

Keith Daly

Seminar in the Theory and Criticism of Contemporary Art

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*One Place After Another: Notes On Site Specificity*, by Miwon Kwon

The rapid diversification of and changes in the landscape of art over the last forty years are at the center of Miwon Kwon's essay, *One Place After Another: Notes On Site Specificity*<sup>1</sup>. The changes Kwon investigates revolve around the notion of *site* and how the production and presentation of art are articulated by it. I will attempt to outline the author's arguments with regards to the notion of site-specificity and explore the work of several artists - in particular Michael Asher's - and discuss how they relate to the themes developed by Kwon.

Kwon's starting point is the autonomous, modern, art object - one that is, in a sense, independent of its location; a self-referential work, which lays claim to universality beyond context. This type of work, the dominant paradigm until, roughly, the 1940-50's (though Marcel Duchamp's readymades and many Dadaist works had already created indentations in that model) when it becomes contested by Minimalism. Kwon evokes the critic Michael Fried's notion of *theatricality* (35). Developing his idea, here, seems necessary in order to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997): 85-110. For ease of reference, the page numbers I will refer to from here on (and directly in my text) are those of Kwon's essay in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Wiley-Blackwell (2013): 34-55.

the foundation of site-specificity<sup>2</sup>. In the modernist paradigm, the work of art could claim autonomy *because* it referred to an elsewhere, to something other than the medium or the physical object itself (whether painting or sculpture). When one viewed a painting, for instance, they saw a mountain<sup>3</sup>, a battlefield, or, closer to us in time, a surrealist, dream-like landscape (as in works by Dali, or Carrington), or a strange-looking group of women (Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon"). Whether the work was mundane, strange, surreal, or even abstract (Pollock, Rothko), what was calling for attention was the representation of an outer or inner subject matter that was, to a large extent, disconnected from the object itself, the frame, the canvas, the pedestal, its physical, epistemological context, or its actual viewing location - the room, the museum. But with the rise of abstraction (and the recession of figurative work), and, much more significantly, with Minimalism - and *theatricality* - the work of art starts to loop back to itself. A large plexiglass cube, for example, references *nothing more or else* than a sculpture, it is not a sculpture *of something*. In that sense, the subject matter of this type of art seems to be art itself, foreshadowing practices taking the art field, in Pierre Bourdieu's definition of the term<sup>4</sup>, as their subject matter. If one were to see that said sculpture was made with industrial materials and processes, the observation would refer back to the object, not something

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<sup>2</sup> In "Perpetually Out of Place: Michael Asher and Jean-Antoine Houdon at the Art Institute of Chicago" (*October*, Spring 2007, 78), Jennifer King makes note of "the progressive move from Minimal object to site-specific practice".

<sup>3</sup> In anticipation of the discussion around site-specific work it's interesting to note how, in plein-air painting, for example, the work, in the end, is always severed - de- then re-contextualized - from its site of production. It is often to be displayed *indoors*, in a home or gallery, on a *wall*. There's an obvious dissociation between subject matter and site of viewing - especially in figurative work - rendered necessary by the fact that the artwork is a metaphor for, or representation of an *elsewhere* - something off-site. If a painting, say, by Turner was displayed next to the landscape it depicts, the painting would be become redundant - useless (despite its aesthetic merits), in a sense.

<sup>4</sup> "A field is a space in which a game takes place, a field of objective relations between individuals or institutions who are competing for the same stake". Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de Sociologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), 197.

*beyond* the object. This shift also has implications in terms of site, as the apprehension of the minimalist work *as art* is activated by (and strongly relies on) its three-dimensional environmental context and the self-awareness the viewer experiences in it. I believe it is within this paradigmatic shift that the various forms of site-specificity presented by Kwon can be fathomed.

Kwon distinguishes several types of site-specific practices. These, she explains, are not necessarily chronological or exclusive of one another. The first relies on the indivisibility between the work and the physical space in which it is present - here (35), she discusses Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981). Robert Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) comes naturally to mind, or works by Richard Long, Nancy Holt, Andy Goldsworthy, James Turrell and Robert Irwin, whose work, *Scrim Veil* (1977), perhaps one of his most iconic, I will discuss later. One might also consider Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections (by virtue of their imagery / content) on buildings in New York City as a variation on the specificity of the work to a physical site. Such practices are often still strongly connected to minimalism.

The second iteration of site-specificity, according to Kwon, relates to a dematerialized, cultural site (38), comprised of institutions such as the museum or the gallery where art is sorted, interpreted and shown. This type of work, which is conceptually-based, requires a more informed type of viewer. It seems to loop the work even further to its context: the art field itself becomes site (see previous comment on Bourdieu). Michael Asher, as we will see, is a key

figure in this approach<sup>5</sup>: his early works provided the necessary hyphen between minimalism and works which focused more on the framing conditions of art<sup>6</sup> (thus connecting the first two types of site-specificity mentioned by Kwon). A central concern of site-specificity, as Kwon notes on several occasions (38, 42, 45, 46, 49), and which we will encounter when discussing Asher, is the resistance to commodification. This represents a difficult, yet enduring attempt in art practices since the rise of conceptualism in the 1960's and 70's.

Alongside the museum and gallery which Kwon evokes in this type of site-specific art, the studio seems to be a lesser explored aspect of the "institution". As the *site* of the artist's activity, often shrouded in a veil of mystery and esotericism, it deserves nonetheless to be mentioned. The artist Daniel Buren expanded on it in a seminal article written in 1971 (precisely at the time when "post-studio" practices started to be in vogue), *The Function of the Studio*<sup>7</sup>:

"Of all the frames, envelopes, and limits-usually not perceived and certainly never questioned-which enclose and constitute the work of art (picture frame, niche, pedestal, palace,

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<sup>5</sup> An approach often called "institutional critique", though it is a term "with which Asher himself has never particularly identified". Andrea Fraser, "Procedural Matters: the Art of Michael Asher", *Artforum*, Summer 2008. <http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/Procedural-Matters/C659AE7686ED540C>

<sup>6</sup> "Many of Asher's early works, such as his 1972 installation at Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, were in fact crucial in forming the bridge from a phenomenologically based Minimalism to institutional critique. At Documenta, Asher divided a gallery space along its central axis, painting half the space black, and the other half white (...) this action extended the phenomenological investigations of the Minimalists by creating a situation where the viewer's perception depended on his or her position within the space. But by basing the work's structure on the gallery's architectural planes, Asher significantly departed from Minimalism by eliminating any remaining connection to an autonomous art object (...) [this] marked a fundamental shift from the partially contingent ontology of Minimal sculpture to the totally contingent epistemology of the institutional frame." Jennifer King, 77-78

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Buren and Thomas Reponsek, "The Function of the Studio", *October*, Vol. 10 (Autumn, 1979): 51-58

church, gallery, museum, art history, economics, power, etc.), there is one rarely even mentioned today that remains of primary importance: the artist's studio<sup>8</sup>. (...) [Leaving the studio] the work is thus totally foreign to the world into which it is welcomed (museum, gallery, collection). This gives rise to the ever-widening gap between the work and its place (and not its placement) (...) This gap is tentatively bridged, however, by the system which makes acceptable to ourselves as public, artist, historian, and critic, the convention that establishes the museum and the gallery as inevitable neutral frames (...)."<sup>9</sup>

Buren's idea - quite novel then - that art institutions are no longer neutral, if they ever were, is foundational. It foreshadows an entire practice of critical contemporary art throughout to today. It is little surprise, then, that this second type of site-specific art includes numerous and varied iterations. It would be illuminating to examine the work of Louise Lawler, Silvia Kolbowski, Fred Wilson<sup>10</sup> and some others. But such a survey would unnecessarily extend the length of this discussion, so I will focus primarily on the more "paradigmatic" work of Asher.

It becomes harder to follow Kwon when she announces a third type of specificity, one connected to what she calls a "discursively determined site" (39) and to which the previous two types are subordinated. That this category of site is, in fact, generated by the artist, makes it

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<sup>8</sup> Buren and Repensek, 51

<sup>9</sup> Buren and Repensek, 53

<sup>10</sup> Wilson's work, for example, is known for its use of curatorial elements. Since curating constitutes a crucial aspect of the institutional site I will briefly address some curating endeavors when I refer to Kwon's section, "Mobilization of Site-Specific Art" (42)

hard to distinguish from what is usually considered as “content” or “subject matter”. The author notes the presence of “a semantic slippage”(40), when, for instance, she looks at the work of Tom Burr and John Lindell. But an ambiguity settles in, notably when she mentions the “move away from a literal interpretation of the site and the multiplicitous expansion of the site in locational and conceptual terms”, and “the possibilities to conceive the site as something more than a place - as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group” (41). In fact, the “fuzziness” of the term “site” (ironically, it becomes less *specific*) carries throughout the rest of the essay and never seems entirely resolved. That Kwon, here, sees (or seeks to assess) solutions to the commodification and “unhinging” (41) of site-specific works by customizing the term “site”, and, thus, allowing it to be *appropriated*, in a sense, by “itinerant artists” (45) is worthy of praise. But is this still a matter of site *per se*? The result is that this section of the essay itself seems “unhinged”. The author has elaborated a heuristic tool for analyzing certain forms of site-based art, from Serra to Asher, or Haacke to Wilson. She extends the use of this tool - and in doing so, the notion of site itself - but perhaps too far: its power to identify or outline specific (no pun intended) site-specific practices seems obliterated by a catch-all use of the word. In this process, however, the author unveils and analyzes of lesser known trends in art. Kwon’s testing the boundaries of the notion of site has also the merit to illustrate perhaps a more epistemological point: the contingent aspect and limits of theory itself

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<sup>11</sup> “From Deleuze (...) we see that theories of all kinds (...) do not function as cohesive systems which generate their own, internally constituted objects, but rather, function as fragmentary bricolage, as temporary contraptions, which link with and produce only external objects as modes of mutation and transmutation. Theories, at their best, are functional hybridities, which operate within the field within whose proximity a question is posed”. Elizabeth Grosz, “The Problem of Theory”, 13. (Text studied in Art 281 this term. Publication and year unknown)

The essay regains some grounding when Kwon discusses the “Mobilization of Site-Specific Art” (42) - a grounding facilitated perhaps by what may be, in the end, the basic for site: the law of gravity (accordingly, Michael Heizer’s *Levitated Mass* seems worthy of mention). The author evokes institutional enterprises to showcase site-specific works that were created in the 60’ and 70’s within a specific (“non-transposable”) physical and / or institutional context, thus attempting to resist, at the time, the market’s and institution’s efforts at commodifying art.

In the last section, “Itinerant Artists” (45), Kwon further pushes the notion of the dematerialized or discursive site which I mentioned above. Although there a terminological confusion persists - “the exhibition history of the artists - his or her vitae” (47) as constitutive of another type of “site” - this part of the essay illuminates usefully the artists’ changing role in relation to the institution. It questions the validity of the globe-trotting<sup>12</sup> status - which, seventeen years after the essay’s publication, judging from the recurring names called to intervene in museums, fairs, symposia or biennales, has become a widespread phenomenon - and the ability to produce critical forms of art and go beyond mere “administration of aesthetics” (46). I will address these changes, but I will focus more on the essay’s section related to the institutional practices of “unhinging” and “mobilizing” site-specific work: these have given rise, in my view, to interesting forms of artistic resistance.

A recent illustration of “unhinging” includes the re-installation, this past summer, of Robert

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<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Michael Asher, with shows and site-specific projects in LA, Chicago, NY, Vienna, Austria, Munster or Krefeld, Germany, or at Documenta, could qualify as such.

Irwin's *Scrim Veil* at the Whitney Museum (where it was first shown in 1977). The work consists of a subtle installation blending with the architecture, geometry, perspective and light of a windowed section of the museum. A work primarily about perception, *Scrim Veil* consists of little more than a dark veil partition which mirrors the pattern of shadow and light. It is a perfect example of near-invisibility, a discretion the artist perhaps felt was relevant to counterbalance an increasingly busy and materially-oriented artworld. Irwin noted that, in 1977, "people would step out of the elevator, say, 'Hmm, empty room,' and hop back in before the doors shut"<sup>13</sup>. In this case, the pitfalls of the "unhinging" process Kwon discusses seem minimal as the Whitney uses the original location offering an opportunity to see the work in near-identical circumstances. Yet, experientially (experience being a focal point of Irwin's), in 2013, one could argue that the perception of the work is quite different. In 1977, if someone saw the work, it would be almost by chance and there might be a moment of uncertainty as to whether one was actually viewing a work of art, or a natural (and striking) play of light in an empty, unused museum room - which may have been Irwin's intention. In 2013, however, *Scrim Veil* has become a full-blown event visitors come specifically to experience. Irwin's work, in its repeat installation, benefits from an awareness (as well as publicity) that it did not have in 1977. As such, is it a different work of art? How much is the author of the "original" engaged in it? Irwin, for instance, "is famously averse to revisiting his artistic past"<sup>14</sup>. When the museum is the sole instigator of re-installing a work that was, initially, intended to be shown only once, is there a part of authorship, that pertains, in a sense, to the institution? While these may seem like legal meanderings, what is in fact at

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<sup>13</sup> Randy Kennedy, "Back at the Whitney, Tinkering With Perception", *New York Times*, June 16, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/arts/design/robert-irwin-work-tinkers-again-with-perception-at-whitney.html?smid=pl-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/arts/design/robert-irwin-work-tinkers-again-with-perception-at-whitney.html?smid=pl-share&_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy

stake are the creative processes behind a work and its re-contextualization. Kwon highlights this (other) “slippage” when she relates<sup>15</sup> the controversy around the reproduced (one might say “forged”) works of Carl Andre and Donald Judd. The nature and extent of institutional involvement becomes even more critical with the rise in power and fame (stardom, even) of curators<sup>16</sup> and with curatorially -initiated and -lead projects, such as Hans Ulrich Obrist’s on-going project, “do it”, involving the participation of an ever-growing list of artists<sup>17</sup>. At other times, it is the artist who is called to curate a show or select works from an institution’s permanent collection ( following the example of Fred Wilson’ Mining the Museum) and display and re-contextualize them alongside their own work - a way for the institution to "activate" the artist's presence. An instance of this is Haim Steinbach’s current show at The Hessel Museum of Art: his work with found objects seems congruent with displaying other artists’ works<sup>18</sup>. This swapping of hats illustrates the shift noted by Kwon from what the critic Benjamin Buchloh called the “aesthetics of administration” to what she coins, derisively perhaps, the

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<sup>15</sup> This particular occurrence and the question of authorship, in general, are the focus of several chapters in Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003)

<sup>16</sup> The New Museum’s Associate Director and Director of Exhibitions Massimiliano Gioni interviewing curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (in other words: curators interviewing curators) is a good (and nepotic) illustration. <http://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/do-it-hans-ulrich-obrist-and-massimiliano-gioni-in-conversation-moderated-by-kate-fowle>

<sup>17</sup> Marina Cashdan, “do it’ with Hans Ulrich Obrist: The World’s Busiest Curator Talks About the Latest Iteration of his 20-Year Project”, July-August, 2013, [http://artsy.net/post/editorial-do-it-with-hans-ulrich-obrist-the?utm\\_source=Current+Users&utm\\_campaign=5b65eaed80-Weekly\\_Email\\_76&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c67eb1f0a4-5b65eaed80-410949421](http://artsy.net/post/editorial-do-it-with-hans-ulrich-obrist-the?utm_source=Current+Users&utm_campaign=5b65eaed80-Weekly_Email_76&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c67eb1f0a4-5b65eaed80-410949421)

<sup>18</sup> “The other display, as Mr. Steinbach likes to call all his pieces, is double-story scaffolding laden with art from the Hessel’s collection. Above is a Minimalist Mount Rushmore of works by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris.” Roberta Smith, “Assembled in Planned Jumbles of Found Creation: Haim Steinbach’s and Helen Marten’s Solos at Bard College”, *New York Times*, August 1, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/02/arts/design/haim-steinbachs-and-helen-martens-solos-at-bard-college.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/02/arts/design/haim-steinbachs-and-helen-martens-solos-at-bard-college.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&)

“administration of aesthetics”.

Returning briefly to and concluding our discussion around Irwin: when Kwon writes “Susan Hapgood has observed, “the once-popular term ‘site-specific,’ has come to mean ‘movable under the right circumstances,” shattering the dictum “to remove the work is to destroy the work”” (p. 43) it’s interesting to note that, in the case of the Whitney’s “resurrection” of *Scrim Veil*, technically, no moving was involved: the work was de-installed in 1977. It disappeared, in a sense, and reappeared twenty-five years later. The installation / removal / re-installation of a work, and its bracketing in a rather wide time frame, are elements, or events which, in retrospect, provide the work with a new dimension and narrative which are not entirely uninteresting.

Earlier, on the same page, Kwon observes that “contrary to the earlier conception of site specificity, the current museological and commercial practices of refabricating (in order to travel) once site-bound works make transferability and mobilization new norms for site specificity” (p. 43). Michael Heizer’s *Levitated Mass* (a 340-ton boulder carved from a quarry 120 miles from its site of exhibition, LACMA), and the herculean logistics it required<sup>19</sup>, come to mind. Here, the institution was closely involved from the onset as the work was a commission. Applying a similar analytical framework as the author’s for Mark Dion’s work (39), we can distinguish three (physical) sites, each one important in reading Heizer’s work: the site of the quarry (origin); the site of display (destination); the hyphen between those two, a site in its own right: a ten-day, five mile-per-hour convoy involving the consent of transportation agencies

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Nagourney, “How Do You Move a 340-Ton Artwork? Very Carefully”, *New York Times*, October 7, 2011. Nagourney, “340-Ton Sculpture Versus Immovable Bureaucracy”, *New York Times*, December 27, 2011.

across five counties in the Los Angeles area, as well as equipment used, typically, for transporting nuclear reactors. One could also add another (virtual) site: the internet and media “buzz” - although this could be pushing the envelope. In any case, “gawkers”, using a map of the convoy’s itinerary provided online by LACMA<sup>20</sup>, traveled to various points along the convoy’s slow progression. As such, the viewing experience, interestingly, occurred also *off-site* (though not entirely, if we apply Kwon’s extensive definition of “site”), in the sense that it was beyond the museum walls (the *institution’s* walls, however, could be seen as much farther-reaching). The boulder, as well as the museum logistics, were, in essence, monumental. The juxtaposition of the internet-based and media hype with the million-year old geological formation provided a compelling contrast between our finite and almost trivial human existence, on the one hand, and the permanence, weight and volume of one of our planet’s base materials, the mineral, on the other. The abundant media coverage and LACMA blog posts (some of which I wrote<sup>21</sup>) not only increased the visibility of the work, but also contributed in shaping the perception of the work itself. Eventually, the operation established the institution as the co-author of a sensational, full-blown “multi-site(s)-specific” extravaganza.

To continue on the mobilization of site-specific art, the paradox of re/de-contextualized works, latent in the case of the re-exhibiting of Irwin’s *Scrim Veil*, becomes much more manifest when the works shown are those that, initially, constituted ardent criticisms of institutional environments and methods. It’s interesting to note that Kwon’s essay - a reference, it would

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<sup>20</sup> <http://lacma.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/levitated-mass-transport-a-gawkers-guide>

<sup>21</sup> <http://lacma.wordpress.com/2011/10/17/levitated-mass-progress-report/#comment-8890>, <http://lacma.wordpress.com/2011/10/17/levitated-mass-progress-report/#comment-9044> and <http://lacma.wordpress.com/2011/10/17/levitated-mass-progress-report/#comment-10267>

seem, on site-specificity - and MoMA's exhibition "Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect" (1999), a survey of works addressing the institution as subject, stand only two years apart. One could assume that the exhibition was already in the making at the time the author was writing this essay and that she was aware of it. I will return to "Museum as Muse" when looking at a work Asher produced for that exhibition, one that could have hardly been more context-specific.

Michael Asher's "prodigious and protean production"<sup>22</sup> lies at the junction of academic research (including politics, history and art history), architecture<sup>23</sup> and perhaps more conventional, albeit conceptual, artistic practice<sup>24</sup>. His work, described as surgically precise, consists mainly of temporary installations, often bearing no title other than the name of the institution or location the work is intended for. "Asher was one of the first artists to give meaning to the term 'site-specific' and for the last thirty years has rigorously adhered to the demands of complying with the work's place of exhibition"<sup>25</sup>. Asher's work seems most relevant to this discussion<sup>26</sup>,

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Rorimer, "Michael Asher: His Work at The Renaissance Society, Chicago", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 1 (1999), 18

<sup>23</sup> "Where many of Asher's peers responded [to Minimalism's theatricality] by expanding their practice into the more temporal realms of film and performance, Asher focused on the temporal as a condition of the spatial, which aligned his work more specifically with architecture." Marie B. Shurkus, Excerpt from "Michael Asher: Familiar Passages and Other Visibilities", <http://www.pomona.edu/museum/artists/michael-asher.html>

<sup>24</sup> "The post-studio practice Asher has pursued since the late 1960s has often been characterized by a rigorous site-specificity limited to removing, displacing, reconfiguring, or reproducing existing or once-existing elements of the sites in which he works. Asher, along with Daniel Buren, reinterpreted the site-specific art that had emerged earlier in that decade, developing practices of formal investigation into strategies of critical intervention". Fraser.

<sup>25</sup> Rorimer, 18.

<sup>26</sup> When researching this paper I discovered that Kwon wrote the catalog's essay, "Support and Decoration: Michael Asher's Critique of the Architecture of Display", for Asher's 2008 work at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. This further establishes, in my mind, Asher's relevance, and perhaps highlights a strong connection between the artist and the author.

not only as a pioneering example of site-specificity and “institutional critique”, but because his approach is, precisely, to address (and perhaps anticipate) the paradox, mentioned previously, of “unhinged” site-specific art, and to neutralize attempts to commodify his work: “Asher consciously activated one of the paradoxes that has emerged from the historicization of highly situation specific works - as the agenda of historical survey exhibitions can create pressure to remake examples of what had been understood as ephemeral work.”<sup>27</sup> The artist (and former student of Asher) Andrea Fraser offers a striking instance of Asher’s strategy to create site-specific projects that are difficult to co-opt into an object-oriented capitalistic art system: “[his] only project for individual collectors to date (executed in Los Angeles in 1978) (...) was to move the wall marking the southern edge of the collectors' property eleven inches to the north, effectively giving their neighbors nearly a foot of their yard. Asher rendered their art acquisition a real estate loss”<sup>28</sup>. This work confronted the collector with rather heavy implications: in a speculative and market-driven culture, can art have a higher value than real-estate? How do we attribute value to art? - by forsaking material possessions (money, land, ...)? In this case, the work was worth (at least) eleven inches of land.

When he passed, in 2011, Asher was the only artist to have taken part in all four editions of *Skulptur Projekte*, a decennial exhibition held in Munster, Germany starting in 1977. While his projects, for each edition, appeared as a repeat of the first, they were, in fact, carefully planned time- and site-based projects. They constituted, in retrospect, a *single* work, articulated over a

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<sup>27</sup> Buskirk, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Fraser.

period of 30 years. Asher's proposal, in 1977, seemed fairly benign: the organization was to rent a small, camping trailer, and, over the exhibition's 14-week period, park it at a different site in, or around the city every week. The trailer, which was to be returned to the rental agency at the end of the exhibition, bore no markings, and could be found (and was identifiable as art) only with a map provided by the organization's office. Invited again in 1987, Asher proposed the exact same project, with the same sites, and so on, until 2007. Over those consecutive editions, many of the sites were no longer available due to urbanization projects<sup>29</sup>. On such weeks, rather than seeking new sites, Asher's instruction was to put the trailer in storage, out of sight (or out of "site") until the following week, provided the space was available. Also, as each of the exhibitions was shorter than the previous one, the final positions from 1977 were never reused. "In this respect, the instruction to repeat the work only served to emphasize its transformation as a result of the changes to both the exhibition schedule and the environment through which this readymade, let loose from the physical confines of the institution, was expected to move"<sup>30</sup>. Asher thus played a subverting game with the organizing institution: in an exhibition format where artists can be expected to come up with new work (thus catering to the demands of "specificity") he proposed the opposite: re-iterations, copies, in a sense, of his previous projects, almost exact replicas, readymades almost<sup>31</sup>. But these were not replicas, for

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<sup>29</sup> "In 1977 the caravan occupied nineteen sites, each for a week at a time. In 1987 there were twelve sites, twelve again in 1997, and now, thirty years later, there are ten available spots. Stephan Pascher, "Phantom Limb: Michael Asher's Sculpture Project", *Afterall*, Summer 2008  
<http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.17/phantom.limb.michael.ashers.sculpture.project#cite1176>

<sup>30</sup> Buskirk, 205.

<sup>31</sup> A strategy to comment on and inhibit commercialization: "For Asher, one of the principles behind continuing to revisit the same work is to place himself at odds with the contemporary market-driven expectation that artists must constantly produce new and novel work." Michael Asher and Jennifer King, "Skulptur Projekte in Münster: Excerpts from Correspondence 1976-1997", *October*, Vol. 120 (Spring, 2007), 87-105

the site (physical and institutional), predictably, changed. One project, became, over a period of 30 years, four projects - by the mere play of context: "(...) the directive to remake the work as closely as possible ten years and then twenty years [and thirty years] later, arose from Asher's decision to use the consistency of the action to bring out the incremental changes in context" such as the urbanization affecting a mid-size German town from the 1970's to the new millenium<sup>32</sup>. By choosing changing and sites that were often perceived as mundane, he also subverted the conventional notions of public sculpture: "[it was] an absolute resistance to those traits typically used to lend authority to outdoor sculpture, such as monumental scale or prominent location".<sup>33</sup> The strength of Asher's production is the multiplication of levels at which it can be read. Some critics, for instance, have seen in the choice of a modest, low-income camping trailer a commentary on Germany's post-war working-class attempting to find emancipation from capitalist alienation, and, despite the promises of Marxism, never getting very far. The choice of this discreet, never-fixated / always-moving (or concealed in storage) trailer can also be seen as the artist's attempt to dematerialize, and, perhaps, decommodify the work of art, by dislocation and removal<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> "Viewed over the three decades of exhibition, it bears witness to the ongoing transformation of the 117 square-mile Westphalian municipality, 91 per cent of which was levelled in World War II, and - in the case of the Old Town - put back to resemble its old medieval and Baroque self." Pasher.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Asher and Jennifer King, "Skulptur Projekte in Münster: Excerpts from Correspondence 1976-1997" *October*, Spring, 2007, 87-105

<sup>34</sup> Some of Asher's other "removals" include the wall separating management office and exhibition space at Claire Copley Gallery (1974), and Houdon's cast of George Washington at the Art Institute of Chicago (1979).

The project Asher proposed for MoMA's "Museum as Muse", formally very different from the one for Skulptur Projekte (but not in its congruence with context), seems to echo to a number of issues Kwon develops, in particular that, through "current museological and commercial practices (...) a methodological principle of artistic production and dissemination is recaptured as content; active processes are transformed into inert objects once again. In this way, site-specific art comes to represent criticality rather than perform it" (43). The MoMA exhibition could be seen as precisely that: a showcase of museum-specific works and institutional intervention, turning critique into an object<sup>35</sup>. In order to counteract this neutralization of the work, rather than re-showcase (an unlikely event since most of his projects sustain little to no material trace other than photography or text) or re-stage older work<sup>36</sup> Asher probably felt it was more relevant to activate a critique rather than serve a "re-heated" one. Responding to the contextual site (the museum), Asher published a small red book, "Painting and Sculpture from The Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions 1929 through 1998"<sup>37</sup>, available for free with a ticket stub at the museum store. In less jargon, this was a compilation "of every work of painting and sculpture known to have been sold or traded from the Modern's collection since its founding"<sup>38</sup>. Here, "Asher reveals one of an art museum's most private and sometimes

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<sup>35</sup> "It is no longer a matter of trying to subvert or intrude,' says Louise Lawler (...) 'Those strategies are now recognized and invited.'" Buskirk, 175.

<sup>36</sup> See note 18 and pertaining quote.

<sup>37</sup> "In fact the catalogue of deaccessions was Asher's second project proposal. His first, rejected practically by return mail, proposed an exploration of authorship by means of the display of works from museum collections for which the attributions had changed or the authenticity had been questioned." Buskirk, 173

<sup>38</sup> Roberta Smith, "What's No Longer on Museum Walls", *New York Times*, May 31, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/31/arts/critic-s-notebook-what-s-no-longer-on-museum-walls.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

controversial practices: the shedding, not the accumulation, of artworks. And not just any museum is under scrutiny. The Modern's history and its renowned collection are virtually inseparable from the history of modernism: each has played a major role in shaping our understanding of the other"<sup>39</sup>. The work deals again with removal - this time, of artworks themselves - thus pointing at something that is "not there". While the form of this work, like that of the camping trailer, is rather unassuming, its implications for MoMA, can be far-reaching. "Asher's proved that the process of invitation and negotiation can still put the institution in an uncomfortable position, if the history the artist wants to highlight is not one the institution wants to reveal."<sup>40</sup> This is evidenced by the disclaimer published in Asher's catalog by MoMA's Chief Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Kirk Varnedoe. "(...) 'we have not been able to assure ourselves that the present list meets the criteria of completeness or accuracy we would require in a museum publication.' By contrasting a museum publication with an artist's publication, even one produced with the museum's own resources, Varnedoe hastens to over determine the separation of the artist's interests from those of the institution. In addition to investigating MoMA's archival erasure (...), Asher's project analyzes the distribution and contestation of institutional authority."<sup>41</sup> Given that visitors took an estimated one thousand copies home (it's seems rare, that a work of art from a major artist would be given

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<sup>39</sup> That Smith, in her article, is able to carry out an in-depth examination of the deaccessioned works and sketch some hypotheses indicates how Asher's catalog not only performs as commentary/statement of museum practices, but also holds together perfectly as a functional object: one that can be studied and which delivers information. This brings to mind his work for the 2010 Whitney Biennial in which the museum was to stay open 24 hours a day for a week: it constituted both statement and - as viewers could experience the museum non-stop day and night - functional content. For this work, Asher was granted the prestigious Bucksbaum Award. [http://artdaily.com/index.asp?int\\_sec=11&int\\_new=37497&int\\_mod=1#.UqiqjJDvng](http://artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=37497&int_mod=1#.UqiqjJDvng)

<sup>40</sup> Buskirk, 173.

<sup>41</sup> Kirsi Peltomaki, "Scenes from a Museum", *Afterimage*, July-August, 1999.

away for free), it's important to note that Asher's catalog survived, in a sense, the exhibition. This could be read as an oxymoron: Did this imply the work of art's prevalence over, and emancipation from the institution? Or, as it had been specifically created within the exhibition's context but was separated ("unhinged"?, commodified, even?) from its initial site to garner a bookshelf in a private home (thus viewed off-site) - had it lost all relevance? What happens to a work of art when it leaves the site<sup>42</sup>? It's also interesting that in the context of an exhibition, an *artist* would produce a *catalog* - typically the prerogative of curators or critics. Asher's choice of the word is revealing of the current trend of blurring or crossing-over of roles. The nature of this catalog (and integrity of the work) is further complicated by the fact that the curator's disclaimer<sup>43</sup> is published in the work itself - this constitutes an alteration of the work of art, and signals the power of the institution in shaping the perception of the work. That Asher chose, despite manifestations of "red tape" (which he had to contend with throughout his career), to not retract his participation from the exhibition is indicative of a determination to navigate and engage the "bureaucratic site". Fifteen years later, when both artist and curator are gone (Varnedoe passed in 2003), something indeed remains (but for how long?): not an object, a commodity, or a relic of some sort, but a powerful commentary on art's impermanence<sup>44</sup> despite our attempts to hold on to it.

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<sup>42</sup> In this particular aspect, Asher's MoMA work reminds us of works by Felix Gonzalez- Torres, such as "Untitled" (1992-93), in which viewers could take posters home. <http://www.sfMoMA.org/explore/collection/artwork/9422>.

<sup>43</sup> Asher told an interviewer: "In principle I didn't want it because I don't believe a curator should modify the work of an artist (...) but when I read it I realized it could be quite revealing." Buskirk, 174.

<sup>44</sup> "The most radical feature of Asher's work may be that it is not only site-specific but temporally specific as well. His installations cease to exist after a contractually determined period of time (...) Like almost all of [his] work, the [Santa Monica Museum of Art] installation was destroyed shortly after the show closed in mid-April. All that is left of it now is the exhibition catalogue, installation photographs, and the documents generated over the seven years of the project's development." Fraser.

Kwon's essay thus opens many useful perspectives on and ways to approach various site-specific practices since the genre's (if we can call it that) inception. Through our research on Asher, what seems to underlie his work, in addition to the notion of institutional site, is his attempt to fully address the role of the artist in the context of a capitalistic art economy. This desire to incorporate, embody even, beyond the making of artwork itself, one's function, strategies and means of operation as an artist, appears, through the lens of Kwon's essay, as a complete dedication to and investment in the "site" - what we could call the "artistic site", perhaps the equivalent, in terms of site-specificity, to Bourdieu's "artistic field". Andrea Fraser has extensively written<sup>45</sup> on, and produced site-specific work and performances investigating the function of the artist. As such, and perhaps also as a former student of Asher's, she has a more radical insight on his work, one that I have not found elsewhere:

"Asher's masterpiece, his monumental life's work, is his method: the procedures, conditions, and relations of production and distribution he has crafted over the course of forty years of work. His achievement is not that he developed strategies to materialize the invisible and immaterial structures of our material relations in artistic sites. Rather, his achievement is that by eschewing the commodity form, circumscribing the temporality of his interventions, and substituting the economic structures of service provision for those of goods, he established a mode of production that has redefined his place within those structures. If artistic production was long defined as the manipulation of formal elements within a given artistic frame, Asher's

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<sup>45</sup> Andrea Fraser, "How to Provide an Artistic Service", *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Wiley-Blackwell (2013): 146-152

innovation is not so much that he shifted the object of that manipulation to the institutional frame, but that he constituted as the object of art the conditions and relations of artistic production itself: not only the positions artists manifest within the frame of their aesthetic systems but the very positions they occupy within the field of art and the economic conditions and social relations that produce those positions—and that artists, in turn, reproduce in their activity. What his work demands is that we consider whether artists fulfill, or fail to fulfill, the claims of their artistic positions on the level of social and economic conditions.<sup>46</sup>”

It seems that, no matter which site the artist chooses to work with, this fulfillment, in its monumental aspect, would be intimidating - yet it constitutes a formidable source of inspiration.

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<sup>46</sup> Fraser, “Procedural Matters: the Art of Michael Asher”