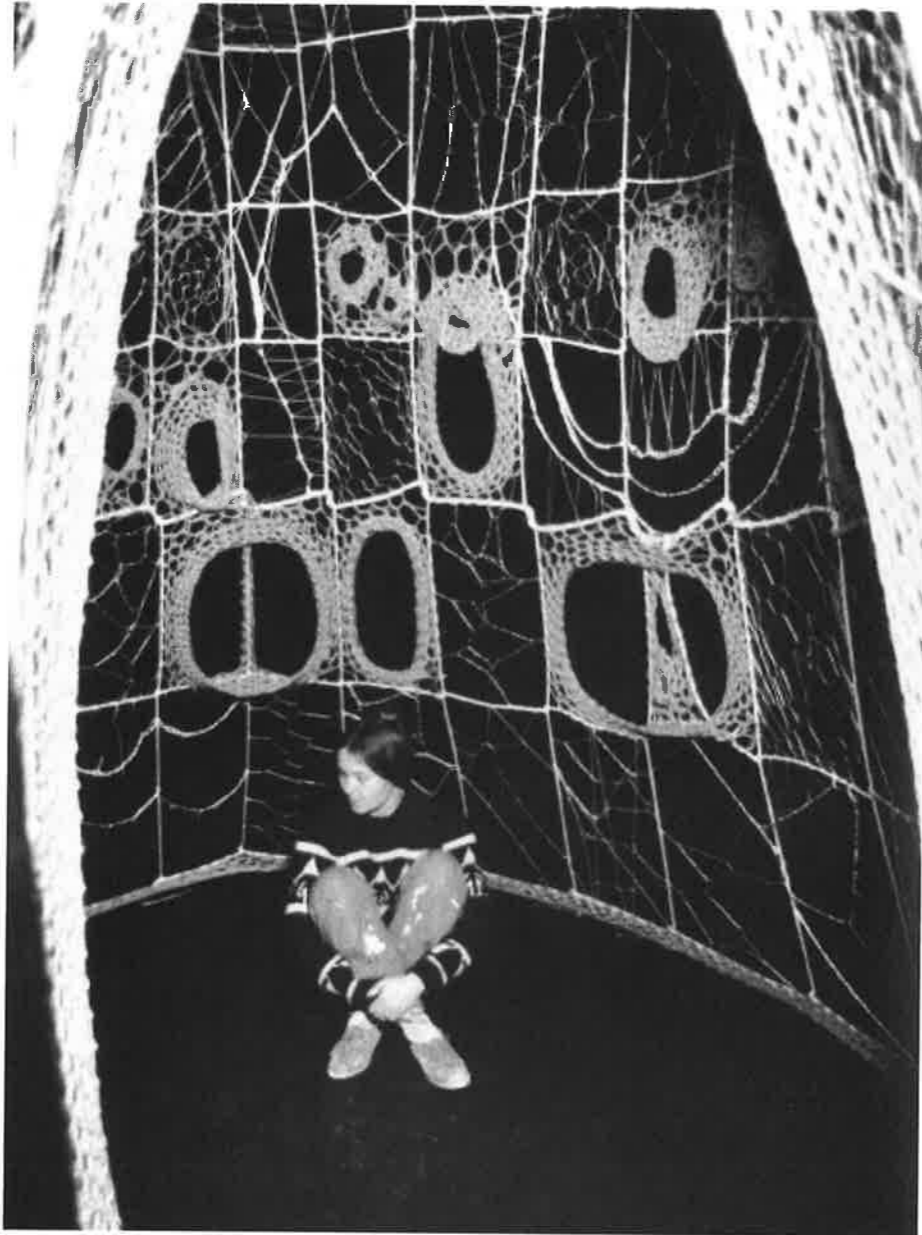
signature
The drawing

C E R T I F I C A T E	
This is to certify that the Sol LeWitt wall drawing number 150 evidenced by this certificate is authentic.	
Ten thousand one-inch (2.5 cm) lines evenly spaced on each of six walls. Black pencil First drawn by: S. Kato, Kazuko Miyamoto, Ryo Hatanabe First installation: Finch College, New York, NY, October, 1972	
This certification is the signature for the wall drawing and must accompany the wall drawing if it is sold or otherwise transferred.	
Certified by	 Sol LeWitt
© Copyright Sol LeWitt	1972

Sol LeWitt, certificate for *Wall Drawing no. 150*, October 1972. (Courtesy The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, Panza Collection.)

derstanding of the *politics* of authorship. A case in point: for a 1995 historical survey of feminist art entitled "Division of Labor: 'Women's Work' in Contemporary Art" at the Bronx Museum, Faith Wilding, an original member of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, was invited to recreate her room-sized site-specific installation *Womb Room (Crocheted Environment)* from the 1972 Woman-house project in Los Angeles. As the original piece no longer existed, the project presented Wilding with a number of problems, least of which were the long hours and intensive physical labor required to complete the task. To decline the invitation to redo the piece for the sake of preserving the integrity of the original installation would have been an act of self-marginalization, contributing to a self-silencing that would write Wilding and an aspect of feminist art out of the dominant account of art history (again). But on the other hand, to recreate the work as an independent art object for a white cubic space in the Bronx Museum also meant voiding the meaning of the work as it was first established in relation to the site of its original context. Indeed, while the cultural legitimation as represented by the institutional interest in Wilding's work allowed for the (temporary) unearthing of one of the neglected trajectories of feminist art, in the institutional setting of the Bronx Museum and later the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, *Womb Room (Crocheted Environment)* became for the most part a beautiful but innocuous work, its primary interest formal, the handicraft nature of the work rendered thematic (feminine labor).¹⁰

But even if the efficacy of site-specific art from the past seems to weaken when it is re-presented, the procedural complications, ethical dilemmas, and pragmatic headaches that such situations raise for artists, collectors, dealers, and host institutions are still meaningful. They present an unprecedented strain on established patterns of (re)producing, exhibiting, borrowing/lending, purchasing/selling, and commissioning/executing art works in general. At the same time, while some artists regress into the traditional argument of authorial inviolability in order to defend their site-specific practice, others are keen to undo the presumption of criticality associated with such principles as immobility, permanence, and unrepeatability. Rather than resisting mobilization, these artists are attempting to reinvent site specificity as a *nomadic* practice.



- ◀ Faith Wilding, *Womb Room (Crocheted Environment)*, installed at Womanhouse, Los Angeles, 1972. (Photo by Lloyd Hamrol; courtesy the artist.)
- ▶ Faith Wilding, *Womb Room (Crocheted Environment)*, reconstructed for the exhibition "Division of Labor: Women's Work" in Contemporary Art" at the Bronx Museum, 1995. (Photo by Becket Logan; courtesy Bronx Museum of Art.)

The increasing institutional interest in current site-oriented practices that mobilize the site as a discursive narrative is demanding an intensive physical mobilization of the artist to create works in various cities throughout the cosmopolitan art world. Typically, an artist (no longer a studio-bound object maker; primarily working now on call) is invited by an art institution to produce a work specifically configured for the framework provided by the institution (in some cases the artist may solicit the institution with a proposal). Subsequently, the artist enters into a contractual agreement with the host institution for the commission. There follow repeated visits to or extended stays at the site; research into the particularities of the institution and/or the city within which it is located (its history, constituency of the [art] audience, the installation space); consideration of the parameters of the exhibition itself (its thematic structure, social relevance, other artists in the show); and many meetings with curators, educators, and administrative support staff, who may all end up "collaborating" with the artist to produce the work. The project will likely be time-consuming and in the end will have engaged the "site" in a multitude of ways, and the documentation of the project will take on another life within the art world's publicity circuit, which will in turn alert another institution to suggest another commission.

Thus, if the artist is successful, he or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as a guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary in-house critic, or pseudo-ethnographer¹¹ to São Paulo, Paris, Munich, London, Chicago, Seoul, New York, Amsterdam, Los Angeles, and so on.¹² Generally, the in situ configuration of a project that emerges out of such a situation is temporary, ostensibly unsuitable for re-presentation anywhere else without altering its meaning, partly because the commission is defined by a unique set of geographical and temporal circumstances and partly because the project is dependent on unpredictable and unprogrammable on-site relations. But such conditions, despite appearances to the contrary, do not circumvent or even complicate the problem of commodification, because there is a strange reversal

now by which the artist comes to approximate the "work," instead of the other way around as is commonly assumed (that is, art work as surrogate of the artist). Perhaps because of the absence of the artist from the physical manifestation of the work, the presence of the artist has become an absolute prerequisite for the execution/presentation of site-oriented projects. It is now the *performative* aspect of an artist's characteristic mode of operation (even when working in collaboration) that is repeated and circulated as a new art commodity, with the artist him/herself functioning as the primary vehicle for its verification, repetition, and circulation.¹³

For example, after a yearlong engagement with the Maryland Historical Society, Fred Wilson finalized his site-specific project *Mining the Museum* (1992) as a temporary reorganization of the institution's permanent collection. As a timely convergence of institutional museum critique and multicultural identity politics, *Mining the Museum* drew many new visitors to the Society, and the project received high praise from both the art world and the popular press.¹⁴ Subsequently, Wilson performed a similar archival excavation/intervention at the Seattle Art Museum in 1993, a project also defined by the museum's permanent collection.¹⁵ Although the shift from Baltimore to Seattle, from a historical society to an art museum, introduced new variables and challenges, the Seattle project established a repetitive pattern between the artist and the hosting institution, reflecting what has become a familiar museological practice—the commissioning of artists to rehang permanent collections.¹⁶ The fact that Wilson's project in Seattle fell short of the Baltimore success may be evidence of how ongoing repetition of such commissions can render methodologies of critique rote and generic. They can easily become extensions of the museum's own self-promotional apparatus, while the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on "criticality." As Isabelle Graw has noted, "the result can be an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they themselves disapprove." And for artists, "subversion in the service of one's own convictions finds easy transition into subversion for hire; 'criticism turns into spectacle.'"¹⁷

To say, however, that this changeover represents the commodification of the



Christian Philipp Müller, *Illegal Border Crossing between Austria and Czechoslovakia*, Austrian contribution to the Venice Biennale, 1993. (Photo courtesy the artist.)

artist is not completely accurate, because it is not the figure of the artist per se, as a personality or a celebrity (à la Warhol), that is produced/consumed in an exchange with the institution. What the current pattern points to, in fact, is the extent to which the very nature of the commodity as a cipher of production and labor relations is no longer bound to the realm of manufacturing (of things) but defined in relation to the service and management industries.¹⁸ The artist as an overspecialized aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time already. What they *provide* now, rather than *produce*, are aesthetic, often "critical-artistic," services. Andrea Fraser's 1994–1995 project in which she contracted herself out to the EA-Generali Foundation in Vienna (an art association established by companies belonging to the EA-Generali insurance group) as an artist/consultant to provide "interpretive" and "interventionary" services to the foundation, is a uniquely self-conscious playing out of this shift.¹⁹ Through this and prior performance pieces, Fraser highlights the changing conditions of artistic production and reception in terms of both the content and the structure of the project.



Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989. (Photo by Kelly & Massa; courtesy the artist and American Fine Arts, Co., New York.)

Thus, if Richard Serra could once distill the nature of artistic activities down to their elemental physical actions (to drop, to split, to roll, to fold, to cut, etc.),²⁰ the situation now demands a different set of verbs: to negotiate, to coordinate, to compromise, to research, to promote, to organize, to interview. This shift was forecast in conceptual art's adoption of what Benjamin Buchloh has described as the "aesthetics of administration."²¹ The salient point here is how quickly this aesthetics of administration, developed in the 1960s and 1970s, has converted to the administration of aesthetics in the 1980s and 1990s. Generally speaking, the artist used to be a maker of aesthetic objects; now he/she is a facilitator, educator, coordinator, and bureaucrat. Additionally, as artists have adopted managerial functions of art institutions (curatorial, educational, archival) as an integral part of their creative process, managers of art within art institutions (curators, educators, public program directors), who often take their cues from these artists, now see themselves as authorial figures in their own right.²²

Concurrent with, or because of, these methodological and procedural changes, there is a reemergence of the centrality of the artist as the progenitor of meaning. This is true even when authorship is deferred to others in collaborations, or when the institutional framework is self-consciously integrated into the work, or when an artist problematizes his/her own authorial role. On the one hand, this "return of the author" results from the thematization of discursive sites, which engenders a misrecognition of them as natural extensions of the artist's identity, and the legitimacy of the work's critique is measured by the proximity of the artist's personal association (converted to expertise) with a particular place, history, discourse, identity, etc. (converted to content). On the other hand, because the signifying chain of site-oriented art is constructed foremost by the movement and decision of the artist,²³ the (critical) elaboration of the project inevitably unfolds around the artist. That is, the intricate orchestration of literal and discursive sites that make up a nomadic narrative *requires* the artist as a narrator-protagonist. In some cases, this renewed focus on the artist in the name of authorial self-reflexivity leads to a hermetic implosion of (auto)biographical and subjective indulgences.

This being so, one of the narrative trajectories of all site-oriented projects is

consistently aligned with the artist's prior projects executed in other places, generating what might be called another "site"—the exhibition history of an artist, his/her vitae. The tension between the intensive mobilization of the artist and the recentralization of meaning around him/her is addressed in Renée Green's 1993 *World Tour*, a group reinstallation of four site-specific projects produced in disparate parts of the world over a period of three years.²⁴ By bringing several distinct projects together, *World Tour* sought to reflect on the problematic conditions of present-day site specificity, such as the ethnographic predicament of artists who are frequently imported by foreign institutions and cities as expert/exotic visitors. *World Tour* also attempted to imagine a productive convergence between specificity and mobility, in which a project created under one set of circumstances might be redeployed in another without losing its impact—or, better, might find new meaning and gain critical sharpness through recontextualizations.²⁵ But these concerns were not readily available to viewers of *World Tour*, whose interpretive reaction was to see the artist as the primary link between the projects. Indeed, the effort to resituate the individual site-oriented projects as a conceptually coherent ensemble eclipsed the specificity of each and forced a relational dynamic between discrete projects. Consequently, especially for an audience unfamiliar with Green's practice, the overriding narrative of *World Tour* became Green's creative process as an artist in and through the four installations. And in this sense, the project functioned institutionally as a fairly conventional retrospective.

Just as shifts in the structural organization of cultural production alter the form of the art commodity (as service) and the authority of the artist (as primary narrator and protagonist), values like originality, authenticity, and singularity are also reworked in site-oriented art—evacuated from the art work and attributed to the site—reinforcing a general cultural valorization of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity.²⁶ An instructive example of this phenomenon is "Places with a Past," a 1991 site-specific exhibition organized by independent curator Mary Jane Jacob, which took the city of Charleston, South Carolina, as not only its backdrop but "the bridge between the works of art and the audience."²⁷ In addition to breaking the rules of the art

establishment, the exhibition wanted to further a dialogue between art and the socio-historical dimension of the place.²⁸ According to Jacob, "Charleston proved to be fertile ground" for the investigation of issues concerning "gender, race, cultural identity, considerations of difference . . . subjects much in the vanguard of criticism and art-making. . . . The actuality of the situation, the fabric of the time and place of Charleston, offered an incredibly rich and meaningful context for the making and siting of publicly visible and physically prominent installations that rang true in [the artists'] approach to these ideas."²⁹

While site-specific art is still described as refuting originality and authenticity as intrinsic qualities of the art object or the artist, these qualities are readily relocated from the art work to the place of its presentation—only to return to the art work now that it has become integral to the site. Admittedly, according to Jacob, "locations . . . contribute a specific identity to the shows staged by injecting into the experience the uniqueness of the place."³⁰ Conversely, if the social, historical, and geographical specificity of Charleston offered artists a unique opportunity to create unrepeatable works (and by extension an unrepeatable exhibition), then the programmatic implementations of site-specific art in projects like "Places with a Past" ultimately utilize art to promote Charleston as a unique place. What is prized most of all in site-specific art is still the singularity and authenticity that the presence of the artist seems to guarantee, not only in terms of the presumed unrepeatability of the work but in the way the presence of the artist also endows places with a "unique" distinction.

Certainly, site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, help provide greater visibility to marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of "minor" places so far ignored by the dominant culture. But inasmuch as the current socioeconomic order thrives on the (artificial) production and (mass) consumption of difference (for difference sake), the siting of art in "real" places can also be a means to *extract* the social and historical dimensions of these places in order to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city. It is within this framework, in which art serves to generate a sense of authenticity and uniqueness of place for

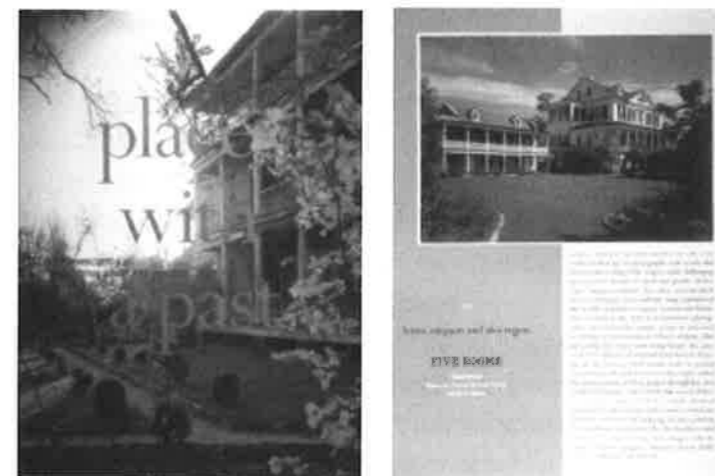
quasi-promotional agendas, that I understand the goals of city-based international art programs like "Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997." According to its cocurator Klaus Bussmann,

The fundamental idea behind the exhibitions was to create a dialogue between artists, the town and the public, in other words, to encourage the artists to create projects that dealt with conditions in the town, its architecture, urban planning, its history and the social structure of society in the town. . . . Invitations to artists from all over the world to come to Münster for the sculpture project, to enter into a debate with the town, have established a tradition which will not only be continued in the year 1997 but beyond this will become something specific to Münster: a town not only as an "open-air museum for modern art" but also as a place for a natural confrontation between history and contemporary art. . . . The aim of the exhibition "Sculpture. Projects in Münster" is to make the town of Münster comprehensible as a complex, historically formed structure exactly in those places that make it stand out from other towns and cities.³¹

Significantly, the appropriation of site-specific art for the valorization of urban identities comes at a time of a fundamental cultural shift in which architecture and urban planning, formerly the primary media for expressing a vision of the city, are displaced by other media more intimate with marketing and advertising. In the words of urban theorist Kevin Robins, "As cities have become ever more equivalent and urban identities increasingly 'thin,' . . . it has become necessary to employ advertising and marketing agencies to manufacture such distinctions. It is a question of distinction in a world beyond difference."³² Site specificity in this context finds new importance because it supplies distinction of place and uniqueness of locational identity, highly seductive qualities in the promotion of towns and cities within the competitive restructuring of the global economic hierarchy. Thus, site specificity remains inexorably tied to a process that renders the particularity and identity

of various cities a matter of product differentiation. Indeed, the exhibition catalogue for "Places with a Past" was a "tasteful" tourist promotion, pitching the city of Charleston as a unique, "artistic," and meaningful place (to visit).³³ Under the pretext of their articulation or resuscitation, site-specific art can be mobilized to expedite the erasure of differences via the commodification and serialization of places.

The yoking together of the myth of the artist as a privileged source of originality with the customary belief in places as ready reservoirs of unique identity belies the compensatory nature of such a move. For this collapse of the artist and the site reveals an anxious cultural desire to assuage the sense of loss and vacancy that pervades both sides of this equation. In this sense, Craig Owens was perhaps correct to characterize site specificity as a melancholic discourse and practice,³⁴ as was Thierry de Duve in claiming that "sculpture in the last 20 years is an attempt to reconstruct the notion of site from the standpoint of having acknowledged its disappearance."³⁵ Keeping this sense of loss of place or disappearance of the site in mind, we will next turn to the problem of site specificity as it has evolved quite distinctly in the mainstream public art context over the past three decades. We will return to a consideration of site specificity in relation to issues concerning locational identity in the final chapter.



Cover and inside page from the exhibition catalogue *Places with a Past: Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival, 1991*.