Roman Ondäk, Failed Fall
2007

Perception, Body, Space; language, site-specificity and documentation

Dragana Travas

James Meyer argues that it was necessary for early institutional critique work to be associated with the site of the gallery in order to expose the modernist portable art object as consumed objects within the showrooms of the gallery and museum. But in addition to the idea that there is a movement that started in the 90s of repurposing the forms of 60s site-specific work, Meyer's article is the first appearance of a term he coins to describe the siting of more recent (and some historical) work:

"The primary distinction I wish to make concerns two notions of site: a literal site and a functional site. A literal site… is an actual location, a singular place… In contrast, the functional site may or may not incorporate a physical place… it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them (the artist's above all). (James Meyer, 24-25)

What strikes me most in this passage is the relationship between site and body that is present even in this idea of the functional site. Meyer is talking about a notion of site as process, body in space and time through the interconnection of the body to different materials: site, language, and culture ("the institution"). The interest Meyer explores in the chapter around the connection of site-specificity to institutions like the gallery, public space, and government, is less of an interest to me because it is less of a fundamental relationship than that of body to objects, the way these form spaces, and then the way language describes objects, bodies, and spaces and changes our perception of them. Meyer talks about historical institutional critique works by artists like Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Michael Asher, but this strand is less relevant to me because essentially, what I wish to explore is what is considered to be so basic that it is not usually given attention; the way that unities are formed by proximity of one object to another.

I have used the book Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation (2000) by Nick Kaye as a reference for my work here. Kaye is a scholar on performance history and experimental theatre, as well as conceptual art practices, who has been publishing since the mid-90s. It is perhaps interesting that someone whose field of study is so connected with theatre should write a book about site-specificity, because to do so immediately prioritizes the body of the artist in the space. In theatre, the play is directed to take place on a set designed specially for the performance; of course, the architecture of the theatre itself is usually left intact, but there is essentially a classical notion of site-specificity built already into the conventions of theatre: the play is only supposed to be played within its appropriate place, one room in a building specifically for the production of plays. Nick Kaye's book therefore has several discussions of works by experimental theatre companies who utilize site-specificity in their works, as well as the more familiar and historical site-working artists, like Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke. Site-Specific Art is divided into sections on Spaces, Sites, Materials, and Frames, alternating with a project by an artist or collective between each section, each of which was essentially commissioned for the book. In this way, the book becomes itself a functional site, mapping and holding together the different threads of artists, time periods, and theories.

"The documentations which intervene into this critical narrative also draw on formally diverse areas of work, just as they make radically differing responses to the paradoxes of presenting site-specific performance to the page. Yet throughout this work, it is performance which returns to define site specificity, not only as set of critical terms and as a mode of work, but as a way of characterizing the place these various site-specific practices reflect upon." (Nick Kaye, 12)

D: What he says about performance defining site specificity is interesting because basically the performance becomes something else when it is written, or when it is shown as a photograph, or when it is documented with video.

C: Roman Ondak talking about his installation Failed Fall says that a street vendor inside the winter garden swept Roman's leaves away from the cart so that her (the vendor's) individual space

would be clean; Ondak's statement on it is that "she becomes my performer."

D: But the woman only becomes a performer after the event is turned into documentation, the moment the performance becomes a written document. Because you can also say that the woman changed the whole performance, but really also that's what Ondak as the artist can say; it is his authority as the artist to direct the meaning of the work for other people through writing, and that is how we perceive the work.

C:But it can the theorist who determines how we see the work, also.

D: Of course. Meyer talks about Smithson's work as allegory; he says he uses documentation (films, photographs, drawings, maps, his writings), guided tours, and the physical location itself, because all together these elements make up the functional site of the work. This site is in fact the relationships between the different things, the overlaps and differences between things and between the ways that they show the work.

Long says "art can be just ordering of ideas." But the written reflection on an art piece can be a work in itself, the documentation becomes the work, and in fact could become multiple works depending upon how it organizes the ideas in the original piece.

C: But is there an original piece?

D: Yes, the Event. That is site-specific, because it happens at a particular place in time, and each photograph or text written about it is site-specific according to the time it is made and the relation it has to the event.

Where do you draw borders between objects in reality? If you use a comma it creates what is the unity, and what is not.

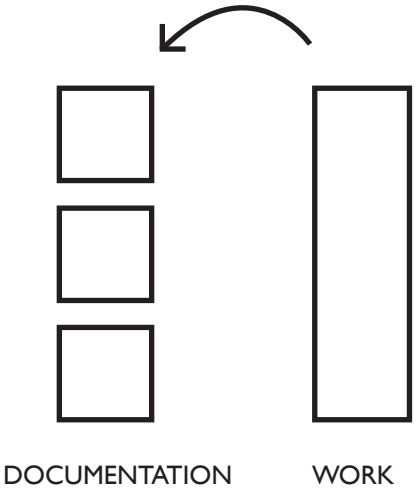
the ordering of ideas in one piece multiplies the idea into many pieces, by manipulating the event, by turning the idea into many variations. It's like syntax, like changing the order of things and using commas in a sentence. The ideas can be changed by how the ideas are emphasized, marginalized, put into lists, or rearranged in the sentence. It's like the Pythian prophecy, they tell you something that suggests the event, and it can be interpreted in different ways according to whatever happens afterward, how it then becomes documented. It's just a special way of documenting it, not a spacial way of predicting something; when you write it in that way, of course something is going to become true or you can find some way of interpreting it so it makes sense to you. So the documentation is always a work for and of itself, because it will always be different from the way the work exists at first.

Bethan Huws's installation Capelgwynn beautifully does what Nick Kaye talks about site-specific work doing: Huws's work creates "exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined." The title of the installation is a literal translation of the gallery's name into Welsh, so the installation speaks to the gallery, calling it by name. The work makes it clear what the height of the gallery floor is by creating a second floor that is not the same height. What was already there is redefined by its relationship to the things that weren't there before.

SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE COMPARED TO SOMETHING ELSE IN ORDER TO EXIST.

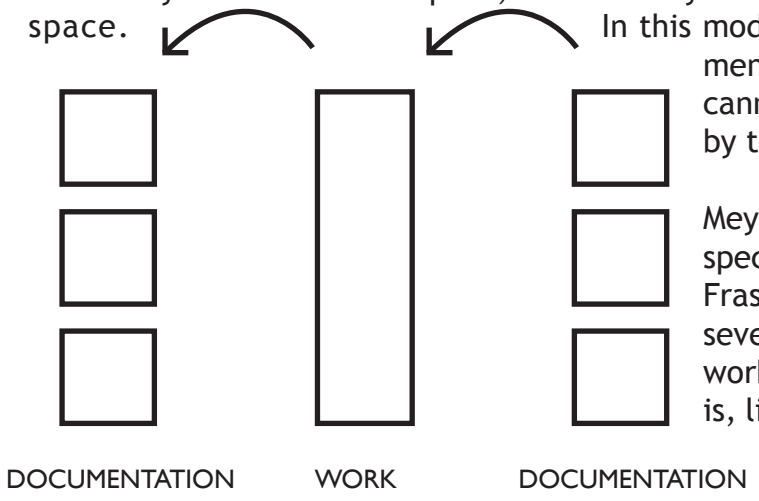
But it isn't clear which level of floor came first, because both are made of the same material, the same kind of wood treated in the same way. In a sense, the gallery is empty; there isn't anything there except the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the lighting. Even the wall text is outside of the gallery room, in the corridor just before you enter. Like the void which Robert Smithson as well as Mark Levy talk about, The empty space of the gallery could be considered a playful variation on wall drawings, where the architecture of the gallery space becomes the signifier, because you can't draw a border between the work and the original space.

Nick Kaye highlights a Daniel Buren quote at the closing chapter of his book, where Buren states that "the reproduction of painting or object, however perfect, is always, definitively, its betrayal. And that betrayal is that much greater when it involves not objects or paintings but whole spaces." (Buren, The Square of the Flags, Helsinki, 1991)



Here is how this works: the art work, which responds to the space, is then documented and changes the meaning of the original space. This documentation has a meaning of its own, and is independant from what the work was before.

Buren says that a re[-]production of a space, like an installation or documentation of it, constitutes a betrayal of that space. But for it to be a betrayal, there must be a legitimacy to the original space, a sense that what is there before the event is a privileged place, the "original" that the reproductions are made from. However, I believe in a more dynamic model of space, where every movement or change of position creates a new space. In this model, every instant of time creates a new moment, a new definition of the space, and so you cannot have an "original" site that is "changed" by the event or documentation.



Meyer's conception of "new practices" in site-specificity (by which he mostly means Andrea Fraser, Christian Philipp Müller, Reneé Green, and several others, up until the year 2000) is that the work he examines "posited a model of place that is, like the subject who passes through it, mobile and contingent… [creating works that] suggest nothing less than a displacement of the 1960s-generated notion of 'site specificity.'" (Meyer, 35) His idea is that the practices and forms that the 1960s artists invented were being reused by younger generations of artists, but that the new works used these forms to talk about social issues, politics, as well as issues in disciplines other than art. What Meyer talks about in saying that place is "mobile and contingent" is at odds with Michel de Certeau's notion of place, space and the walker in the city; instead of saying that place is mobile (de Certeau would use "space" here to already imply mutability), "[t]o walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper" (Kaye, 5). The difference is whether place can move, and is contingent upon, modified by, the people and things that move through it – or if movement actually destroys place, if by walking you become unattached to the locations where you are physically present. Taken together and applied to site practices, the texts perhaps highlight the nomadism and solitariness that is a byproduct of Western capitalism.

In Richard Long's *A Thousand Stones Added To The Footpath Cairn, England 1974*, the meaning of the work is created by seeing the photograph and then seeing a text, which transforms the perception of the photograph. A photograph can be simply an image, or it can have a meaning, an implied narrative. But the narrative is not so much implied as it is applied, applied to it by the person looking at it. Seeing the photo without text, you don't necessarily count the number of stones, or to presume that someone made it for the photograph. The entire picture space is changed by the words because the stones become Richard Long's stones, the area is a place

where he has been and taken a photograph. But the text itself is also defined by the language used in it. It says a thousand stones are taken from a pile of stones somewhere, and placed on the cairn, which is basically the same thing, a pile of stones. But the words given to the pile of stones determines the meaning of them; the stones that are called a cairn are one recognizable form of pile with a history attached to them. In the same way, the stones that are referred to as "a thousand stones" are an artwork because they are named as the subject of the work by Long's title.

A THOUSAND STONES ADDED TO THE FOOTPATH CAIRN

ENGLAND 1974

For someone like Francis Alys in his walking works, the body performs walking, and this performance erodes the fixity of place and the presence of self, other and physical body, creating a perceptual state of isolation and obstruction. Richard Long's walks are very different in this way, in addition to the difference in when they were made, because of course Meyer's writing is about art practices begun much after the sixties and so isn't supposed to apply to an artist like Long. But Alys's walks, like the Seven Walks in London, the Green Line along the Israeli-Palestine border, or the Paradox of Praxis ice cube walk in Mexico city, all engage social issues for the simple reason that the work is made in a city or according to political borders. Long's walks, on the same principle, don't suggest social issues because the city only appears in the work as the place where the documentation is presented: in urban gallery spaces. I would argue that this absence of cities suggests a paradigm where the solitary figure in the landscape must be in the landscape, cannot exist or walk in the city, because essentially the city does not exist; there are no people to speak to, interact with, or stay with, only viewers and audience within the shelter of the gallery context. Within the world created by his work, there is not really space for human interaction; there is only space for stones, and for poetry, documentation. There are no Richard Long photographs where he photographs his departure from a hotel, or an airport, walking through a town, or anything else associated with collective experience, with the exception of his rock cairns. However, these are just isolated marks upon a landscape, not a real interaction in the way the word is usually used. In fact, the way Long piles new stones on top of new stones, making a sculpture rather than announcing his presence – this working logic suggests a world where all cairns are built by a single person.

However, it is not just Long's work that contains such a relationship between image and text, obviously; it is simply that his work highlights the way that this relationship is played out in contemporary society. Another artwork that illustrates the way text creates our idea of the image is a Qing dynasty marble wall plaque from nineteenth-century China. The marble slabs are set into the It takes the language of poetry and selectively appropriates the formal language of traditional Chinese landscape painting, and because the artist managed so successfully to combine the right stone with the right poetry and setting, it is readable as being an image and a description of the image. It is not about choosing one stone which is the only one which would be "right" or would work as an image; any stone could work, as long as the artist came up with an appropriate piece of text that would explain it.

D:In order to get something, you have to say it in a certain way. It's different to beeeh like a sheep than to articulate something, which is connected with the legitimacy of the institution; in this case, of language. So in order to make a work communicate, you need to adopt the communication systems of other people,other artists, other things in general, not in terms of writing about it, but in terms of you making the work in a specific way that would be understood by other people because it shares the same system of adoption. It shares things with how things are made. Of course everybody does that, everybody of course makes their work in some way that other people are going to understand it.

C:But you are cosidering that, and it especially relavent to you because you are not simply trying to communicate something to someone, you are looking into how communication happens.

If you put a sheep and a rock next to the sheep, they are both the same because they emerged from the same substance. In the same way, the image made in the marble is the same as the painting, because they are formed from the same ideas of what an image is.

Wall Panel with Stone Paintings

Qing dynasty, 19th century
Hardwood with veined marble and brass fittings
Inscribed: (on the round slab)
"Morning Mist in a Spring Forest, inscribed by Zhushan zhushi";
(on the rectangular slab) "Overhanging Cliff and Sheer Wall, inscribed by Yibai Shanren at Shenjiang [the Whampo River at Shanghai]"

Purchase, The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift, 1995
1995.418d

In a text painting on board supposedly kept, amulet-like, in his studio, As Long As I'm Walking (1992), Alys utilizes a play on the English word "Long" and his own conscious relationship to Richard Long's work. The engagement is at once playful and critical here; wordplay suggests that he takes on the persona of Long when doing walks (being Long while I'm walking), references the duration of the walks (as long), and makes a parallel to that duration in saying that the other process takes the same amount of time as the walking.

As Richard Long also explicitly acknowledges his Englishness, Bethan Huws's engagement with her Welsh identity and the heritage of Welsh language and culture is an important point for her notions of site, body, artist, and language. It is helpful to think about the parameter of awareness, rather than perception, when thinking about the way Huws's work is received and understood. It is the term she used in her show with On Kawara – she describes Kawara as "Aware of all that passes on around him," and choosing to paint as a response out of all possible responses to a particular moment. When considering perception, all things perceived are in a present moment, a sensorial experience that has no dependence upon prior knowledge. Awareness, on the other hand, is something which includes memory and understanding – you are aware of something because you remember seeing it somewhere before, you are aware of it because you read all about it. And language, a medium Huws often uses, is something which one can be aware of and will therefore understand, whereas perceiving language (hearing someone speaking a foreign language at the next table in a café) does not guarantee a transfer of meaning from the words to the brain of the perceiver. To put it simply, awareness can be a form of perception, but perception doesn't necessarily lead to the fullness of awareness.

Huws's exhibition Capelgwyn at Whitechapel Gallery in London could be read as an updating of institutional critique. Such a methodology of "updating" is common in her practice, from the translation and self-righteous anthropomorphism of Piss off I'm a fountain, a word vitrine (Burkhard), to the also Duchampian spatialized text-intervention of Nu Descendant un Escalier. In Capelgwyn the conditions of the gallery are literally heightened, made noticeable through their raising and differentiation from the "flat" plane of the floor. In applying the theory of de Certeau to the installation Capelgwynn, installed January through March of 2011, place could refer to an idea like the Whitechapel gallery space as a location in London, while Bethan Huws's floor

installation could be read as a space. The depth of projection of the floor could parallel the history and context of white cube gallery space, the dialectics of institutional critique and normative use of the space; the artist's floor raises the audience already a certain degree from the baseline of normative cognitive experience (by putting their eye level physically 17 centimeters higher than their normal height in that space), revealing the way a space already exists and is constructed prior to an artist's intervention in it.

It is important to consider the piece's title within the framework of Huws's work where so often text and theory are the primary content in the work. The name of the show, installed in the Whitechapel gallery in London, is Capelgwynn, which translates as "White Chapel." By doubling the name of the gallery and linking it to the title of the exhibition, she appropriates the place, creating a space that through her verbal gesture becomes a Welsh gallery in London. Because she names it in Welsh through a translation of words that exists in English, the authority derived from the show being in the institution which it talks about makes the English name of the gallery become a translation from the Welsh, rather than the other way around.

While Bethan Huws's installation highlights the boundaries of the room which it is in, and reframes the space which the viewer is inside, in historical terms, Beatriz Colomina argues this same kind of reframing was done by Le Corbusier in his house designs. Colomina describes a project where Le Corbusier was very particular about the windows in the house, because too much of the landscape would overwhelm the inhabitant. In the architect's writings, Colomina writes that "The house is being described in terms of the way it frames the landscape and the effect this framing has on the perception of the house itself by the moving visitor…The house is immaterial. That is the house is not simply constructed as a material object from which, then, certain views become possible. The house is no more than a series of views choreographed by the visitor, the way a filmmaker effects the montage of a film." (Colomina, 22) In comparing the lived space to filmic space, the site of Le Corbusier's dwelling must be considered as a viewing point, a kind of fixed perspective around which the dweller can orchestrate a series of instants where they contemplate the image of the outside. The house is like language, differentiating the outside from the inside and creating a set of meanings applicable to each. The meaning of the outside is determined in relation to the meaning of the inside according to the structure of the division (the architecture). Thus, for Le Corbusier at least, the placement of the windows is more vital to the meaning of the inside than to the outside. "For Le Corbusier, 'to inhabit' means to inhabit the camera. But the camera is not a traditional place, it is a system of classification, a kind of filing cabinet. 'To inhabit' means to employ that system. Only after this do we have "placing," which is to place the view in the house, to take a picture, to place the view in the filing cabinet, to classify the landscape." Thus, the construction of the house determines the meaning of the landscape around it through the perspective it observes. In this way, site is implicitly linked with its documentation.

The site of the conventionally aesthetic photograph (or of the photograph that creates the conventions of aesthiticity, or in other words the revolutionary photograph) is intriguing in the fact that at base, aesthetics is not usually considered in terms of site-specificity. However, when one considers how "good" photographs are produced, it is clear that the photographic perspective which leads to a "good" photograph, is a position in space that relies upon one other variable, the element of time. The "decisive moment" of Breton is not simply a moment, but a perspective-instant; it is both a position in time and in space, and in its spatio-temporality it is a position one which we rarely remember to privilege. The furthest extent of our acknowledgement of this principle in life is the touristic "photo spot" where a sign encourages the visitor to take a photograph standing in a certain place; thus, even those without firmly resolved aesthetic sensibilities can take a "good photo" based upon the relative certainty (anticipated of course by the sign-posters, therefore the government or a similar authority) that something picturesque will be in the frame if the tourist photographs from the vista that they provide. This probabilistic

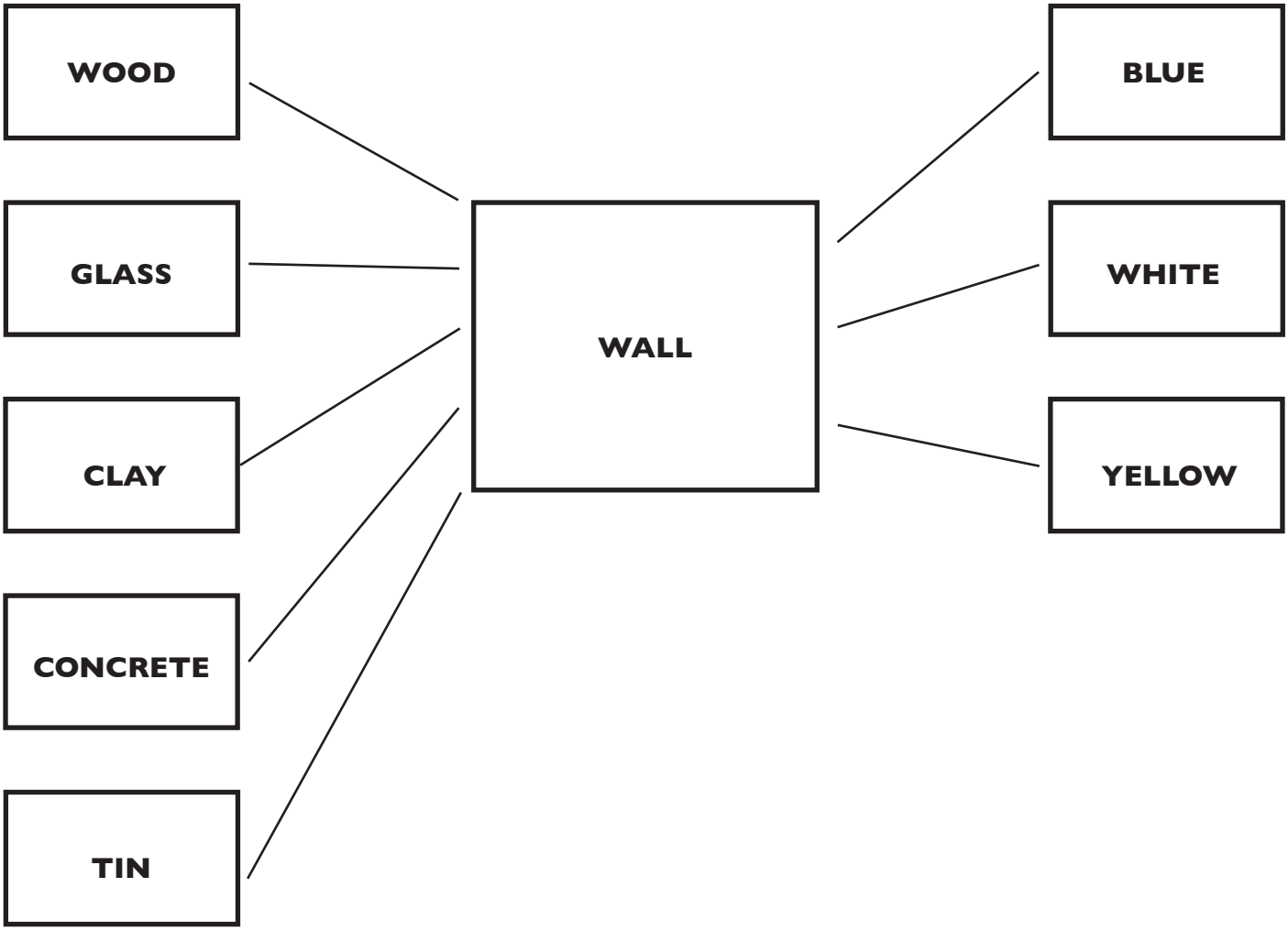
Martin Parr, The Last Resort, New Brighton, (1986) from Magnum Contact Sheets, Thames and Hudson, 2012

conception of aesthetics is quite in harmony with how most amateur imagemaking occurs, but theory demands at least a laying down of some rules that explain how

Recently, Magnum released a book of it's photographers' contact sheets, intending to show how great photographers sort images, preview images, and of course finally select images. It is of course a fascinating book — how could it not be, being as it is one of the more representative ways of showing the true production of a large number of highly trained and skilled image makers? But central to the idea of the book is the concept that a subject has the potential to be transformed into a great aesthetic object if the photographer is able to come across the proper perspective-instant. Martin Parr is a good example to examine; his photographs are frequently seen as examples of the chance juxtaposition highlighting the absurdity of the banal. The contact sheet illustrating the book is for the making of an image from the 1986 series, Last Resort, New Brighton. The photograph which was finally chosen as the definitive image from the group-

ing was not even shot from the perspective Parr first photographed the scene from, as shone in the top left frame. It is only after he decided upon the proper framing and camera position that the subject clarified itself through the young girl sitting down next to the lying figure. The successive photographs between the first, "finding" shot and the final image in which the elements have all come together illustrate how photographic culture creates a hierarchy of image content and values certain images over others. It is according to this hierarchy that physical space becomes evaluated and made specific to the mode of photography, to the apparatus of documentation.

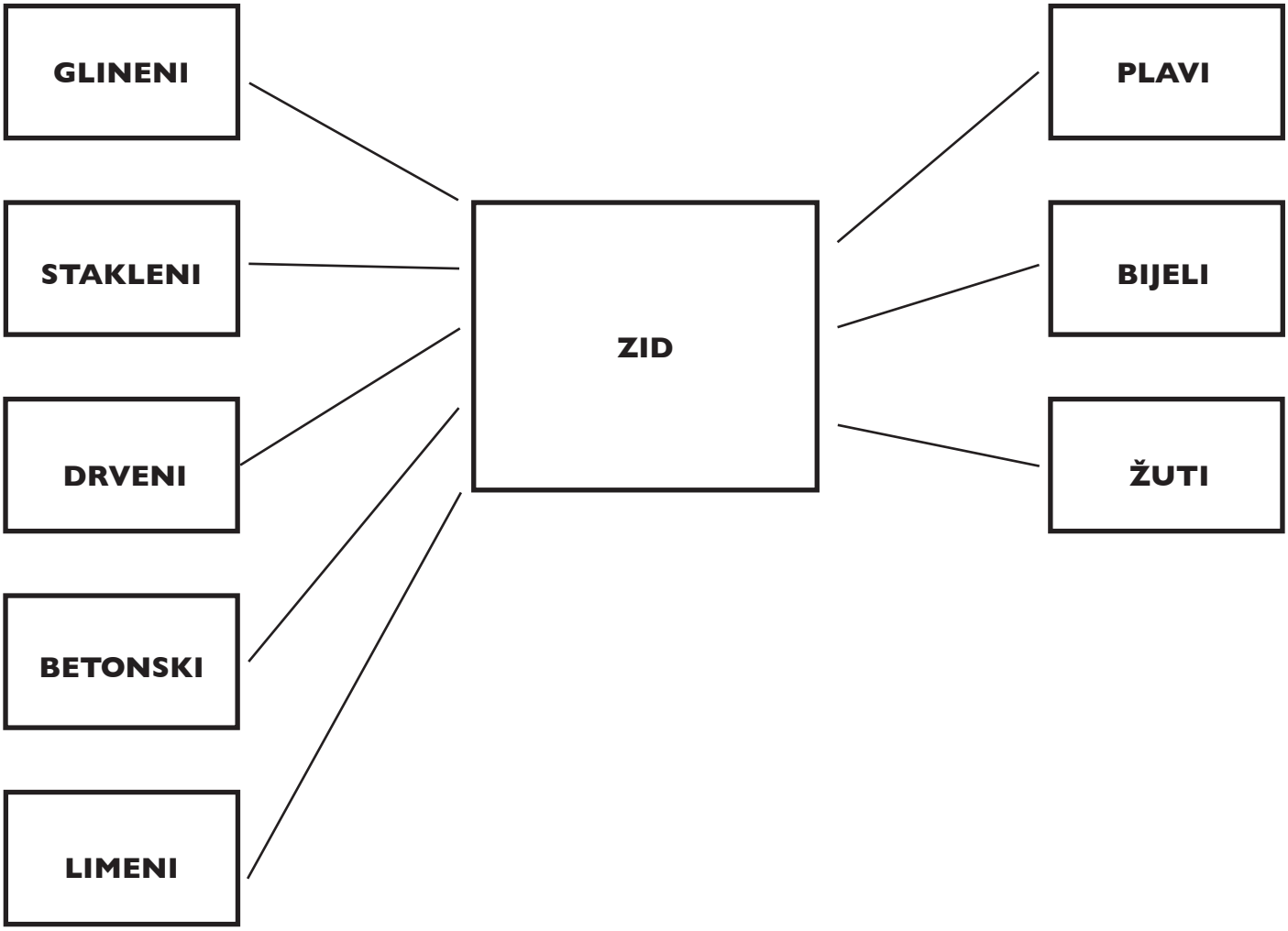
For both Long and Brown, there are works that are “outside” and “inside” with respect to the gallery, and frequently times when the work that is produced outside the gallery has to be brought inside. For Long, sometimes the way it is brought in is through the photograph, a sort of stand-in that references the outside without really bringing it in; in semiotic terms, it is the index of the exterior performance. Other times, physical objects that would have made up a



performance outside, such as stones or mud, are brought into the space and then confuse the relation of the outside performances to the gallery in general. If a work is produced because of its site-specificity in nature, how is its displacement into the gallery related to that site? Of course, in addition to the difference between inside and outside works, there is also the way that time changes work. Richard talks about this relation between older works and new works in the same site: “Sometimes my work crosses the route of another work made earlier. So you have very strange memories of times and places stayed at the same time yet you are a different person because you are two years older.” It would be interesting to see Long remaking a work in the same way on the same site, but simply at a different point; the remade work would of course not be able to be the same as the original work, it would be something different based upon the weather conditions, the way the camera is used to document, the language put to it, and if nothing else simply the undeniable change brought about by time.

Everyone knows the maxim that the presence of the camera changes the performance; the documenter has a relationship to the audience, to the performer, and to the event, and their presence is going to change things as basic as the movement of people through the space. But if Nick Kaye can talk about performance and documentation in the context of theatre, it is equally instructive to look at it in the context of musical performance. In a hall where an orchestra is playing for an audience, the first or primary experience of the event is from the live performance of the orchestra. A second level of experience occurs if the concert hall has a live sound system, which we can think of in three parts; the microphones, the recording device, and the

speaker in the hall playing back what the microphones pick up. There is a blending that happens between the original sound of the performers and the amplified sound from the speakers, which allows theoretically for audience members in the back to hear the orchestra just as the people in the front hear it. However, the way the sound is heard at the microphones is not the same as the way it is heard by the audience. The only thing that is the same would be the pitches and



rhythms of the instruments, but because the spatial positioning of the sound is different for the person somewhere in the audience than it is for the microphones, and therefore the character of the sound is subtly but distinctively different. A comparison would show that certain points are emphasized by the microphone being in a given place; perhaps it's not meant to be heard from that point, or at least it gives a different experience than would have been intended by a composer making a work that would be played in an auditorium.

So in the setup of the live sound system, there are two levels of experience; the first is that the microphones are put in specific places, now you hear certain things that are depicted from the orchestra and maybe that would't be possible before, and it maybe makes things more clear. So maybe what's site specific is the position of the microphone. The second thing is that the sounds are mingling, creating the possibility of a feedback loop, or even if not in the form of an incredibly audible experience, at least the recording would experience some bleed from the room noise and reflections from the back wall. If your body were outside the concert hall, then the experience is different, because you only hear it one way, the speakers are there so you can hear the piece. And the sounds are not the same because your body is not in the same place. Therefore, the specificity of your experience is always the placement of the microphone on the stage, even though your physical specificity is in the room outside the hall.

But even inside the space, the specificity of the performance hall is lost in the doubling that happens in the reperformance of its documentation; the confusion and conflation of the amplified

sound and the live sound make create a site that is simultaneously the event and the documentation. In the past when recording would occur separately to amplification, there was not a blending between event and document but here the depiction from a certain point changes everything. At least, the documentation is now so integral to the event that the distinction between the CD version of a piece and its original performance is only that finally, the CD has lost the trace of liveness that clung on to the performance. What is now left is direct documentation and documentation via feedback or transmission; and, at the same time, simultaneous documentation: a representation of the performance, in the space of the performance, at the time of the performance.

Janet Cardiff: the Forty Part Motet, 2001

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