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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Jeff Kelley

At some moment in the late 1970s we crossed an important threshold. We moved beyond sites and into places. At the time, the crossing went largely unnoticed, in part because thresholds are not so much boundaries as matters of dawning awareness, and also because it is only in retrospect that any collective arts drawn by that awareness come into focus. Even so, one can now discern in much site-oriented and socially-driven art of the last two decades an emerging consciousness of the thresholds at which the sites of art become the arts of place.

One such threshold lies at the boundaries of art itself, and in the advent of Minimalism and earthworks those boundaries were extended to circumscribe the sites in which artworks were made and placed. Sculpture, by then a disintegrating, academic category that included all manner of art-making to the chagrin of many sculptors, became "site-specific". Site-specificity, though, often referred more to the perceptual precision-fitting of disembodied modernist objects into dislocated museum spaces, than to an acknowledgement of the social and cultural contents of a place. Even now the term 'site' tends to mean a place for art rather than the art of place. In part this is because sites and places are so interwoven in our descriptions of the public impulses of so much recent art.

Over the past decade though, artists have begun to acknowledge that it feels very different to be in a place than to be on site. In a place one taps a longer root, digs a deeper well. Over the past decade the sense of the human particularity of places as distinct from the art-like specificity of sites has informed and even become the contents of the best public art. Permit me then to tap a few subjective roots of this distinction.

One might say that while a site represents the constituent properties of a place - its mass, space, light, duration, location and material processes - a place represents the practical, vernacular, psychological, social, cultural, cerebral, ethnic, economic, political and historical dimensions of a site. Sites are like frameworks. Places are what fill them out and make them work. Sites are like maps or mines, while places are the reservoirs of human content, like memory or gardens. A site feeds out of itself and a place feeds in. A place is useful and a site is used. A used up site is abandoned and abandoned places are ruins.

Indeed one museum went so far as to consign the works of such disparate artists as Robert Smithson and Herbert Bayer to the mid-century idealism of "social design", with Bayer as the missing link between the Bauhaus and the shelters of contemporary artists of place. It is about disalignment - the very different approaches to the relationships among art, landscape, architecture and society.

While many artists of place are motivated towards social engagement through their works - and are thereby romantic and utopian to that degree - they are neither social nor aesthetic idealists, basing their practice instead upon the particular, pragmatic, and ever-changing conditions of particular places. They do not design society. They represent place. If they were to become models for social design, all the better, but an art of place is not about abstract equations of function to form which is the legacy of mid-century utopian architecture. It is human scale work about human scale work. The extent to which the content of a place resonates in other places is the extent to which an art of place has resonance. The place, not the art, is the metaphor. In another place one would need another art.

Perhaps a better analogue for an art of place is theatre, not that of the proscenium stage, but rather the latent theatre of our personal and social lives. In 1966 Michael Kirby described the participants in Allan Kaprow's "Happenings" as "non-matrixed performers" as the conscious enactors of scripted tasks which did not require the affectation of a dramatic persona. You just performed the task as yourself. Around the same time Kaprow wrote in 'Assemblages, Environments and Happenings': "If there are to be measures and limits allowed, they must be of a new kind. Rather than fight against the confines of the typical room, many are actively considering working out in the open. They cannot wait for the new architecture." Of course, the new architecture never came, although its precedents existed for Kaprow in Schwitters's Merzbau, Frederick Keisler's concept of the "endless room", and also in the ceremonial and living spaces of native American and African societies. In retrospect, Kirby's notion of a non-matrixed performance and the kind of flexible, organic architecture Kaprow had in mind were part of a broad intention to integrate artists and art into non-art settings. Beyond the new theatre or the new architecture, what they unwittingly predicted, was the convergence of the two in the context of place.

In a particularly American sense the theatre of modernism has been scripted by the act of work. As such critics as Leo Steinberg and Harold Rosenberg have noted, we have tried since the early nineteenth century to convert works of art into an art of work, to peel away from artworks that frosty European patina that keeps us from the direct experience of the world. "Americans", wrote Rosenberg, "dream of taking home hunks of

raw nature". In this sense, work has been seen as a penitential ethic by which American art is stripped of aristocratic pretensions and made common, especially if that work is tied to the land. Aaron Copland once told his violinists during a rehearsal of Appalachian Spring, "Try to make it more American in spirit: meaning's not all on the surface, it's more 'cool'."

And yet, in the context of North American cultural mythologies, the reification of work feels like a fundamentally male, specifically Anglo conceit. It is a way of paying one's Protestant dues for being merely an artist in a culture of cowboys, but the terms of that bargain were not forged by women or non-Europeans. Perhaps tellingly, the archetypal worker of American modernism was Jackson Pollock, an abusive, alcoholic, tough guy for whom painting was where the action was. Behind him was the hard-nosed, journalistic sensibility of the American Regionalists and ahead were the street theatrics of happenings, the industrial materials of Minimalism and the hunks of raw earthworks, all infused with a sense of the common, the literal, process and of the capacity of work to demystify art in the name of life.

At its worst this ethos of work perpetuates stereotypical, masculine standards for the redemption of artists as workers. At its best, it suggests that art is a process in which we can all participate. Doug Hollis once said that while he didn't know if people understood his work as art, he was certain they understood his art as work. The point is not to romanticise work. Rather, in an age when the tangibility of the world has been flattened by the ubiquitous, formalist criticism of culture called "the media", one might think of an art of place as a theatre of social engagement in the context of our common work.

The condition of a place is the condition of an art of place. A place is a particular condition. Siah Armajani sees a place as an extension of the activity it contains and which, in turn, defines it as a place. He sees sets of tools used to generate a set of conditions that constitute a place. Those conditions are transitive and relational. They involve a web of human activities that give meaning to the place, that animate the tools. This is a place's practical dimension. In it, we recognise the theatre of place passing through tools, locations and sites.

When Armajani builds a public reading room, he shapes it according to a reader's need for interior light. The structure takes the shape of the activity it was created to contain. It is open to the possibility of readers reading and is not really a place until reading occurs. In this sense, a place cannot exist outside the present. It is a "here and now" extension of the activity, the work, that shapes it. If we have this particular work in common, if we read or cross bridges

together, then a place is an expression of our common work. And that work is nothing so mundane as eating lunch, but rather a socially consequential activity like reading Thomas Jefferson in a place that embodies his notions of social democracy, of what is required of a private citizen in a public place. Perhaps more than any artist Armajani articulates the thresholds at which the private individual becomes a public member, at which personal comfort is measured in terms of communal responsibility.

Armajzani writes: "It is the place that makes ordinary things particular." By using a tool we particularise its location. We animate it with our work. We move along the axis of our work from the general location to the particular place. We deduce place. We go home. At bottom Armajani's art, his work, is about the confluence of public and private space in a democracy. Perhaps "going home", and being left alone there, is the supreme American theatre.

When "Power of Place" an urban site research group organised by Dolores Hayden in Los Angeles, conducts a workshop in which the social history of that city's first all-black fire station is resurrected and its fire fighters and their living relatives are honoured, it returns history to a city too often thought to have none. The human values of Los Angeles are cognitively mapped and grounded in the places they helped create. A hybrid of performance, conceptual art and urban design, Hayden's vision - or might we call it a re-vision - enters the public domain as a spectacle of remembering, and of doing so in terms of the ethnic and cultural diversity that shaped a city. The first sites of that diverse city may be gone, but the power of places to remember are being reclaimed.

When Douglas Hollis installs an outdoor matrix of aolean harps and wind organs, he activates an invisible sonic ceiling that settles over its place as a physiological translation of the wave patterns of the wind. Since sound is a physical, albeit invisible field, the mass of Hollis' sculptures - of his places - varies from breeze to breeze, now inflated, now diminished. It seems to breathe. One moves in sympathetic resonance toward the shifting proportions of the sound and thereby measures and is measured by the spatial, temporal and physical wavelength properties of the given place. A place becomes an extension of the sensing body; sculpture, as such, becomes an instrument. It works. When the air is still, the art is waiting. Perhaps a place is a wavelength to which we are attuned and for which we are willing to wait.

When Andrew Leicester constructs a memorial mining structure on a hillside in Frostberg, Maryland - in the coal-mining belt of the Appalachians - he pays homage to the generations of local miners who are in a very real sense the spent resources of the American coal industry. Like a mining platform, his actual structure rises out of an abandoned tailing mound, while back

along its length runs a railtrack towards the woods, symbolically linking the notions of resource and waste. By entering, one can pass through a series of iconographic changes that stand for the miners' one-track lives and suggest a kind of cradle-to-grave mining of human potential. In one chamber, actual tools owned by local miners with whom he had researched this project are displayed. In an ironic reversal of convention, the museum is suddenly 'in' the sculpture, its artefacts taken from the place where it is, its iconography a form of local history.

When members of the Border Arts Workshop Taller de Arte Fronterizo stage low-tech, participatory performances for and in the "Soccer Field" - a barren staging ground from which undocumented workers cross daily into North America and which doubles as a sort of public square for the residents of Colonia Libertad, Tijuana's oldest neighbourhood - they intend to intervene in the prevailing US media characterisations of the border as a "war zone" by engaging and making visible the human and community dimensions of this dusty, geo-political pass. Designed to be passed through at dusk when the migrants move north, these "performance interventions" do not capture an audience, but seek to acknowledge the more pressing currents by which their undocumented constituents move. Based on historical and contemporary events relevant to the troubled history of US/Latin American relations, these performance interventions embody familiar icons and rituals of the Mexican Catholic liturgy and reflect the daily cat and mouse scenarios played out along the border. Thus, a contemporary story with historical roots is enacted in terms of community traditions in the political context of a particular place. In the open-ended, participatory and multi-cultural pose of those gestures, one is able to sense in this illegal port of entry the unofficial presence of a post-modern Statue of Liberty.

When David Ireland sandblasts layers of paint and plaster from the walls of a former army barracks that is now the Headlands Centre for the Arts, he suspends the architecture in a moment of physical time that spans its entire history as a place. By revealing layer after layer of the building - old wooden door jambs, steel weightbearing poles that aren't quite hidden by the walls, and places where windows used to be - he interprets the site in terms of the intentions, decisions and sometimes the indecision that maintained it for most of this century. It is with neither stridency nor self-certainty, but with a kind of memorial empathy that Ireland uncovers the sense of the place's inner life and of the lives of those who passed through it.

When Buster Simpson uses a floor joist for the long-destroyed Seattle hotel as the bench for a bus stop that overlooks the original site, and when he inscribes on that bench the phrase - "An Old Hotel Demolished Here. Only this floor joist remains to bear your weight", he not only recycles an artefact of

history in its place, but he also creates a powerful mnemonic device in which one "remembers" through the seat of one's pants. Here, the memory is borne in one's weight.

When, as part of Pittsburgh's annual Three Rivers Arts Festival, Suzanne Helmuth and Jock Reynolds install "Table of Contents" - an open, rusty steel replica of the nineteenth century children's room of the Braddock Carnegie Library - they honour a process of local urban renewal in which the nearby city of Braddock, economically depressed since the decline of the steel industry in the 1970s, has embarked on a grassroots renovation of its famous library, the first of hundreds given to communities throughout the nation by Andrew Carnegie. By welding into the sculpture steel-framed photographs that were either taken of the renovation process or researched from the library archives, the artists were able to incorporate into their work a collage-like record of civic and social change in Braddock, a city symptomatic of what ails the rust-belt. And also of what heals it. As part of the public period room, volunteers from Braddock were invited to sit and tell festival-goers about their community's renewal, transforming the art, as it were, into a stage for the oral transmission of local history at a place in which the broader legacy of Carnegie's philanthropy is renewed.

When Mel Chin installs a black nylon scrim that replicates the pitched-roof facade of Hartford's nineteenth century Talcott Street Church on its original site which is presently occupied by a parking structure, he resurrects not only the ghostly visage and diminutive scale of the old building, but because the church was home to Connecticut's first black congregation, a regional cornerstone of the Abolitionist movement (with ties to the underground railroad), and a vital community centre, he also invokes a screen of collective, if faded memories of a once thriving place and the layers of racial and political identity that gave it meaning and coherence, but which have since been fractured and lost like so many American stories, within a labyrinth of modern, urban renewal.

When Suzanne Lacy lays a length of railroad track across the lawn of Pittsburgh's Downtown Point, with roped into its wooden ties, the words and phrases of an epic about domestic violence, and when she installs at the end of that track a working phone-booth in which women may seek advice, leave recordings and/or listen to other women's stories, and leaves beaten-up cars along the tracks as metaphors of battered bodies, she not only weaves together a post-industrial allegory of family violence, but she also ties that violence to the history of the site. For, though now a popular park overlooking the confluence of the rivers that meet to form the Ohio, which in turn flows into the Mississippi, the Point also carries a symbolic load relating to colonial occupation: before the British arrived, there had been a French fort, which was itself staked out on the embers of the seat of the Iroquoi Confederation. With the

Industrial Revolution, the site became a dreary railroad terminus for trains hauling coal to the great steel mills along the river banks, further concealing its previous history as a destination for slaves escaping along the underground railroad. It is perhaps this dual metaphor of being forced underground and choosing to rise up and claim one's place that Lacy invokes when she lays her trap, scatters her cars and plants her phone-booth. In so doing, she evokes the social memory of the site, its underground resources, its layers of place, knowing too that beneath the point of Pittsburgh's civic identity, flows an unseen fourth river, an untrammelled force of life.

In each of these approaches to place, art is re-conceived as a tool by which some half-forgotten layer of our public life is unearthed. Underlying this archaeological tendency is a broad transformation in the 60s and 70s of our perception of the spaces of art from those of negative presence to those of particular place. In that time site-specific art has been transformed into a place-particular practice which represents the domestication and/or socialisation of the art site, and defines approaches to art-making in which the social and cultural contents of places are acknowledged and worked as the materials of human exchange. To acknowledge the contents of the place is to move beyond what Robert Morris called "The Solipsism" of the senses and into a more concrete (and politically complex) relationship with those whose place it is. Therein the abstractions of art are literalised: viewers become constituents; art history gives way to local memory, and public opinions about art are suddenly less important than community values about place.

What began in the 60s as a material seepage beyond the gallery system has returned in the 70s and 80s and now the 90s to the cities as a social engagement with the political system, or what might now be called a "post-modern social realism". It would be wrong to suggest, however, that an emerging consciousness of place among artists represents a "progression" for art. While a certain opening-up of the art site (from the dense pictorialism of late-modernist sculpture to the fluid social-realism of actual places) can be described in general and in retrospect, it probably has more to do with the social reclamation of artists than with the aesthetic progress of art. The linear arc of modernist progress has not been grounded in the human-scale particularities of time and place, and it is in a more "vertical" sense that artists have recently begun to excavate and interpret the strata of personal and social memory that constitute places, finding therein places for themselves outside the specialised social sites of art. In time both artifice's place and the place of artists will have been reclaimed.

A place comes into art loaded with contents. An artist comes to a place in one of two ways: either loaded with content or, like a clean slate, ready to receive, interpret and represent

what is already there. If the former, an artist will displace the resident meanings of a place with his preconceptions about art. If the latter, she will make those meanings visible as if for the first time. In so doing she may also make something that bears little resemblance to art; it may look like beach furniture, feel like a walking tour, read like an ethnic community library, sound like oral history, pass by like a parade or be organised like a photography competition. Having being made by an artist, however, it will be none of those things alone.

To borrow a phrase once again from Allan Kaprow - "It will be art without necessarily being "art-like". It will be art "like" something else: like architecture, like street life, like urban design, like social research, like outdoor advertising, like memorials, like graffiti, like archival photography, like turn-of-the-century graveyards for the stillborn infants of unwed mothers. What this means is that a place will be both the content and the context of an art of place: it will have a kind of double life. In place artists engage meanings that may have nothing to do with art, but which are framed, proposed or clarified in the engagement. Like archaeologists, contemporary artists of place excavate the accumulated history and character of a place; like anthropologists, they study the institutions, myths and customs that characterise a place; like psychotherapists, they unlock the unconscious assumptions and forgotten secrets that keep a place's histories and intentions hidden from public view; like witches or magicians, they invoke the rhythms and spirits of a place; like sociologists, they measure the social systems that give a place its power; and like social activists, artists of place confront the rhetorics of exclusion and power that keep certain places off limits to dissenting voices, which means that the thresholds now before us are fundamentally political: metaphors for access and belonging, for empowerment and remembering.

Under the weight of these analogies, though, an artist of place is as much a dowser as anything else. Thank you.