# Framing Locative Consciousness

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## Abstract

A special autonomy contains the word "place" in modernist thought and language. It refers to locations with at least a vague name and an implied prominence over non-places. But aside from traditional monuments, little in current notions of place relies on the role of memory in constituting placemaking. Today, therefore, place exists in disconnection with event, an incorrectly separate term with its own semantic lineage. This disjunction is both the opportunity of postmodern architecture and what locative media art, with its union of place and event, seeks to obliterate, as the argument and examples in this essay indicate.

A fundamental strategy in locative art's practices is to effect a radical transcendence of perception through the temporal shift between the presentation of a location as a physical entity and its representation as a site of active signification, something stimulated when the often veiled communicative circuitry is triggered. To deploy this abstraction, the problem emphasis turns on how a new, complex space of signification is constructed from a simpler material one. Whereas the material environment's contact with our presence is interpreted by means of the passive signs that its architecture conveys in the language of its constructed style, the electronic superstratum of the locative work communicates by means of more active signal transmission. This turn, converting into palpable what is internalized and implicit, was discreetly adopted into the architectural lexicon in the individual structures of the Structural Expressionism that took seed in the 1960's, and after a long gestation, became prominent two decades later. The art world finds a seminal example in the Centre Georges Pompidou, for whose structure Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers displaced much of the bony's skeleton arrangement from interior outward, to play a new role, operating as epidermis of the building's exterior.

Centre Georges Pompidou, lateral isometric ground view
1977, Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Paris, France

More broadly, the stage effect for which the internal structure is employed in Structural Expressionist projects suggests that architectural function is capable of supporting other forms of communicative ostentation. Transforming its original, austere objective of supplying material support, architecture evolves to convey its union not merely with the physical function of place but also its historical vestiges as well, which is to say that it is in constructively reconciling the union of social function and social history that architecture finds its character as praxis. And in order to serve as both empirical and historical vessel, the built object – the house, building, agora, court, boulevard, market, plaza, park, commons, or waterfront port– circumscribes the discourse of its identity in the signs and monuments, and that are to be perceived, traversed, and read within it but separate from the protective implementation of its physical reinforcement, demonstrates that function and history are connected but in fact independent tiers of one's comprehensive experience with the structure. This separation admits of two distinct but co-continuous lines of vernacularization; where the physical construction exists in response to capacity planning, historical representation responds to the imaginal necessity for coalescing the temporal progress of social identity. Every design typology derives from a simpler obsessive need for containment of some problem in the engagement of society with its defining components – the court, castle, or palace is the figure of authority attired against the ground of a populace; the ghetto relates the architectural account of the social containment of a community; the hospital, of collectively managed infirmity; the school, of socially directed learning; the market, of freely negotiated exchange; the plaza, of social encounter. All manner of place invests in the atmosphere of its generating forces: of goodness, of authority, of oppression, of succor, of encarceration, of mortality. Nor are these

merely functional, purposive justifications for certain kinds of architecture; they are driving influences on the routes of historical incidence that associate to place. Some, like the artists' colony, are highly complex; others like the *place d'armes*, are not.

And the near literal clarity with which markers merge the historical echo for ritual identity with the empirical function of localization that is served by the knowledge that a town center, for instance, is in fact the center of gravity for the remaining environs, is a clarity that often assumes a factual certitude that we might read literally. Thus the town center's proverbial tower, announcing the centrality of place, also exhibits its largest clock, thus simultaneously declaring the official time, with both being broadcast through the timely and regular gong of its bells. Many such indicators are embedded into the narrative of the metropolitan story. Some point to a narratival beginning, as does the gate, the symbolic membrane of entrance into a place distinct from what lies outside, and therefore with a history. Others are signs of coordinate space, as is the idea of the *cippi*, the stone street marker, established throughout the world almost concurrently and still maintained unchanged in many sites, but also modernized in the street sign. Others impose social performance, branding on the group a specific identity, as does the colonnade, its covered porticoes and the arcade attracting and fashionably converting the passerby from aimless pedestrian into ambling shopper.

Now, it might be sufficient to leave things at that, were it not for the sort of ancillariness that this argument assumes. In advocating the reciprocality that we might mutually caption as the narrative of place and the place of narrative, this might appear to be little more than a proposal rooted in architecture rather than studies of contemporary art or new media. But architecture is not my trajectory, perhaps because in opening with what is in truth more a preamble to a critical aesthetics of locative communication than a highly selective revision of the architectural canon, I am moving toward a different set of thematic concerns than those of architecture which Mark Wigley abridged as being "only ever discourse about building"[11]. For this glib characterization, cheekily caricatured with the missive that "what we do in schools of architecture is to teach people how to stand beside a bunch of representations of a project and tell a credible story"[11] makes reference to a discourse of consideration entirely unlike that which I have been tracing. Such stories of construction are, for all the adventure of the deployed engineering, never ontologically faithful to the ways in which individual and collective presence is shaped by the constructive mythologies to which they become subjected in the experience of we must call geographical residency. The architect's deliberations on constructed *being* have shadowed the infinitely tacit ones of the dweller, considerations which become apparent from the phenomenon of *being there*. The effortless and common way in which this phrase flows occludes the fact that it entails two concepts of radical dimension and difference, and which exist in a

determinedly tense quest for resolution. That the first part, *being*, as metaphysically irreducible condition and first class absolute, encounters its complement, *there*, the capricious and wavering geographical relativity, points to a state of banal superficiality and indeterminate depth.

But my present discussion is not centrally concerned with either condition, that of *being* or of *being there*, but rather with a distinct inversion, one which defines one problem scope of locative art, the condition that we might term the *there of being*. Here, in this awkward word choice, is a circumstance whereby architecture's functional objectives, through which social conditions of character and identity originate *ad hoc* from the programmatic design of place, become transposed such that the character and identity of place now appear to originate *ad hoc* from the programmatic design of social conditions. If the aspiration of architecture and urban planning is to create environments, from dwellings up to piazzas, commons, and arcades all of whose contours shape social and personal conduct with a named role and a story of experiences that leads there (for what is a prisoner but someone whose story culminates in a prison? How does one imagine a hospital, a home, a cemetery, a hair salon, an office building without the title of its occupants?), then one concern regarding locative practice is to create shapes of social and personal conduct whose experiences overdub and retitle existing environments to which such art has access, from wall to storyboard, from building façade to reflective canvas, from street to game board, and from silent cenotaph to informative witness, as instances of this art indicate.

These references speak of ontological anchors, and more; they are closer to what might be termed experiments with the <u>narratival reception of place</u>. As a case of the opposite, it is this destruction of space that commercial advertising propagates – the ad on the billboard is an exercise, an attempt at universal relevance, in which a case is made for the unconditional possibility that whatever is being portrayed has a natural fit with whatever habitus [Habitude; mode of life; general appearance] *anyone* happens to inhabit. Documenting this with extraordinary relevance to method is Jacques Villeglé's *decollage*, the visual anti-story to place, a reconstruction of the impossible, a stitch whose thread is the false narrative condition of every ad whose imagery he has ripped from some wall and repositioned deftly in his own collage of refuse. Every reconstructing shred comes from the wall banner, the netherworld of culture industry's postage stamp, and is on one hand all too obvious in its appeal for consumerist acceptance. Yet, being entirely ambiguous in the possible belonging to any one place to the exclusion of any other, the decollage is consequently without meaning, without the existential foundation that being-in-place promotes. Comprising a collage not merely of approved objects but capriciously torn tatters, Villeglé's method argues for the opposite, for what might be termed the <u>narratival possibilities of non-place</u>.

Jacques Villeglé, *Rues Desprez et Vercingétorix - "La Femme"*, 1966,
© Adagp, Paris 2008

## II

We have established the historical designation of specific meaning to instances of location that assume distinct names – town, center, square, room, temple, hill, monument, and so on. Each of these names points to a class of space that indicates both the physical construction of a location as well as the presumable purpose, if any, for its being. Quaintly, the word "hill" connotes a place of slightly elevated earth where nature has presumably not yet been asphyxiated by industrial construction. The signifier "cathedral" designates not just a kind of edifice, but also suggests a historical setting and an enduring agenda in the particular kind of engagement that

might be called worship. The term "square" or "common" is inevitably a central site of congregation and traffic. The linguistic indications of geography set out the idea that location takes on a variety of names that reflect both what up to now has shaped a space through specific forces and what might in a timeless sense happen there in general.

As with the terminology of place, but entirely isolated from it, language reserves specific words such as "birth", "battle", "discovery", and "destruction" to denote actual occurrences possessed of a definite meaning. In contrast with our conceptualization of place as a shared backdrop for potential occurrence, the cognizance of event is invariably discrete and particular to specific events. When someone comes into the world, even though one element takes place within the other, we remember the hospital in a very different way than the actual birth of the person. The cemetery is significant yet diminishingly distinct from the loved one buried there. Instinctually unfelt through rational experience is the way in which we separate what is even the most momentous event from the place in which it has transpired.

With this contrast as my second angle's preamble, the seeming strangeness of the argument I want to lay out here is that locative discourse intends in a way not seen before in other human practices toward experiences of revealing by undermining the implicit distinction between the collectiveness of place and the specificity of event.

This is really made by a conceptual convergence between arguments from two disciplines. The first comes from a corner of architecture, specifically from a critical position on the suitability to the human condition of recent solution systems proposed in recent decades. The second derives from views about technology as an organizing perspective that come into view toward the moment of late modern philosophy at which Benjamin, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty write on the question of being and perception, and the degree to which the conflation of one with the other provokes what I would term the *necessary destruction of spectatorship*, in favor of locative meaning that materializes through immersive participation with and commitment to an environment. The convergence of both lines of reasoning finds instances in particular installation practices of work that, unlike the design claims of much architecture, seeks to prevail over the division between place and event.

The merger of place and event hasn't in certain theories been entirely overlooked. If Donald Schön's vision of 'reflection-in-action'[9] relates to design practice, this should be found in the reflection of the work product itself, the realized environment. Hence, a search might begin pointing toward a notion of 'reflection-in-place'. The received assumption on reflection is that it is an entirely subjective process, an act of removal from the circumstances of 'being-in' so that a non-temporal and siteless experience

can emerge, and in this sense there is no "meditation in situ" but rather 'contra situ', in spite either of the environment or one's being in a specific place.

One of the persuasively received arguments about Schön's rationale relates to the practitioner's necessary refusal to operate exclusively within rule-based thinking that is inculcated by a practice. This refusal is necessary to solving problems unique to a situation and for which, by definition, there exists no general rule. Since for architecture this entails thinking that is both novel and responsive to a site's specific problems, such fruitful and recurring deviations amount to a hermeneutics of practice. Corresponding to this is Schön's call for a 'conversation with the materials of a situation' so that it becomes possible to sense how this class of solutions leads to an engagement with what is already in place. For media in which space is programmatically produced, to include what has been called *augmented reality*, the argument that its design be approached as an architectural problem has been proposed by among others, Lev Manovich.[7]

The recent criticism and history of art are also cognizant of the spirit, for lack of sharper term, that inheres in the context and construction of a work of art in a post-Industrial age. It goes without repeating that Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* expresses the first such contention, pitting the specific and therefore unique conditions of ritual, of experience, of the sublime transcendence that each work of art promotes on one hand with the modern capability of its opposite, its unlimited reproduction through the appearance of mechanical technology as principal mode of production on the other. In Benjamin's world, the latter has interrupted the former. Putting something to use has for Heidegger a analogously interceptive quality, one that redirects not only attention but the seeming ontology of things. This idea of being-as-engagement is everywhere in Heidegger. It is a modal change through which our concern "subordinates itself to the 'in-order-to' which is constitutive for the equipment we are employing at the time; the less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment."

It might be possible to think of the spirit of a locative situation as entirely unrelated to Heidegger's signature example of perception, the one that involves the disconnection between purpose and use of a hammer when there is breakage or failure of the item that is ready to hand, but the argument relates to any property or characteristic that the hammer appears to have within itself. What fascinates Heidegger is the delicacy with which the purely subjective desire for use of a thing in a particular task conflates out into nuances of constitutive being imputed and projected entirely to the object itself. This reifying slippage might enter our judgment over the hammer even being too heavy or too light, for "even the proposition that the hammer is heavy can give expression to a concernful deliberation, and signify that

the hammer is not an easy one—in other words, that it takes force to handle it, or that it will be hard to manipulate".

Ultimately, Heigegger's phenomenology centers less on perception than engagement, less on what emerges out of observation than from use, and thus presents the additional advantage of generalizing to environments that are unfamiliar and novel to perception. The principal question turns on the sense of belonging-to, does the heaviness belong to the hammer as one of its general qualities, or is it something that it possesses uniquely in connection with my specific task, or is it, conversely, located in my own physiological constitution? Would this hammer's ostensible heaviness be the same if I were twice as strong? However variously reasoned, the hammer's heaviness is not an internal quality of it. Only its weight is. To speak of the weight of something, even when this weight is located at the extreme end of a spectrum comprising equal units of measure, is to pronounce a value. But to contend on its heaviness in the spectrum of common activity is to offer a value judgment. It is this distinction, between qualities manifesting through the physical environment versus those produced by our reasoning and perception, that aesthetic strategies of direct mediation, from *trompe l'oeil* to the phenomenological installation ultimately bring to focus and leave open to question.

Situated engagement is in fact one hallmark of locative art, but as interactivity – a technological affordance – it is barely a few decades old, we would be right in asking about the sources of attempts and forms of engagement prior to the rise of the electronic medium. Thus, as distinct from the electronic model, site specific art's utilization of place in order to evoke response can be rooted in modern times at the junction of architecture and engineering, as places specifically constructed for the creation of immersive experiences point to a kind of institutionalization endemic in this application of art and social purpose. For proverbial evidence of this kind of social programming, we have no further to look than the class of edifice known as the cyclorama. As monuments of historical replay, these buildings comprised multiple levels of view into an *outer innerness* that was available from the moment of entry into the structure, as visitors would enter through a gangway that leads to the center of the structure, creating the illusion of being in the center of the action. The Gettysburg Cyclorama, which provides a navigable recapitulation of the most renowned battle of the American Civil War, is essentially a brick construction enveloping an enormous painting 400 feet in circumference and nearly 50 feet high – what today might be likened to 16,000 square feet of nonmoving film – of bellicose action as captured from the faux vantage of a central hilltop. That it was the 1884 work of French artist Paul Philippoteaux, who had earlier painted the equally sized "Siege of Paris" for another intricate building, situates something of the roots of early locative attempts within the fusion of architecture and visual media, as these cycloramas were long-standing, popular, and highly lucrative venues.
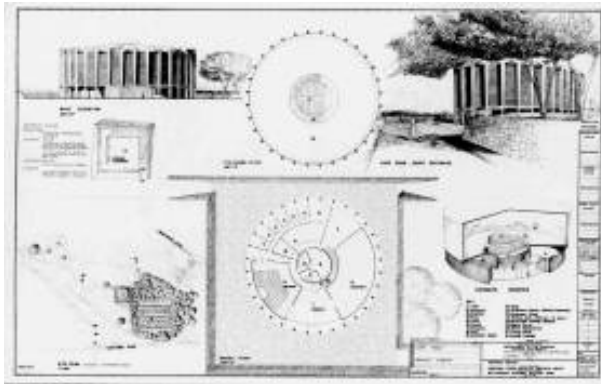
Park Service architects produced this preliminary drawing for a visitor center at Cemetery Ridge, south of Ziegler's Grove, in February 1957. The firm of Neutra and Alexander was hired the next year. (Courtesy National Park Service Technical Information Center, Denver Service Center.)1



Paul Philippoteaux, *Battle of Gettysburg,* 1884, Oil on canvas, 12192 cm. x 1524 cm.

In a subtler way, however, this natural selection was problematic. The locative experience of the cyclorama, being one of principally retinal staging, had the hindrance not of subsumption of the other modalities of reception – the acoustic, for example – to the visual, but rather that as visual instruments, these structures

promulgated the modernist separation of work from viewer. It is overcoming this distance precisely remains one of the signal challenges of locative art today, as significant attempts at the destruction of spectatorship within a mode of insistently immersive collusion would not appear for another hundred years. And as instruments whose narrative was inscribed in modalities that naturally predate interaction, the phenomenological effect always led to a kind of rational disengagement endemic to pedagogy, rather than absorption to meaning that inspires the reflection in action that Schön sought not merely for the architect but also for the visitor, the user, and the dweller.

Nor does the deployment of interaction present the only condition for meditating on the unity of place and event, such as I am positing its importance to locative media. Space filled with the products of conceptual experimentation provides one step beyond the archaic instrumentation of the cyclorama, and is closer, if not to a meditative state, then at least to moderately reflective interrogation. I might thus take the next logical point in this spectral argument in the architectural deconstructions running from Gordon Matta-Clark through Georges Rousse, Tony Oursler, Vito Acconci, Shimon Attie, David Byrne, Alexander Stublic, and Anna Schuleit, among others.

Indeed, so much has been written about Gordon Matta-Clark that another rehearsal of his work would seem unproductive. But the arguments of Matta-Clark's work, which are essentially exercises in the destruction of space boundary for installations, houses, and buildings, deserve an interpretation in light of the character of locative discussion as I have set it out, namely, through the interpolation or intimacy of place and event in opposition to seeing these as separate agencies. Working from the spaces of the already-given, often the already-abandoned, Matta-Clark engages in the most literal form of Schön's idea of the conversation with the materials of a situation. For the materials are themselves always both dead and simultaneously about to become the medium for a critical discourse about politics of space and critique of cultural institutionalization itself. The film *Conical Intersect* which documents his contribution to Paris Biennale of 1975 conversation with and conversion of two forcibly deserted 17th-century apartment blocks in Paris adjacent to the construction of the Pompidou Center is about the use of the given in order to deconstruct every symbolic assumption of its nature.

For not only is Matta-Clark appropriating a building, he is doing so in a site that was itself a battleground for appropriation, as the residents of a neighborhood were forced out by governmental order to raze the buildings and open the space to a new plaza. Matta-Clark's usurpation of the target building for refurbishing into art echoes this opening, if with all the ironic and iconic act of his creating a series of openings through the building so that the outer space enters the structure in an angular way

and across various floors. Subjecting the building, as found object, to this radical kind of spatial rupture could be called the proverbial case of a *ready-unmade*.

An argument can be made for how varieties of this found deconstruction, this *ready-unmade*, devoid of the <u>critical dialogue endemic to the event of place</u> that energized Matta-Clark, are much less interesting without the discursive character crucial to it. The removal of the actual labor and its replacement by a machine converts a conceptual document on the disposal of place into an flat experiment of mechanical engineering, as we might see in Richard Wilson's blandly titled *Turning the Place Over*, an installation for the 2008 Liverpool Biennial in which a circular segment of wall is seen to extrude from the building, rotate in two angles and return to its original position.

As if to pose the visual translation of an obvious question about a communitarian allocation of space, Matta-Clark's strategy of forcing open structures that are neglected or derelict physically marks an aesthetic inflection on the internal space, which with its new opening now lets the world in, and external space, which now has an explicit relation of entrance into the formerly closed locale.

This is again made evident in *Day's End (Pier 52)*, a work from the same year as *Conical Intersect* and which also involves a dialogue not only with the materials of the situation but with the situation of the materials, given that the city of New York was adamantly resistant to the use of this abandoned pier for public use, a prohibition that Matta-Clark found in need of being addressed directly. We will revisit a similar use of piers, particularly interesting as a site for locative work, in the work of David Byrne.



Gordon Matta-Clark, Day's End (Pier 52), 1975
Color photograph, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, Courtesy David Zwirner Gallery

That locative engagement is social engagement had already been reinforced four years earlier by a series of institutional interventions by Hans Haacke, most notably *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings a Real Time Social System as of May 1, 1971*.



Hans Haacke,Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings a Real Time Social System as of May 1, 1971, 1971, 142 black and white photographs, diagrams, maps

Resonating the social liberatory significance of May 1st, Haacke presented a radical work to the ever-conservative Guggenheim Museum. The construction, a pastiche narrative of 142 black and white photographs, diagrams, and maps is a veritable biography of how one powerful benefactor to the Guggenheim had built a fortune in the ghetto business by buying, selling, and running scores of poorly maintained buildings throughout New York City. Thomas Messer, the director of the museum, cancelled the commission of the artwork and, on continued advocacy for the piece by Edward Fry, the curator, fired him as well. This reminds us of J.R. Carpenter's *In Absentia*.

To this literal parallel between artistic event and the conditions of place during gentrification reflects the narratival possibilities of non-place can be added other morphological permutations of the argument. What we might term the **non-narratival possibilities of *non*-place** are emblematized in the work of Georges Rousse during the mid 1990's. As something between the structural lacerations of Matta-Clark and the rebus approach of Villeglé's deconstructive counter-reflections on the advertising poster, Rousse applies the same technique, the cutup, this time

in a more immediate material sense, to draw attention to the interstitial space of perception after vision but before the object.

This claim about space requires the unpacking that Merleau-Ponty endorses through the contention that "all knowledge takes place within the horizons opened up by perception"[2]. For it is not knowledge that is the object of his attention but the picture of knowledge, the belief system we come to develop on a world that is available to us only through and around the flaws of sensory logic. And as with the three-dimensional optical illusions that present themselves with both internal logic and material impossibility, we come to understand that the image is a contingent aspect of language's most crucial partition: the question of whether something is real or false. In a semiotic answer, the image is not the thing itself – working as suggestion, it is only a deficient indication of something else. Transposing Merleau-Ponty's remark onto the visual plane, and therefore to Baudrillard's insubstantial simulacrum, we can say that the image as signifier is real in a way that its signified may never itself be.

Here the image is a clue, not a contract. And so, its semantic fragility is regularly equalized by (literally) *situating* the image, fastening it, to a material place that can bear witness to the truth value of the correspondence between what is shown and the physical authenticity of its target reference.

To the extent that the image is grounded in physical objecthood, acquiring documentary character and therefore truth-value, so also the theme, concept, or idea that antecedes the image uses it as a grounding device as well. When religious thought seized on this correspondence between idea and image, the cosmos of sacred iconography was born. And in a more contemporary case, we have seen the birth of what might analogously be called conceptual iconography, the direct connection between an idea and its iconic representation in the material world without the intervening history of a mediating image. Starting from the readymade, the earliest instances in this practice of non-image (conceptual) idea-to-material correspondence were siteless and placeless, that is, materially present but without a context to the world that the relational role of the intermediate image fulfills.

So the line between concept, image, and object is the vector that Merleau-Ponty encapsulates within the "horizons opened up by perception", and the documentation of this space is at the heart of Rousse's work. Like many of his installations, works like *Metz* or *Argentan* indicate a combination of these three ingredients – a geometric formalism, an installation space amenable to carving, etching, scoring, cutting, and reworking; and a photograph as evidence integrating these two elements. Rousse's photograph operates to document a variety of illusions, including the impossibility of pure geometry or color shapes in physical space, and the raises question of place as an identifiable instance rather than an abstract class

term. One characteristic of Rousse's installations is that, while situated, they are without place in anything like we accept that term.



Georges Rousse, *Argentan* 1997
Color photograph, 123 x 159 cm, Courtesy Galerie Graff

The ambient spatial mystery of Rousse's installations is echoed in inverse form by the work of Tony Oursler. Because physical transformations of space precede the photograph of the work, Rousse's major limitation is that the optical illusion in each work is effective from only one specific vantage point. Thus while the work exists as a three-dimensionally fixed structure, it is constructed for only one point of observation. Oursler's approach reverses this funnel, effecting no physical alteration of exhibition space at all. The signature technique is the deployment of variously sized orbs, some resting, others supported or suspended like satellites around the heliocentric viewer, and upon which are projected video loops of eyeballs. Oursler's world is created not for a single viewing coordinate, but for a gaping field of inspection. For it is not only the viewer who is apparently doing the watching from any unbound location in the room; the work itself exhibits the unhindered act of viewing encapsulated in a work that "looks back", not in time but rather line of sight.

Tony Oursler, *Eyes*, 1996, Installation with mixed media, Acrylic on fiberglass, VCR, video projector, Size Variable, Courtesy Tony Oursler and Metro Pictures, NY

In work like that of Oursler in which space becomes a more explicit element of expression there is a palpable sense of intimacy between the viewer and the location in which the work is installed. The conditions of *being-there* that I discussed earlier become part of the dialogue of reception, for without the explicitness of one's presence as an attentive factor, the space of exhibition fades into the anonymity as of a blank museum wall, unrelated to the paintings that hang on it, and unresponsive to the existence of the visitor.

This fading is problematic, as it also destroys one's relationship to place, a relationship that is substituted by one of process – the process of perception. It would be nice if the process of reception were somehow made explicit while at the same time drawing attention to the coordinates of place. This is the kind of mapping that Andrew Neumann's work provides in works like *Cranes*. For here, the distancing effect experienced through the abstractions of cartography is replaced entirely with a statement that lays particular emphasis on the fact that place and motion are inseparable sides of the same coin. A physical location, in this case the industrial piers of Boston Harbor are fixed in level view by the act of photography, but the motion that renders places near or distant, recognizable or strange, figure or ground, is communicated with special insistence by a video recording that depicts the panning action of the camera but which is itself in motion, oscillating like a futuristic

cuckoo clock, over metal rails. Here place and event are on equal ground, if made rather tenous and fragile by the evidence of perceptual motion. The direct connection to a mode of framing a locative consciousness is evident in the artist statement, which asserts that the work's "engagement defines a space within which the technology of the video or kinetic sculpture is experienced less as an artifact of the technology than as a highly formal bridge into perpetual questions of depth, objecthood, and presence".



Andrew Neumann, *Cranes*, 2005, Electronic sculpture, Courtesy of the artist

Using opposing technical means, Oursler's and Neumann's particular intuition is that the act of viewing is the final reduction of purpose for which space, work, and viewer have congregated, and by inverting this process from implicit experience of the visitor to explicit element of the work, each artist can call into question through a homeostatic field of perception, all that is in focus as both place and event. But that this reception or experience of this unification is tied to a model of presence, to *being-there*, rather than to a specific technology or sensory channel is unique to even the loosest kind of locative work, by which it is evident that I refer to work in which there is a mutual response of viewer to work and vice versa.

So the distinction between sensory and existential turns on the possibility of a narrative of place rather than of sight or sound. Such a narrative, even when conceptual in nature, is characteristic of the engagement through which Vito Acconci's early video and installation work was structured. One work, *Seedbed*, is paradigmatic in articulating this existential conjoining of place and event.

Vito Acconci, Seedbed, January 1972, Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Performance/installation. 9 days, 8 hours a day, during a 3-week exhibition. Wood ramp 2' X 22' x 30'

For a little over one week in early 1972, Acconci lay invisibly pleasuring himself under an upward sloping ramp – perhaps itself psychoanalytically relevant – in New York's Sonnabend Gallery. He was invisible, but not inaudible, for at a far corner of the ramp lay a speaker that amplified the artist's sensory moans and speculations on visitors whom he could hear sauntering about the gallery space. The sounds of the artist performed in allusion to the act, but literally locked into place, provided a notion of locative presence that made the medium come to life, in more ways than one. Without the capacity of sight or the intervention of technology, this work was powered by both the involvement of the artist and the presence of the visitors, who were in fact interacting with the work through the artist, rather than the other way around.

Inspired by the intensity of the statement, others have reprised the work; Marina Abramowic, in one of the *Seven Easy Pieces* performances at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005, mainly as an gender inversion. But the fact that the work was also seen by Eva and Franco Mattes as worthy of re-performance in 2007 is ironic, given that it found its repeat performace in the immaterial ether of *Second Life*, thus appearing in that incarnation as anything *but* a work of locative dimensions.

The conceptual phenomenologies of Matta-Clark, Rousse, Oursler and Neumann are fundamentally distinct from that from that which I trace next, in the work of David Byrne, Shimon Attie, and Anna Schuleit. Targeting the process of indeterminate experience rather than that of definite memory, the first class of work documents a type of event that can be posed like an abstraction out of a problem set: meta-perception, as in Rousse; meta-observation as in Oursler, meta-presence in Acconci, and meta-discourse in Matta-Clark. Contrasting with the notion of event as a specific cultural or institutional phenomenon that characterizes the second kind of work situated in place, the distinction is essentially between that which is spatial and that which is narratival. It is this to this latter kind of work that I now wish to turn.

## III

The narrative character of certain works of locative media signal a conclusive step in everything entailed within what might be thought of as *manifestation* in its various senses. In particular, this term should convey something pluralistic in character, in which an intertextuality and intersubjectivity operate in a variety of modes. This plurality, for example, may assume the form of multiple points of expression in a given place, and such expressive openings identify place-event unities in line with so much of what we have seen thus far. David Byrne's contribution to this domain of art is, as with Matta-Clark, to be found in an abandoned structure.
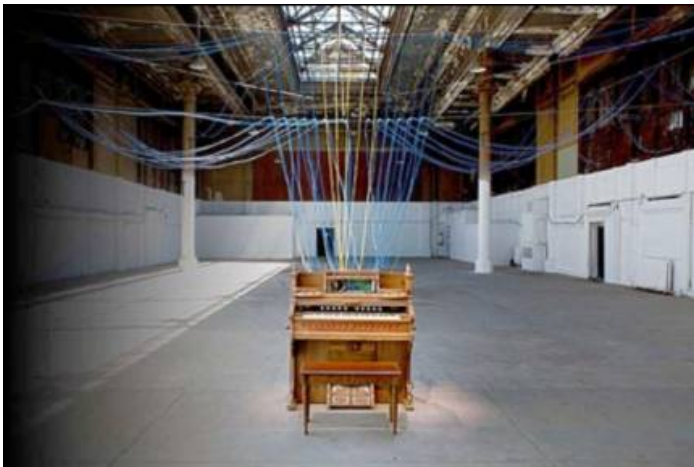


David Byrne, *Play the Building*, 2008, Installation with wire, organ, and electronic components. Photo by Justin Ouellette, Wall Street Journal, Courtesy of Creative Time

In 2008, Byrne "opened" *Playing the Building*, at Lower Manhattan's Battery Maritime Building, a 9,000 square foot building that was unoccupied for over fifty years. Not merely installation and not quite performance, the work presented a single object, a large organ in the center of the loft-like floor. It was altered to trigger electric signals rather than air through pipes, could be played in the traditional sense, except that its "notes" are the sounds produced by the acoustic vibrations resulting from the electrical firing of solenoids attached to pipes, columns, beams, and conduits all throughout the edifice's interior. In unifying event and place, the building, the organ, and the visitors were each subject to a particular transformation. The building became the medium, the organ was both the iconic representamen of the work and the point of interface between viewer and building, and the visitor dons the role of author or performer of the sounds and harmonics of the work. The work, aiming for unison in more ways than one, reflects Byrne's belief in some integration of creative elements: "I'm not advocating a kind of 'Wiki' world of culture; but I guess I am advocating less separation between cultural producers (the artists, writers, musicians, dancers, singers) and cultural consumers."[2]



Shimon Attie, *At the Coliseum (Looking towards the Arch of Titus),* On-location slide projection, Rome, Italy, Lambda photograph,40 x 50 inches  Edition of 3

Shimon Attie, *At Portico of Octavia*,2003,On-location slide projection,Rome, Italy. Lambda photograph, 40 x 50 in. Edition of 3., Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

For his part, Shimon Attie's concern is less with the novel performance of structure than, contrastingly, with the restoration of forgotten memory within place. In other words, the work derives meaning because events associated with place are historical, and he makes it his aim to embark on a mission of cultural and geographic resuscitation as a corrective to the displacement, in both literal and figurative senses, that accompanies whatever might be ancient lost within with the suddenness of the new. Using the low-end technology of the slide projector, Attie provides indices to a narration of story embedded in place. The projections known as *In Portico of Octavia* display the apparition of a girl with an unsure, searching expression typical of Attie's other projected characters, apparently struggling against anomie. It is no doubt Octavia on the walls and colonnades of the ruin-like structure, which dates back to the Roman Empire's Republican era when it was commissioned by Quintus Merellus Macedonius in 149 B.C., Having later restored the building almost eighty years later, Emperor Augustus, dedicated the portico to his sister Octavia. The work has been a protagonist of artistic attention, being painted, etched, and drawn by Piranesi and other artists.

Krzysztof Wodiczko , *Grand Army Plaza* , Projection, New York, 1984-1985

The projective techniques that Attie adopts are not identical to those of other artists whose statements, readable in the vein of visual postmodernism, aim for the paralleling effect of a blended reception between image and medium. These positions are exemplified in the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko and James Coleman. But since in the latter cases the works' ground of exchange is with the status and location of the image in contemporary culture, the role of place is to serve as the background of the image, sometimes conceptual, sometimes monumental, but in no case is the specificity and non-fungibility of place indispensable to the power and reason for the image. Which is to say that the relationship between image and place converges and resolves on the signifier of the image or on the signified itself. For it is in conceptual practice that we see the most radical and unwavering separation between the iconic impact of the image as reproducible entity and the site of its event as unique circumstance in time and space.

Less than a hundred years after Frederick Law Olmstead, having invented landscape architecture, designed the Grand Army Plaza in Prospect Park section of Brooklyn, Wodiczko overlaid the work with a projection that, with the translucence of an onion skin sepia over an existing drawing, brings an eerie immateriality to the solidity of this miniature Arc de Triomphe. The immateriality is not merely for retinal

performance, but rather makes obvious the historical pedigree of the monument itself, erected as a commemoration of military prowess, but in Wodiczko's projection, the timelessness of the structure is repositioned within the historical moment of Cold War tensions, seen as intractable in their opposition; the mutually assured destruction that an ICBM from each side implies is rendered explicit by the presence of an enormous lock and chain that connect one weapon to the other.



James Coleman, *Retake with Evidence,* Single channel video, 2007, Documenta XII, Kassel

At this juncture I turn away from these emphatic statements on the tone of place as origin and destination of the work to illustrate the opposite, and how conceptual work problematically neglects this factor. And this disdain of place is evident in James Coleman, who presents the severe example shown at Documenta 12 in the form of a video existentially floating in dimensionless void. *Retake with Evidence* displays Harvey Keitel delivering scene after scene of what has been called a "heartfelt soliloquy as he wanders though a series of apocalyptic sets". Despite the Greek tragic undertone of the text and delivery, in paroxystic utterances like "Oh site of woe, what fury hast seized thee? Wretch that I am, where art thou now? Where do I wander? Wither art thou fled? Sunk, into inutterable horrors. Detested never-ending night, the cloud of darkness thickening round beyond expression, beyond hope", the complete lack of visual affordances available to observation with the work, compounded by the actor's unlikely garb – black sweatsuit fashion and sneakers – makes the placelessness of the work contradictory to the historical redolence that it seems to be wanting the audience to enter. In this incongruity, the actor assumes the functional status of a readymade parachuted into Beckett's world.

If this anomie finds little resolution in the placelessness of the video, the propitiousness of place for reflection, the complementary activity, is epitomized in something like the Unazuki Meditation Pavillon designed by the architects Miralles Tagliabue and inaugurated in 1993.This is less a pavilion than what is the more proper analogue to Buddhist sentiment, a bridge without an endpoint.
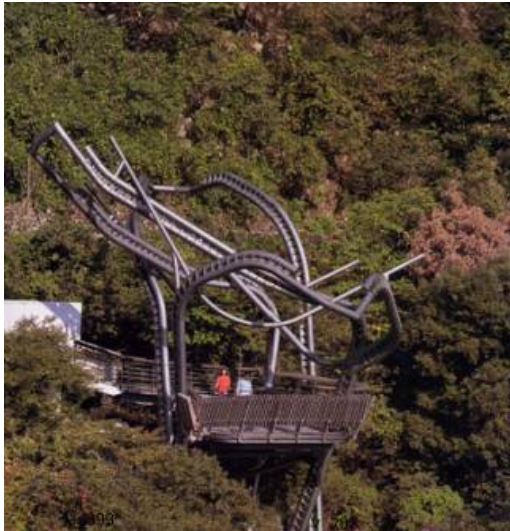


Meditation Pavillion, Unazuki, Japan,Courtesy Miralles Tagliabue



Unazuki Meditation Pavillon, Unazuki, Japan,Courtesy Miralles Tagliabue
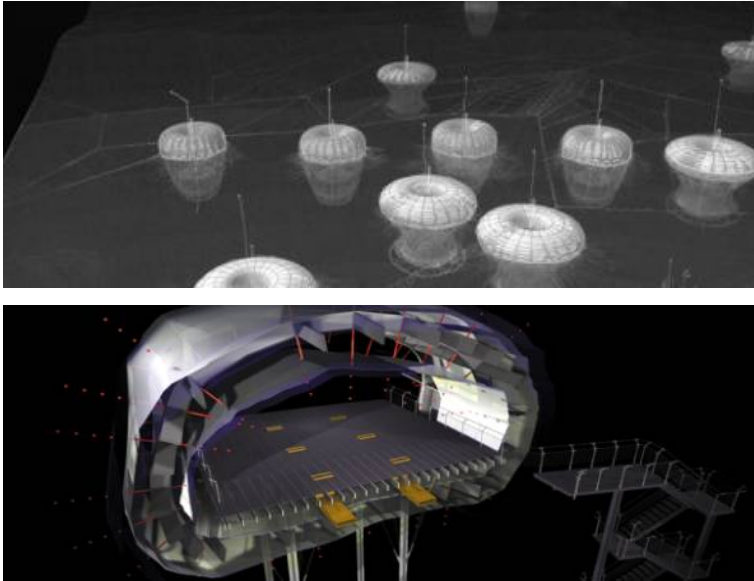
OAMBRA, the Institute for Responsive Architecture, Studies

As it merits attention that these examples are principally small structures, one question might be whether there are major urban structures that repel the locative unity of place and event that I have been tracking. Indeed, in the large-scale contrary of meditative integration we find examples like that in OAMBRA, the Institute for Responsive Architecture's well-meaning but unsuccessful experiments in the response to space.Largely this is due to the question of what it is that these kinds of architectures are responding *to*. The attempt to satisfy constraints in the proportion between the number of travelers over a single space inspires design directions for structures that are sensitive to externalities like weather to the exclusion of internal processes that could be fostered in the augmentation of an experience of meaning in a given space. As a result, macro-design philosophies have historically tempted toward the creation of cloned modules that look like insect pods and are empty of consideration for the inner experience of those within them. While the rationale for "transportation warehousing" of human beings speaks to the challenges of overpopulation, it is impossible to deny that when there is no design notion of how experience would meld with perception in space to produce contemplative meaning of being in *this* space at any moment, placelessness equates to selflessness in a qualitative void that emerges without having been anticipated, and which within these replicated structures cannot be ameliorated.

The modern philosophy of new media unreservedly embraces two Luddites, two critics of technology, in Benjamin and Heidegger. With an anthem against what with

technology art and life lose, Benjamin has been quoted endlessly for his argument on the loss of aura that modern technologies of art, particularly photography, bring about. Heidegger's comparable attack, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, attacks the same problem, as machines of systematic production of exactitude, regularity, and control, whose symmetries emerge from the orientation of "enframing" (*Gestell*) the world into a kind of grid of regularites that can be endlessly interchanged and completely controlled. But Heidegger's essay is somewhat misnamed, for he does not center on technology at all. His is a discussion of the mindset underlying and motivating it. It is from the same kind of generalization, starting from the point where he states that "Technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology", then, that I take the tenet of my argument here: that place is not equivalent to the essence of place. And where essence denotes for the human sciences the locus of attention, the essence of place is readable synonymously as locative consciousness. But with Heidegger we might feel that, to the extent that he is correct in asserting that "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological", anything close to the center of locative media indicates an essence that is also not technological.

If a first condition of locative media entails the treatment of place as the medium and secondarily the use of art or technology as the conveying material for the physical support, it is difficult to imagine an enclosed site as fertile as an abandoned building complex – a theme we have seen before. Then, rather than a single building, a complex of them would seem to be an idyllic setting for locative work. And the almost half a million square feet of abandoned interiors of a psychiatric hospital were a site in 2000 for *Habeas Corpus*, a locative work by Anna Schuleit. Working with, or against, institutional bureaucracy for several years, Schuleit prevailed in placing numerous industrial speaker systems throughout the hospital so that, on the occasion of a commemorative meeting by doctors, former residents, and the general public, the hospital was transformed from a symbol of suffering to the more sublime kind of spirit evoked by J.S. Bach's *Magnificat*, a work that for nearly a half hour resonated from every window and hallway within the complex. Rather than playing the building, the building sang, and an audience found in the union of place and event a restorative experience.
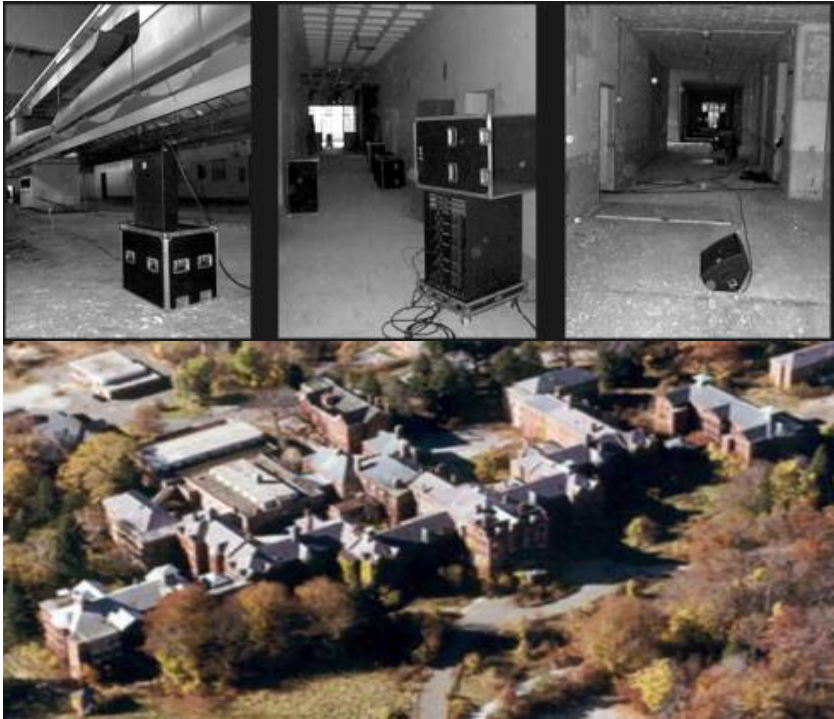
Northampton State Hospital, Northampton, MA, Detail., Images courtesy of the artist



Anna Schuleit, *Habeas Corpus*, 2000, Sound installation
Northampton State Hospital, Northampton, MA, Courtesy of the artist

Anna Schuleit, *Habeas Corpus*, 2000, Sound installation
Northampton State Hospital, Northampton, MA, Courtesy of the artist

Three years later, the closing of the 91-year old Massachusetts Mental Health Center in Mission Hill, Massachusetts presented a second opportunity for Schuleit. While retaining the medium of asylum, Schuleit transposed the material from the aurality of music to that of sumptuary visuality in this subsequent work, *Bloom*, addressing the absence of flowers in psychiatric settings like this treatment center for the mentally ill, by lining it with 28,000 flowers carefully arranged through the now-abandoned halls, rooms, and offices of the structure.

I opened with the contention that a basic and essential strategy in locative art's practices aims for transcendence of perception through the temporal shift between a physical entity and its iconic power through literal signification. This abstraction, as I have argued throughout, appeals to new spaces of signification constructed from simpler material ones, and can assume multiple forms and variations on the theme of unification of place and event, two concepts that are usually considered separately from each other.

But whatever form their unanimity may assume, conceptual or narratival, the final experience needs to be approached with a kind of closure that is more than merely gregariously narratival or austerely conceptual, but is in fact conversational, meaning-preserving, and contemplative of the larger material and sensory whole to which locative art uniquely resonates and for which it appears willing to take extraordinary risks.

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## Notes

1. http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/allaback/images/fig29.jpg

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1945/1962), 241.