

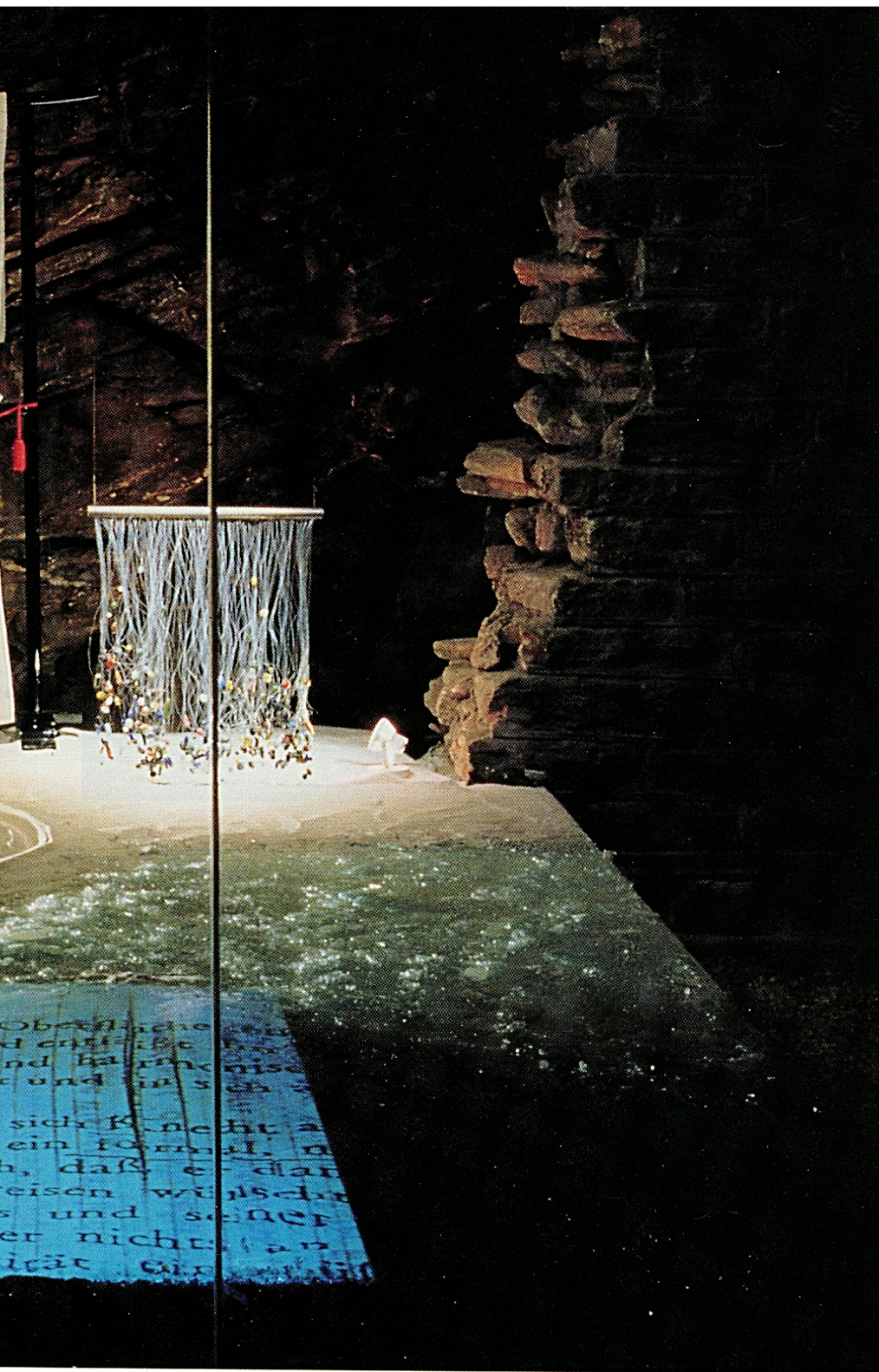
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JOHN MCWILLIAMS



# Ten Years of Site-Specific





Ten years of evolution in site-specific art can be neatly bracketed by the "Skulptur Projekte" exhibitions held in Münster in 1987 and 1997. During that period, the Postmodernist movement to take art outside the formal museum setting—transporting it into the public sphere and reversing Modernist elitism by making art more user-friendly—has played itself out in sometimes unexpected and unruly directions. Events subsequent to 1997 suggest that Postmodernism is indeed played out, but what has replaced it is less clear.

It is curious that the site-specific medium, focused as it is on the relation of a work of art to a local context, has been frequently fostered by means of large festivals, which often bring in artists from outside the local scene to create the works. The issues raised by the resulting works have been as varied and unexpected as the participating artists, venues, and institutions. Yet, as each year of the decade brought ever more site-specific activity, there continued to be proclamations of the irrelevance of the medium. One such criticism came in *The New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman's review of the 1997 "Skulptur Projekte." He stated that "site-specific art has produced little of lasting value, and for predictable reasons: site-specific sculptures, often made to be ephemeral, tend therefore to be trifling...Because [site sculptures] must be local, they can also be parochial. The assumption is that they involve a level of social engagement, which discourages artists whose impetus is not political." Kimmelman's accusation of parochialism specifically contrasts contemporary site-specific art to Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. Although site-oriented work is related

Regina Frank with Edward Stein, *The Glass Bead Game*, 1996. Installation at "Conversations at the Castle," Arts Festival of Atlanta, 1996.

by Nicholas Drake

# Art



This page: Ulf Rollof, *23 September 1994, 1994*. Five fir trees, steel, electric motors, various truck parts, sand, car tires, and concrete. Installation at inSITE94, Estacion del Ferrocarril, Tijuana. Opposite page: Betsabée Romero, *Ayate Car, 1997*. Mixed media. Installation at inSITE97, Colonia Libertad, Tijuana.



to or even derived from our cultural past, it quite consciously lacks the contextual/functional necessity and longevity of its predecessors, particularly in its festival venues. Neolithic stone structures, burial mounds, and even the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico could be regarded as “site specific,” but contemporary site-specific sculpture is more closely related to conceptualism and other movements to dematerialize art, movements currently serving critics like Kimmelman as straw men in their attacks on contemporary art.

Michael Brenson’s review of 1987’s ground-breaking “Sculpture Project Münster” exhibition now seems a bit ironic—resonating with something of Kimmelman’s more recent displeasure. Brenson stated: “The show raises many questions. Much of the Conceptual work wants to be both deferential and subversive. It insists on its sensitivity to the needs of the people, but its desire to educate and challenge usually assumes a feeling of superiority. The result can be a pretentious unpretentiousness.” Though his initial reaction was unfavorable, Brenson later went on to become a major proponent of the genre, as site-specific work became more interactive. What seems to have brought him around was an under-

standing of the community orientation of much of the work, as well as its educational value.

During a phone interview, Michael Brenson confirmed this turnaround, “I did have resistance to Conceptual art at the time, which did disappear. I do feel that it was a landmark show. Münster opened up the sculptural imagination as it expresses itself in relation to its environment, with the history and the identity of a place becoming a central part of the work’s content.”

After the ’87 “Skulptur Projekte,” a growing number of exhibitions were developed around site-specific art. Each of these nudged the genre along toward its current status and its present variety of forms. The first important such exhibition came in 1991, across the Atlantic in an unlikely place, Charleston, South Carolina. Unlikely, in that the sleepy Southern city had never before hosted an exhibition of this scale. Produced by the Spoleto Festival, its organizers elaborated on the urban ambiance and history of the colonial city. Instigated by the festival’s General Manager Nigel Redden and curated by Mary Jane Jacob, “Places With a Past” caused a sensation for a variety of reasons (and produced

infighting among Festival organizers and founder Gian Carlo Menotti).

“Places With a Past” received wide critical acclaim. Though the number of included artists was more modest than at Münster, its specificity and sensitivity to place advanced the art form beyond the beginning experimentalism of its predecessor. Its curator emerged from the experience having learned important lessons. The most dramatic one centered on a new term being bandied about at the time: “parachuting,” a term for an artist briefly dropping into a community to create an installation.

David Hammons’s two installations for “Places with a Past,” *America Street* and *The House of the Future*, were notable for the artist’s transcendence of parachuting. Hammons interactively immersed himself within the adjacent community, involving the neighbors and their children in the art process. The work evolved out of this interaction, within the limits of the exhibition’s deadlines.

Jacob took this lesson on to Chicago during 1992 and 1993 for Sculpture Chicago’s “Culture in Action,” along with an awareness that museums and other institutions—though sometimes staid and stifling—were still crucial to the cultural process. Armed with her



knowledge of the tension between the museum and public art, she engaged in a series of significant public art projects and dialogues. In the book that documented the project, Michael Brenson summarized its intentions: "While 'Skulptur Projekte' and, to a greater degree, 'Places With a Past,' essentially rejected the notion of a permanent public art monument imposing an artist's view on a public site, and while they pointed eloquently toward the kind of intimate relationship between artist and place that is now characteristic of the most influential public art in the United States and Europe, the success of these two endeavors still depended, to some degree, upon the tourist and museum experience. 'Culture in Action' does not. It is smaller, more intense, and less conducive to a hit-and-run approach. None of the artists in 'Culture in Action' is known as an object-maker. All are known for collaborations."

The exhibition sought to change the relationship between art institutions and public art. In the same book Jacob

wrote: "The nature of contemporary art during the past three decades has led art out of the museum into the world. Art has demanded spaces beyond the galleries of the institution because of its scale, its tie to the land or a given location, or because its message depended on a social context. For those artists with a pronounced social and political agenda, their work reached a desired, wider audience by being placed in a particular, everyday setting that actualized their critique of culture."

Here we see a movement not only beyond sculpture as object, but also beyond site-specific installation—toward an "audience-specific" art. Parochial or not, by tightening their focus, these artists were broadening their field. Some of the artists—like Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio, with their project for a commercially distributed candy bar, or Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle with his "Tele-Vecindario" collaborative neighborhood video project—transmuted themselves into social activists.

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After 1993, large-scale shows were produced, in San Diego and in Santa Fe, that demonstrated what artists and curators could do within a festival setting. Because of the host city's proximity to Tijuana, San Diego's "inSITE94" became an ambitious, wide-ranging project that spanned two cities and two countries, while including 100 artists from all over the globe. This was multicultural experimentalism at its most extensive. The sheer scale of "inSITE94" made viewing the widely dispersed installations an unwieldy experience. But some projects did push interactivity and audience specificity



PHILIPP SCHOLZ RITTERMANN



Right: M. Dias and W. Riedweg, *Question Marks*, 1996. Performance at "Conversations at the Castle," Arts Festival of Atlanta, 1996. Below: Martha Schwartz, *Field Work*, 1997. Installation from "Nature/Nurture," McLeod Plantation, Spoleto Festival. Opposite page: Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Hand-Like Trees*, 1997. Installation from "Nature/Nurture," the Battery, Spoleto Festival.



forward while digging deeply into a sense of place.

One example was by Mexican artist Alvaro Blancarte, whose *The Tomb/Magical Ritual* was an installation based on the rituals and ceremonies that local Native Americans conduct in sacred places. Another, by Nina Katchadourian, Steven Matheson, and Mark Tribe, directed cars around Southwestern College's parking lot, color coding each motorist's parking to create a collaborative visual display. Pepón Osorio's visual testimony, *Public Hearing*, was based on experiences of Latino communities with

unsympathetic governments and social agencies.

1996's "SITE Santa Fe" turned out to be an odd parody of itself. Shifting focus in midstream, the organizers put on something a little less daring than what was originally intended. The exhibition ended up including 31 artists from 13 countries and was housed in only two sites. A sense of place, so important to earlier large-scale projects, seems to have been lost in the shuffle. Reviewing the show for *Sculpture*, Harmony Hammond touched upon the essence of this shift: "It is possible that Bruce Ferguson ran into

a problem hosting an exhibition of site-specific work by outsider artists, precisely because of Santa Fe's identity as a pre-existing art site complete with a long history of cultural colonization. The usual site-specific project of parachuting artists in would simply serve to frame an existing exploited cultural field, thereby forcing "SITE Santa Fe" to examine its own role in the capitalist project of tourism and the continued marketing of culture. With the thematic shift, the exhibition was safely framed by the current discourse about place, but not site, as the role of "SITE Santa Fe" was never seriously examined in this context."

Some works did address tourism, including Tseng Kong Chi's travel photos depicting himself in a Mao jacket touring the world and Rebecca Belmore's poignant mosaic composed of fragmented souvenir mugs, a memorial for Oklahoma City bombing victims. Though the exhibition did delve into the spectacle of commercialization, the midstream change of direction shifted the focus away from community interaction by the participating artists.

Mary Jane Jacob's project for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta directed the momentum back toward



ABOVE: CHRIS VERENE; BELOW: WILLIAM STRUHS



interactivity. Instead of spreading outward into the already crowded public arena, as her large-scale projects in Charleston and Chicago had done, she chose one site, a mansion across the street from the High Museum that is known locally as The Castle, as a hub for the project's activities. The projects concentrated on three areas: social/community, performance events (dinners), and gallery installations.

In the article "Curating Conversations," the introduction to the project's book/catalogue, Jacob states: "With a shared interest in the role of art as a communication vehicle, the artists in 'Conversations at the Castle' created projects that took the form of public interaction. Art, to them, was a mode of conversation. The artists'

presence, whether at The Castle or in communities and then later at the exhibition site, added a human dimension to their work that made it real and more compelling. Here the art experience, even though in a public setting, was one that touched audience members on an intensely personal level."

In a social work project, Brazilian Maurice Dias and Swiss Walter Riedwig worked with 130 children at the Fulton County Child Treatment Center, making videos that they exchanged with inmates of the Federal Penitentiary. German performance artist Regina Frank, on the other hand, enacted a gallery interactive or participatory installation in The Castle. The piece integrated thickly interwoven

*Site-specific art succeeds when the artist weaves the personal and the communal together in a meaningful way.*

symbols of deconstructed book pages, a Japanese kimono, and glass beads—all connected interactively with the Internet, as well as a performance by the artist. Frank imprisoned herself within her installation, allowing viewers to communicate with her via two laptop computers. This curious set of interrelationships was simultaneously highly personal and global.

By far, the most pivotal and controversial portions of "Conversations at the Castle" were just that, a series of conversational dinners put on by an Italian collaborative team, Artway of Thinking. These dialogues joined cultural thinkers and artists from Atlanta, other parts of the United States, and a few foreign nationals, as well as the participating artists themselves, to discuss various issues of the contemporary art world, including public art, the Internet, youth, and the role of cultural institutions.

In 1997, Charleston's Spoleto Festival put on its second large-scale, site-specific exhibition, under the direction of curator John Beardsley. The long shadow of "Places With a Past" cut deeply through this production. Following the fireworks and controversies associated with "Places," patrons and contributors seemed a little wary of another such excursion into "outside the museum" adventurism.

There were a number of themes with which Beardsley, and assistant curator Roberta Kefalos, worked. Among the 13 artists, there were two essential camps: self-taught folk artists and more formally trained "brand-name" art stars.

Rather than an "in your face" promotion, "Human/Nature: Art and Landscape in Charleston and the Low Country" was presented with subtlety, maybe a bit too much. The show seemed more like public art presented





*The success of these shows depends on artists taking risks while adhering to the immediacy of place and community.*

for the elite. Gone were the crowds of the curious and uninitiated. At times while touring the sites, which were widely distributed around South Carolina's Low Country, the exhibition seemed like a treasure hunt.

The work with the most powerful sense of place was by Adriane Geuze. Set deep within a swamp at Cypress Gardens, the steel cable construction had its walls delicately draped with Spanish moss. Its strength lay with its breathtaking immersion into the steamy natural environment. But the viewer pretty much needed a guide to find it.

Charles Simonds, on the other hand, enacted a highly interactive work at Ashley Hall, a traditional all-girls school near the historic district. Collaborating with the schoolgirls for a modest period of time, Simonds oversaw the sculpting of phantasmagorical faces upon the inside rock face of an on-campus grotto. Though very community and audience specific, this site-work was both inaccessible and—due to its inadequate natural lighting—nearly unviewable.

A more public and political sense of the power of place emerged from "The Thirty Minutes" project, which was put on in South Africa's Robben Island Museum, a former prison island. Nine cubicles were used to focus the viewer's attention on the site's 30-year history of incarceration. The sculptures were installed within special viewing booths: the point of contact between the inmates and their outside visitors. "The Glass Frontier," allowed the nine participating artists to charge their installations with the heavily laden emotions still lingering.

One such sculpture was by Kevin Brand. Brand manipulated common materials, soap, porridge, toilet paper, spoons, etc., that were routinely used

to fabricate other objects, thereby tapping into the significance of prisoners' struggle to maintain hope and dignity.

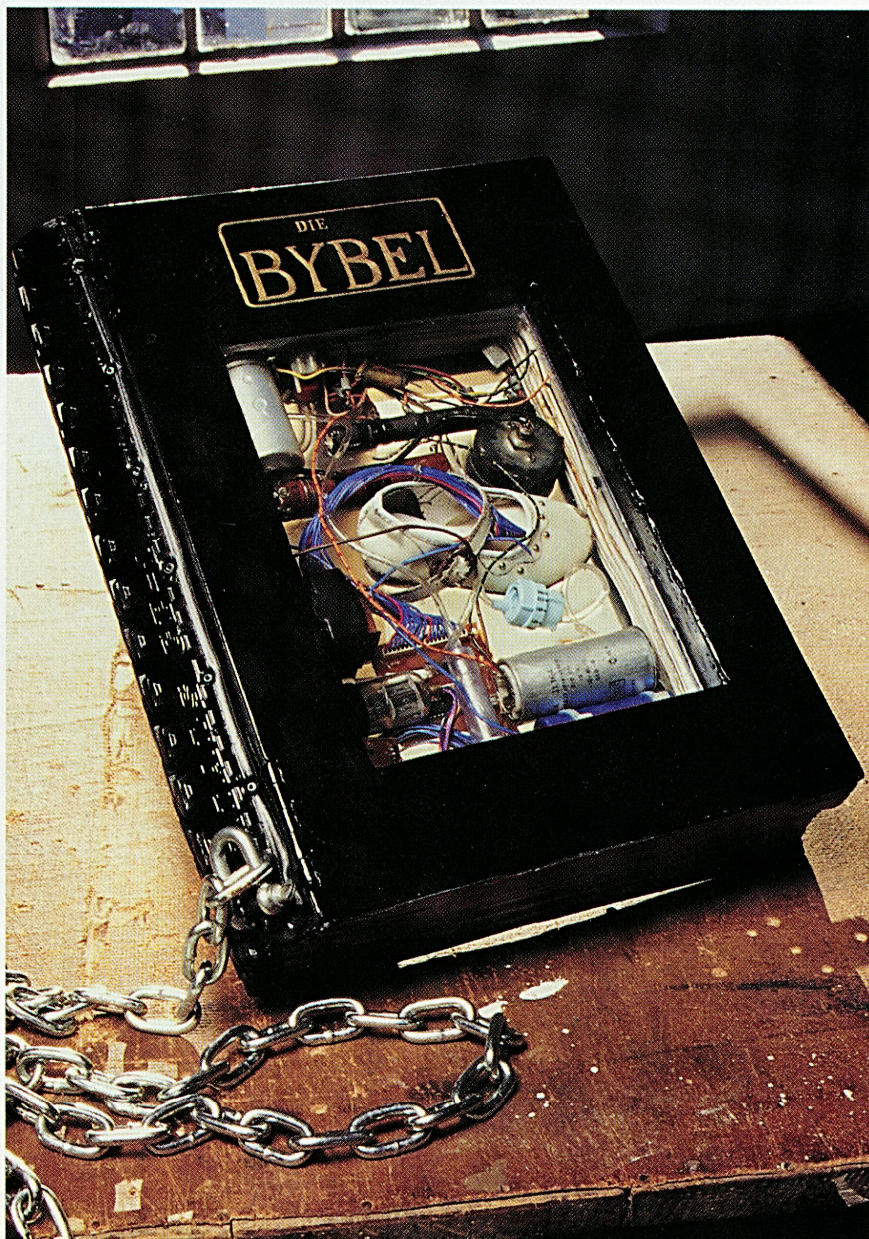
Lisa Brice attempted to digitally reconstruct images of Nelson Mandela as he might have appeared and as he changed during his years of political isolation and imprisonment there. The inadequately replicated composite likenesses carried a message initially unintended by the artist, demonstrating the very reason activists were locked away. Time fades the vividness and accuracy of memory.

San Diego's "inSITE97" included half as many artists, about 50, as the city's previous exhibition. One major difference was the substantial number of community-based projects. The curatorial team included Canadian Jessica Bradley, Brazilian Ivo Mesquita, Mexican Olivier Debroise, and Sally

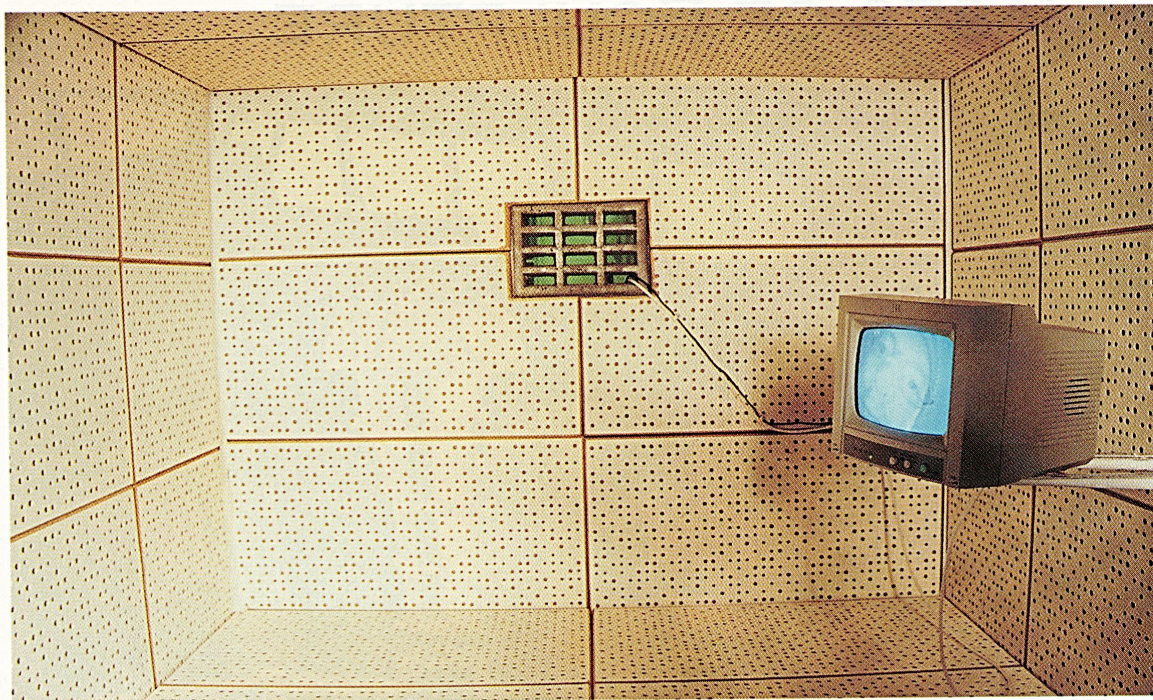
Yard from the United States.

Artists like Eduardo Abaroa and Kim Adams varied their interactive approaches. Abaroa's artistic role was a passive one, allowing the viewer to actively participate in the experience. A series of gum ball machines was set up within a specific area in downtown San Diego. Each one dispensed a prize along with directions to the next machine. Participating meant circumscribing a tour of the urban landscape while also engaged in a thematically subversive escapade.

Adams, on the other hand, took her *Toaster Work Wagon*, a fold-out mobile workshop, to unexpected locations, where she engaged children to construct wacky sculptures out of bicycles. Whether as activists or facilitators, artists tended to intentionally encourage their audiences to partake







Opposite page:  
Willie Bester, *Die Bybel*, 1997. Steel, rubber, glass, found objects, resin, and paper, 370 x 450 x 90 cm.

This page: Sue Williamson, *Is Anybody...?*, 1997. Acoustic tiles, wood, airbrick, monitor, camera, and sound, installation view.

in the public art experience.

An important component of "inSITE97" was the Community Engagement Program. Fifteen artists were commissioned to engage various communities in year-long projects, investigating the lines where private and public art intermingle. These projects included the communal painting of murals, the recording of street sounds, the design of piñatas, an archaeological dig, as well as other projects tailored to specific communities, like the one for fisherman and their families.

On the occasion of 1997's "Skulptur Projekte" in Münster, Kaspar König said this when asked what the purpose of public sculpture might be: "The purpose is the purpose of art. It is to question the autonomy and the function of art. There are also the dialectics between the museum and the outdoors. This time in Münster we will go so far as declaring the museum as public space. The big difference is that in the museum you expect art and in the outdoors, you don't. So there has to be a plausibility within the works presented in the urban environment."

So where is all this "Let's make the outdoors into an interactive public museum" going? Consider Mary Jane Jacob's next project, at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói (MAC) in Brazil. The intent of "Art Without

Frontiers" is to merge past public art lessons with the support systems of the museum. Preliminary materials from the project state that "Art without Frontiers' aims to expand the ways in which our museum can play a role in the cultural and educational daily life of social groups in Niterói. The inspiration for this project is its pioneer nature, searching out for new means of non-traditional action, both for the museum as a public institution as well as for the artists and their work. This program starts with various projects integrating MAC, local communities, local and international artists, and teachers/scholars. These projects will be complemented by courses, workshops and exhibitions covering contemporary artistic discourses and their educational development."

What the MAC exhibition proposes is a complex web of cultural activities that interlaces artistic experience with the macro-community, involving its people in a multileveled discourse. This curious evolution out of the museum and into public spaces has taken art—specifically site-oriented works—full circle, returning us to the interactive communalism of antiquity, where art and life were one and the same.

Reflecting back over the last 10 years then, what lessons have been learned? When site art realizes itself,

it is because the artist is engaged in a process that weaves both the personal and the communal together in some mutually meaningful way. The tendency toward festival venues—with the increased access and opportunity of temporary institutional support—can make it possible for artists to dig deeply into this process. The danger of these festival formats is that the art can become superficial and showy—eye candy fabricated for the tourist and art traveler—rather than being investigative and substantive. Both "Site Santa Fe" and the "Human/Nature" exhibits demonstrated the importance of "place" and "audience," by demonstrating all too clearly what occurs when neither are taken seriously.

The success of large-scale shows such as "Places with a Past" and "inSITE97" has come from the individual artist's willingness to take risks in unexplored areas while adhering to the immediacy of place and community. This process is not only "audience-specific" but, more importantly, "artist-specific," requiring constant experimentation to discover new relevant forms. Site sculpture is by no means dead. It is just shifting its format.

Nicholas Drake is an artist and writer living in Charleston, South Carolina.