

## **Transient Reformations: Transforming Place through Projection**

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Legend has it that Martin Luther commenced an infamous public conversation with other local Wittenberg church officials by nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church - the place and symbolic face of their authority. Today artists can engage in public conversations with symbolic places through the medium of projected video without leaving behind a single nail mark. This paper examines some aspects of site-specific public art, then looks at a team of artists creating site-specific video installations - illuminating issues and stories associated with a particular place by temporarily transforming the inanimate place into a dynamic space of visual dialogue. Finally, the site-specific multimedia performance shown at this year's conference, *Mediated Sentinel*, will be discussed in light of the dialogue it engaged with a steel and bronze seven-story sculpture.

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**T**HE year was 1517, and Fr. Johannes Tetzel was busily collecting funds for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. What he was selling were letters of indulgence - letters excusing a confessed sin from punishment in exchange for a monetary donation to the church. The Dominican monk, recently promoted to Papal Commissioner for Indulgence, was traveling through the areas just north of the Saxony border (where indulgence selling was not allowed). Many people of Saxony traveled to see him, buying Peter Indulgences for their past sins, their future sins, even the sins of deceased friends and relatives. Among them were some congregants of the Wittenberg City Church of St. Mary, where Martin Luther was a priest. He had sermonized against misuse of indulgences before, but that October he was moved to write a letter to the bishops who had written the instructions governing the sale of indulgences. While the 95 Theses included with the letter did not challenge indulgence in principle, they asked pointed questions about the sales of indulgence as practiced by Tetzel and company ("Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Sale," 1997).

Legend has it that Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church, home base of Saxony's highest church officials, on October 31, 1517. If the legend is true, he chose the place and symbolic face of local church authority to publicly commence an infamous public conversation. The Castle Church door functioned almost like a bulletin board for the church and the university. Not only would the letter be seen by the bishops, it would be seen by students, priests, and the rest of the reading public ("Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Nailing," 1997). While the replies (in word or action) to Luther's letter were not instantaneous, the public conversation he initiated from that single place reverberated into a church-wide reformation and schism. Today, artists can engage in public conversations with symbolic places through the medium of video without leaving behind a single nail mark. This paper examines some aspects of site-specific public art, and then examines the site-specific public video installations of artists

Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg. Finally, the site-specific multimedia performance shown at this year's conference, *Mediated Sentinel*, will be discussed in light of the dialogue it engaged with a steel and bronze seven-story sculpture.

### Public Dialogue through Site-Specific Art

**A**s a medium for site-specific art in the public arena, we can consider graffiti. Most graffiti found in a typical urban landscape are simply tags - scribbled names, handles, epithets and graphic symbols - not art. Graffiti tags mark territory conquered (or at least visited), claiming a bit of permanent wall real estate to declare a temporary presence. The message to passers-by at that site is simply "I was here." No deep conversation or engagement is generally desired. There are notable exceptions to the rule, however.

This guilelessly askew English graffiti found in the middle of urban Japan is no simple epithet:

They always give up everything, and forgot the angry postwar Japan.  
"Chang yourself if you want to change around" though you feel so, too  
late, you lost the sool.

They cry, They want Freedom, but they cry to lose myself.

If you do nothing. Time is passing. AH! Don't cry boys & girls,  
You can Do it!!

2001.Nov.? [symbol tags] T&T©

(Richardson, 2004)

The authors of this graffiti, following loosely in Luther's footsteps, put their message in a very public place - an unoccupied billboard - in a direct appeal to other youth in the community to take heart, get inspired, and change their world.

The 461 crew (Bary and Meisal) wanted to inspire the citizens of Lodz, Poland with their rich local history. Unlike Luther (or the T&T responsible for the billboard in Japan) might have done, the 461 crew did not spray-paint the city history in prose, or even poetic text. Instead, they chose visual art. As a gift to Lodz, these professional graffiti muralists turned the parking lot side of a nondescript brick building into a metaphysical meets hip-hop depiction of Lodz's architectural, maritime, and industrial heritage affectionately called *The Boat Wall*. Bary and Meisal transformed No. 152 Piotrkowska Street with a mural that speaks directly to the place, Lodz, and to the people who live there (Farrell & Webb, 2002). The same mural on a wall in Santa Fe, New Mexico, or isolated inside a gallery would be beautiful work of fine art, but would lose the resonating power it has as an artistically-expressed response to the specific place it resides.

When curators and critics speak of site-specific art, they generally agree that the art is grounded in a specific context. What they do not agree on is what constitutes a specific context. Miwon Kwon proposes several flavors of site specificity. What Kwon (2002) calls phenomenological site specificity refers to artwork created for a particular physical

environment - geography, architecture, and space. Minimalist sculptor Richard Serra has been creating artwork that is phenomenologically site specific for decades. In a proposal for one such sculpture, Serra (2002) describes his process of scrupulously studying the landscape and surroundings - measuring elevations, horizon lines, and views of the adjacent architecture from multiple perspectives. Serra's chosen challenge in conceiving the sculpture was not creating an independent object to be viewed in isolation, but creating something that, once sited, would be perpetually "shaping the viewer's response to the entire context"( para. 6). In Serra's view, his site-specific art should be "continuously redrawing the viewer's relationship to the landscape and the architecture" as they move through the site (para. 5).

Many artists want to address not only the physical/perceptual context, but the intangible human context of a place as well. Kwon (2002) discusses institutional and discursive site specificity - artists either responding to the particular sociopolitical framework of the art-sponsoring institution, or seeing particular sites as almost interchangeable stages and content sources from which to address larger issues such as environmental crisis. In contrast to the view of cultural discourse being separable from and privileged over a place, Sholette (1999) argues that there is a brand of site-oriented public art (tagged sometimes as "New Genre Public Art") responding specifically to the non-interchangeable, non-separable intersection of cultural, social, and historical aspects at a particular place. These artists perceive expressive potential flowing from the unique symbolic ecology of a site. The 461 Crew perceived Luther's church bulletin-board door in the industrialized heart of Lodz at No. 152 Piotrkowska Street.

A spectacular example of that special quality of dialogue is Hans Haacke's 1997 *Standort Merry-go round* installation in Munster, Germany. The site of Haacke's work is right beside a 1909 monument, a ring of relief-sculpted soldiers on an impressive round pedestal, raised in honor of Prussian war victories leading to the establishment of the 2nd German Reich. Haacke's installation had the exact same diameter and height as Frydag's *Ehrenmal am Mauritztor* monument, but they were the same in outer measurements only. Within that diameter, Haacke imprisoned an old children's carousel (playing the German national anthem instead of any children's songs) behind a round wooden fence topped with barbed wire. Though the eerie music could be heard continually, and flashes of light escaped through the cracks, the only way to see the spinning carousel and its ring of riderless horses was through a few narrow gaps and chinks in the tall gateless enclosure (Busmann et al., 1997; "Hans Haacke," 1997). Through close proximity and echo of scale and form, Haacke ensured that passers-by could not help but connect the disturbing pathos of the stockaded carousel directly to the martial nationalism embodied in the war monument.

The following is Haacke's own description of his approach to "site-specific":

I like to stress that the site-specificity of many of my works is not restricted to architectural or other physical conditions in which I am invited to work and exhibit. At least as important for me is the social and political context. As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say that, in addition to a traditional artist's use of materials like bronze, canvas, paint, etc., I also use the social and political context as my material (Haacke, 1996, para. 1).

When Haacke first encountered the monument, Frydag's stone ring of men had likely faded into mundane background of the park setting for most passers-by. As he became cognizant of the unique heritage of the monument, Haacke could have created a generic piece dealing solely in a broader political context and amenable to traveling exhibition at galleries and sites around the world. Instead he was inspired to answer with an installation that was the Munster monument's precise physical and conceptual counterpart. The *Ehrenmal am Mauritztor* and its troubling symbolism were pushed into the foreground and transformed by force of perfect tandem with Haacke's mysterious round prison.

### Site-Specific Video Installations

THE media discussed so far for creating site-specific art in public spaces have all been tangible materials - paint, steel and wood. Recently, some artists are adopting the new medium of video imagery as the immaterial material of their site-specific work. As the requisite equipment becomes more attainable and less intrusive, more artists are using video to illuminate the issues and stories associated with a particular place by temporarily transforming that inanimate place into a dynamic space of visual dialogue.

The San Diego/Tijuana border region is rife with potential issues and stories, so it is no wonder that it is regularly visited by the InSITE festival of site-specific visual art. Among the field of international artists participating in InSITE 2000 were Mauricio Day and Walter Riedweg. Their chosen site of intervention is an actual site of transition for tens of thousands of people a day: within the controlled San Ysidro pedestrian crossing corridor. They placed two boxy one-room structures side by side, the entire side of one painted with the huge word "MAMA" black on white, the other white on black. Painted in small letters by the door of one: "Motherland". By the door of the other, visitors found the words "Rituales Viciosos". The two small theaters housed two parallel but incongruent stories of the San Ysidro border fence separating Tijuana from San Diego (Sanchez, 2003).

The projected video entitled "Rituales Viciosos" is actually a fairly short loop. Footage of a small band of migrants making a spirited attempt to jump the fence, and then being captured by the US border patrol on the other side, is played over and over again. The resulting impression of perpetual confrontation and frustration reminds viewers that that particular ritual is played out incessantly up and down the fence just outside the door. In stark contrast, "Motherland" is a 12-minute up close and personal portrait of the work lives of US Customs Officers in San Ysidro's canine unit. The candidness of the officers sharing their daily experiences is reminiscent of the reality television show COPS. Unlike COPS, Dias and Riedweg ask the officers to discuss their personal definitions of territory, authority, defense, and motherhood. In the following excerpt, one of the officers discusses territorial borders:

...is the imaginary, or the lines drawn in sand, on paper, through marks, that many people, animals, would defend; it is just something that is set up and, how it's done, how do animals know that this is their territory... they mark it. We are a little bit further advanced, we draw lines on a map and there the lines are, and that is our territory and that is whoever else's territories over there (Sanchez, 2003, para. 5).

They talk about how they train the dogs to aggressively discharge their official duties (detecting illegal drug and human cargo) by getting Woody, Scotty and the rest of the German shepherds to see the work as a game - an extended playtime. They talk about their relations with the general public and the illegal immigrants they encounter. They talk about their strong motherly affection for their canine partners. They talk about their own mothers (MacMasters, 2000; Sanchez, 2003). Despite the “vicious ritual” being relentlessly reenacted in the other theater (on the other side of the conceptual fence), the customs officers of “Motherland” are presented as earnest, dignified human beings. The two narratives are in a tense dialog with each other, and with the fence itself, but Dias and Riedweg’s *MAMA* installation never becomes didactic. Instead, they aspire to

evocar poesía en el público. Estimular, encontrar la propia autonomía para cuestionar, para mostrar que cada uno ve el mundo de una forma que es absolutamente personal. Ese es el principio de la dignidad. [evoke poetry in the public. To stimulate, to find our own autonomy to question, to show that each one sees the world in a way that is absolutely personal. That is the principle of dignity.] (“Cada uno ve” 2003, para. 4).

With the InSITE *MAMA* installation, Dias and Riedweg illuminated the polarization of personal experience occurring in the shadows of the San Ysidro fence.

Two years later in 2002, Dias and Riedweg set out to illuminate the stories of grey-market peddlers and their goods in the Largo da Concordia in Sao Paulo, Brazil as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Arte/Cidade. The topology they noticed was not determined so much by the topology of the market as by the routes of exchange of the goods - useless kitsch and counterfeits reappearing in many of the tented stalls. Dias and Riedweg selected just 6 products, and found 33 peddlers who sold them. To create a map of those interconnections, they conceived a installation, *Mera Vista Point*, of multiple perspectives and locations to be integrated into the sprawl of tents by the train tracks. Each of the chosen peddlers was interviewed for a one-minute promotional/self-portrait spot, and was given a television to set up within their stall. Meanwhile, over the haphazard sea of tarps protecting the stalls of Largo da Concordia, they layered some canvases, each printed with a giant black-and-white portrait of the peddler located just below. In an effort to show “the other side of currency” flowing among the peddlers, Dias and Riedweg became part of that informal economy. The network of peddlers and products made visible by the tent-top portraits could be viewed from above by climbing up to the small 2<sup>nd</sup>-story refreshment stand (doubling as the broadcast center for the peddlers’ promotional spots) that Dias and Riedweg constructed in the middle of the market. The underside of the tarp over the belvedere/refreshment stand/ broadcast center was printed with a mosaic of the peddler portraits (Lopez, 2002; Peixoto, 2002).

*Mera Vista Point* accomplishes a dense interweaving of images and perspectives. As you walk through the stalls, the peddler promotion channel is broadcasting from several locations around you. On television and in person, the peddlers give their individual litanies, yet they are often hawking the same goods. If you stop and climb up to the refreshment stand for a snack, you see the same television channel, but looking out you see a patchwork of dignified portraits of those same peddlers stretching over the marketplace tents, and looking up you see a mosaic of those portraits. Pulling together video, canvas, and their own 2<sup>nd</sup> story entry into the marketplace, Dias and Riedweg

construct an alternative topography of the Largo da Concordia - a topography of outsider commerce, individuals struggling to make a living, and a makeshift architecture beside the train tracks.

### The Author's Turn

WHILE Dias and Riedweg have created video installations that transform a site by illuminating the stories of people who are inextricably bound to the site, the author was inspired to commence her practice of site-specific video installation at a more basic level - focusing on the inanimate site. Last year, there appeared on campus a steel and bronze seven-story sculpture. It was created by Albert Paley, and named *The Sentinel*. Like *The Boat Wall*, it was conceived as a tribute to local denizens - the students of the institute. According to Paley, "College is an incredible time in your life when you redefine your values. My abstract sculpture deals with that sense of dynamism and allows for a variety of interpretations" (Low, 2003, p. 4C). The sculpture is as tall as the tallest building on campus, and dominates the plaza where it is sited. Various observers see in its exploding shapes a soldier, a sword and shield, a rifle, banners. Others may see the tools of a draftsman (Low, 2003). The president of the institute has even been known to speak of preparing students for the war effort, and building closer relationships with the military/intelligence complex. What the author saw after viewing the sculpture many times (and choosing a vantage point that seemed to create most cohesive impression), was a stereotype of life at an institute of technology. It seemed very mechanical, very male, and overwhelmingly martial. The author also discovered (from different vantage points) a sheltering space within the "legs" (base) of *The Sentinel*, and a large rectangular flat space when viewing the side of those legs. Desiring to respond to *The Sentinel* by temporarily transform it (without graffiti and without nailing a position paper to its base), the idea for a performance, *Mediated Sentinel* was born.

The goal of the performance would be to dramatically transform the RIT Sentinel sculpture with music and interactive video projection. The video projected onto the side of the Sentinel would be controlled by an artist and a musician performing from within the walls of the steel structure's base. The projected black-and-white imagery (snippets of pre-recorded video) would be gradually more organic, romantic, and in other ways opposite to the static sculpture. Blending with the pre-recorded imagery would be live video of the artist's sketchpad as the artist creates a drawing as part of the performance. The darkest lines and contours of the drawing would burn through and overlay the pre-recorded imagery in saturated color. The degree to which the sketchpad's drawing-in-progress would color-burn through the pre-recorded imagery could be modulated by audio characteristics of the music. The result would be a performance to juxtapose the metallic and martial aspects of the Sentinel with music and context-inspired art in a setting uniquely altered by the interactive video projection.

The initial performance of *Mediated Sentinel* began June 11, 2004 just before sunset. As a prelude, the audience chose their favorite vantage points around the sculpture, discussed what they saw in the sculpture (good, bad, and indifferent), inspected the performance setup, and did fun experiments to understand its workings. Hiding within the sheltering base of the sculpture were a computer, a stereo system (in lieu of a live musician), a sketchpad on an easel, and an artist ready to wield charcoal. When the sun

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had been sufficiently extinguished, and the audience seated on the lawn beyond the broadest side of the base, the performance began. Under the author's control, the pre-recorded black-and-white video - projected large on the rough exterior surface of the base - transitioned from automated punch press machinery, gear works, and iron chains to undulating water, a meandering ant's silhouette, and a shadow of gesturing human hand. Meanwhile, the darkest contours of the charcoal drawing (and even the shadowed edges of the hand and hair of the artist) burned through the black-and-white imagery as bright blues and greens, flickering in synchronization with the pulsing of the music. The nighttime projection onto *The Sentinel* revealed only the strongest contrasts in the imagery - all dark colors were absorbed by the sculpture's base. As a result, the projected imagery blended in and made the base come alive with organic movement, accomplishing the goal of transient reformation.

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