

The Many Sites of Art

17th Spring School of the Réseau international de formation en histoire de l'art

13-17 May 2019

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For its 17th edition, RIFHA's annual Spring School invites its partners and doctoral candidates to gather at the Université de Montréal in order to address the complex relations between artworks and the material, physical and institutional sites they occupy. Rather than exploring topics and fields associated with the representation of sites in the visual arts (scenography, cartography, landscapes, theories of perspective) the scientific program wishes to focus on the various modes through which artworks are influenced or even determined by their actual site or context of presentation. It will also seek to shed new light on the transformed perceptions and uses of a given site following the insertion, implantation or intrusion of an artwork in its midst.

From the opportunistic inclusion of actual relief in some figurative motifs of cave paintings to the practice of contemporary public art, the importance of site has often been acknowledged in the interpretation of visual arts and has entailed considerations for the material surfaces as well as for the historical and symbolic resonances of the sites invested by art. This calls attention to the remarkable extension of what can today be investigated under the lens of "the many sites of art".

How to apply: Candidates wishing to participate will submit a proposition (300 words-1800 signs) for a 15 minute intervention and include a short CV. The proposition may be written in English, French, German or Italian. It must be sent in a Word Document including the candidate's name, her/his postal and electronic addresses, the institution (and country) of affiliation and specifying under which of the six sub-themes the proposition is to be registered. The proposition and CV should be sent together in a single document and will be named in the following way: Proposition_First name_Name_Abbreviated Name of the institution (For example: Proposition_Chloé Miron_UdM). The subject of the email will be listed as First Name, Name and Country (For example: Chloé Miron Canada). Emails are to be sent at: edp2019montreal@gmail.com. The deadline is **February 20th**. The selection of participants will be announced in the following weeks, before the end of March.

Nota Bene: in the two weeks following the acceptance of their proposition, candidates will provide their summary in another of the four official languages of the Network (see above). Complete texts and powerpoint presentations are due for **April 30th**. Since participants are invited to present in their mother tongue, they must be bilingual to favor interactions and debate with their peers. Candidates from Latin countries are expected to understand English or German and candidates from Canada, United States, England and Germany to understand French or Italian.

1. Architecture and site

In the study of art and site, the history of architecture offers a vast terrain for investigation. If the materiality of the built world, construction processes, and the question of drawing remain fundamental aspects of research in architecture, since the 1970s new methodologies (in particular phenomenology) have shaped thinking on the relationship of architecture to its site. The work of Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* highlighted the complex relationship between man and place at the root of architectural works in pre-modern societies and continues to dictate the core stream of thought among contemporary practitioners. For Schulz, “architecture means to visualize the *genius loci* and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell”. Who then (Gods? Spirits? Memories?) inhabits the sites that we choose to occupy and how do architecture and its associated works participate in this visualization? In other words, what types of social relationships and practices can architecture create and favor to transform a site into a place? How can a work of art or architecture *as* a work of art transform a simple location, a “Non-place” (Marc Augé) to a meaningful place – a place marked by a particular identity, history or relational dimension – and become a privileged place which, by the view and consent of its subjects, distinguishes and detaches itself from utilitarian space? And what then is the rapport between *in situ* and *in visu*, between inhabiting, which implies a participation in the place (Tim Ingold), and the perception thereof?

The question at the heart of geographic and anthropological enquiries of the past 30 years (notably Augustin Berque or Jean-Marc Besse in France) is in one part concerned with the myths and beliefs that form the essence of places, and on the other hand with the practices (Henri Lefebvre), participation, and “experience” of places (Yi-Fu Tuan). It also touches on notions of environment and landscape and the complex imbrication of site, landscape, and space as elucidated by W.J.T Mitchell. We could focus, for example, on the way buildings or other architectural incursions (benches, terraces etc.) are positioned within their environment (be it rural or urban) and, in doing so, transform it into a landscape by means of framing, scansion, unveiling, or camouflage, thus creating a specific identity to the place for those who live and “practice” there.

Beyond the “architectural oeuvre”, we are also interested in questions pertaining to the “architectural site” – be it the ways in which the relationship between architecture and its constituent works is articulated, or from the point of view of creation and reception – a field in which phenomenology has proven essential. How, for example, does the style of architecture that surrounds paintings affect the ways we interpret them? How does architecture influence the presentation of collections and, in opposition to this question, how can collections influence design or disrupt perception and representation?

Our question is not limited to built architecture, but rather extends to encompass the tradition of mnemonic architecture – palaces of memory based on the articulation of images (*imagines*) and of places (*loci*), the importance of which in art history, since the work of Francis Yates, is limited not to the medieval period (Carruthers) but stretches to the modern era and contemporary creation, as well as to both material and immaterial heritage management since Pierre Nora’s work on “sites of memory”. The idea of travelling or “strolling through places”, either fictitious or real, was a defining characteristic in the *domus* of the ancient Romans and the palaces of the Renaissance and has long informed installations, contemporary performances and cinematic representations (Georges Didi-Huberman, for example, in *Le lieu malgré tout* and

Fables du lieu). The cinematic dimension, is also essential to the virtual environments in which artists invest as well as in current museological practices.

2. Decorative ensembles

Architecture is the bearer of complex decorative ensembles, which have already been the subject of countless studies. We have established that the location of a work determines its format and its material components and that the artists' choices respond to an assigned function. Religious art provides emblematic cases for the analysis of that which we call the "spatial context" of a work. Already, the painters of prehistory took into account the relief of rock surfaces to give form to their signs and images, which resulted in the complex topographical organization of their grotto decorations. This idea is at the heart of a long-held conception of artistic creation, according to which nature is the first artist. The artist imitated the creative process of nature itself (*natura naturans*) and it is this competition or complicity with nature that gave rise to the work of art. For example, the observation of exceptional natural forms (anthropomorphic rocks or rocks in the shape of animals) has, on many occasions and across many cultures, been the basis of the creation of sites – spaces marked by toponymy-defined characteristics. This conception led to the creation of a wide range of works of art inspired by *natural images*, from the watercolors of Albrecht Dürer to the works of earth artists like Richard Long (Corboz).

"Contrary to European thought build upon the temporal vector and instilling a linear and teleologic conception of history over spatial referents", in Indigenous cultures the place or site itself *is* culture (Vigneault). In this respect, a large part of the work of Indigenous artists is marked by a resistance to colonial alienation of territory and its identity, which is served not only by the appropriation of its resources and the exploitation of the earth, but also by the erasure of place names. Derrida notes that toponymy is one of the most absolute tools of violence and the exploration of this question will offer the opportunity (one that is urgently needed) to reimagine conceptions of place in relation to that of the "great divide" which, in western societies since approximately the 17th century, has presupposed a separation between society and nature, humans and non-humans, and contributed significantly to the Anthropocene crisis in which we exist today (Descola, Charbonnier).

Isolated, the work of art does not influence its site in the same way as if it were presented in a series. Multiple works construct a space for themselves by virtue of their disposition. Thereby, erect stones or the *in situ* components of Daniel Buren's works, for example, incite an exploration of place and site that is profoundly different if they are single or multiple in number. The theme chosen for this edition of the Spring School seeks to elicit a reconsideration of certain works of art still too often left in the margins of art history textbooks. The painted wooden ceilings of the domestic sphere that have long been known for their "agency", for example. Those painted ceilings project "images of the self" that are not only private, but also collective. The "living spaces" (houses, taverns, workshops, offices etc. where the image has, little by little, been domesticated) are distinct from the "sites of power" (Foucault) that have long monopolized the attention of art historians (Bartholeyns, Bourin and Dittmar). The consideration of exterior decoration (paintings, signs, inscriptions, panels, shop signs, coverings, graffiti, "furtive art") evinces a further line of questioning. Interested not in the social life of family, exterior decorative ensembles are open onto shared social spaces, most notably cities, which, as a result, implicate identity construction, politics, and the commercial struggles inherent to their location.

If the images painted or sculpted on walls and ceilings are in solidarity, what to say then of mobile works and their relationship to the spaces where they circulate? Besides miniature altarpieces – the transportable sacred spaces that had for effect to “have the church enter the home”, and the votive images that were carried on one’s person in order to “find oneself at home” while abroad, we can equally consider tapestry, furniture, and dishes – all objects that, thanks to their individual properties, “*trans-transport*” one site to another. The porcelain pavilions of the 18th century that sought to recreate an imagined China in European homes, and wampum belts of Native North-Americans (veritable mnemonic devices of events and sites) are examples of these among many others.

It is essential to think not only of the manner in which the site influences art – where works at once come into existence and disappear (Arasse, Didi-Huberman, *Génie du non-lieu*) – but also how works “*trans-figure*” the site and transport those who traverse its space (all decorative ensembles being, in a certain way, immersive in nature). Because the site is indeed a *figure* (in the sense of Auerbach), which is to say something that can be “shaped” or “fashioned” (Paquet); it is at once the fruit of the intelligible and the sensory, of the spiritual and the real or, to put it more precisely, “a dynamic process of representation of the problematic point of contact of the sensory and the intelligible, the visible and the invisible, the corporeal and the spiritual” (Guideroni).

3. Gardens

The garden, in this context, can be understood as a series of places defined by this same double, paradoxical ontology. A real and physical place, the garden is also all “other-places”. For Michel Foucault, the garden is a heterotopia (other-place), that possesses the power to juxtapose, in a single real site, a number of contradictory locations: “The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity”. The garden is thus a place much more complex than the site it occupies. It is form and life at the same time, it is a mesocosm (Brunon, Mosser) continuously renewing the relationship between form and life across stratifications of nature and culture, the evolution of time and a vital projection towards the future. Sometimes marked by hypertopia (the accumulation of a large number of spaces in a single garden as in the gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries or the modern, and didactic gardens like the Botanical gardens in Montreal, for example), the garden, most notably the city gardens that developed as of the 16th century in Europe and in America, is also often a representation of utopia (and at the same time the manifestation of nostalgia for a lost place).

As in architecture, the garden gives shape and life to *Genius loci*. It not only visualizes the temporal strata that shape its landscape, but also the perpetual alchemical movements of nature (in artificial caves with their stone concretions, or thanks to the fountains that symbolize the water networks of a given territory, for example). The link that connects the garden to man, nature and its site however exceeds the realm of “representation,” allowing rather to measure the “mode of identification” (Descola) between self and others, between a given society and the natural environment. If the Western garden, at least since the Renaissance, is defined as a place of competition between man and nature (in which the first is surely the vanquisher – a historical tenet requiring perhaps some reconsideration), non-occidental gardens can be understood as the meeting point of a gardener and the place he tends. For example, during the Heian era in Japan (794-1185), to erect stones signified the making of a garden. It is not just a matter of he who tends the garden having chosen the stones but that of the stone having invested itself with

intentionality. The stone wishes to become a work. The site of the work (the garden) is therefore also a site belonging *to* the work, a site “in perpetual genesis of that which it is not yet and tomorrow will not be” where man is capable of listening to and feeling the language of stones and nature (Berque). Whereas relational aesthetics, as defined for contemporary art by Nicolas Bourriaud, and the notion of intermediality propose a consideration of the *relationship* between humans (between artists and their public) or between medias – in the garden, it is the relationship between humans and non-humans (be they on one hand patrons, visitors, gardeners and on the other plants, animals or stones) that should be questioned, in the wake of recent scholarly work that present the garden as the laboratory of relational ontology, as a “planetary garden” (Clément), where the gardener is in fact the co-creator alongside nature and where one “thinks and feels with the earth” (Escobar).

4. Museums and collections

Since the 19th century (with Géricault, according to Michelet; or with Manet, according to Bataille), the museum has imposed itself as the alpha and omega of artistic production. Be it as a source of emulation or a fantastical horizon, artists view the museum as the promised destination for the work of art. Yet the works that enter museums are not only invited to take their place within the physical space of the institution, but also within a typically heterogenous collection constituted of singular acquisitions and fortuitous assemblages of anterior collections in which the individual works have already received a given place and a «value» (in both the economic and semiotic understandings of the term). This phenomenon has been well demonstrated in research on the history of collections and private collectors.

In the past 20 years, in light of increasingly prohibitive costs associated with massive exhibition productions and the recognition, indicated by Francis Haskell, of the material jeopardy to which artistic heritage is submitted when subjected to the nomadic régime of the “ephemeral museum”, institutions seem to have gradually developed new means by which to invest in and valorize the works of their permanent collections. Henceforth, an entire series of new uses has favored the reinterpretation of these works within the collection by their integration into series atypical of traditional art historical discourse. These new uses and presentations of collections also impact methods of acquisition, as well as processes of alienation and deaccessioning and have included: shorter redeployments, thematic and anachronistic hangings, exhibits playing on shock as opposed to harmony or familiarity of ensemble, restorations conducted in situ, and the partial exposure of storage facilities. Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre have approached the collection as exemplary of the most recent phase of capitalism, which is oriented towards the growth of value and wealth from pre-existent assets as opposed to an economic model rooted in the production of new goods. In parallel to this economic model of “enrichment”, the re-centering of museums around their collections further acknowledges, particularly in regional areas, the need to work in proximity with the resources at hand rather than from the perspective of some international fantasy of cultural tourism. An interest in the life of an object within a collection has emerged in tandem with the re-valorization of collections and is connected to a growing field of studies that engages with the ethical dimension of provenance research and the trajectory of works both following their entry into the museum and over the course of the vicissitudes imposed on them by history (theft, illegal trafficking, spoliation etc.).

Finally, contemporary art has played an important role in changes to museum practices, particularly since the end of the 1960s. We have observed the emergence of a marked resistance within artistic practice to the commodification of art and the associated immobilism of the

museum institution over the last 50 years and, while certain institutions compensate for this disaffection on the part of artists by re-orienting the public's attention to the museum itself (grand architectural gestures, for example) or temporary programming (ie. a proclivity for blockbuster exhibitions), others have invited artists to produce works that target or question the institution itself. Whether we think of the *in situ* interventions of Daniel Buren indexing the museum, or the institutional critique that artists were able to initiate, thanks to the *cartes blanches* offered to them by museums, the museum's traditional ways of doing have been irrevocably altered. Museums are typically fond of works that engage, despite the eventual criticism they bring, with the institution's own history and thereby offer a reflection on and of the institution, even if it is a distorted one. Once the destination of art, we find that museums have become the associated producers thereof.

5. Land art and environmental art

The emergence of land art at the end of the 1960s constitutes a turning moment in the renewal of artistic practices. By its criticism of traditional art circuits (galleries, museums, workshops), it has manifested itself in punctual and extravagant appropriations of disaffected and abandoned or para-institutional sites that favor the art of installation. Often less accessible than traditional installations by the places it elects, land art has often necessitated important material operations that shed a different light on the paradigm of a general dematerialization of art (Lippard), a popular hypothesis in the 1970s. In confluence with the rise of feminism, land art has often been practiced by women artists who, while taking up the challenge of forging new mediums, favored through earthworks a practice that ran contrary to gender stereotypes (Dubreuil). The rhetorical register of land art ranges from ephemeral and quasi-invisible works to the affirmation of the monumental impregnated with archeological resonances.

The difficulty of accessing land art works, the majority of which exist far outside of major cultural centers, initially inscribed their experience under the aegis of photographic and documentary mediation that were, at the time, a newly privileged form of expression in art exhibitions. Since then, a type of cultural tourism has emerged in relation to land art wherein motivated audiences can experience iconic works *in situ* and observe how the passage of time has somehow altered and transformed their initial state into vestiges of sorts. Developed in the heyday of structuralism in the United States, land art is sometimes informed by an universalist anthropological vision – which entails that these implants of forms and structures on selected lots and terrains are not always concerned to assert and maintain a privileged link to the host site. This raises the question of if and how land art can be considered as a mode of intervention determined by a given, specific, location or whether it rather constitutes a device by which the experience enables an alternative experience of the indexed site, which would draw closer to *in situ* practices rather than those that are *site specific*. In either case, land art has resulted in the expansion of nomenclature related to the site of art and rests upon the taking into consideration of a place, whether or not it is a determining factor in the final form of the work.

While land art has been formidable in shaping reflection on the transcendence and duality of nature and culture, it has not always been exemplary from a point of view of ecological practices and standards of today (the envelopments of Marie Jeanne and Christo, for example). As such, it has brought about important polemics tied to its negative environmental impacts. This is also to say that the invitation to go beyond the built walls of the art world is insufficient to qualify an artistic practice, whether it inserts itself in a natural or denatured landscape, as environmental art. The designation of environmental art, notwithstanding the proto-installations

of the 1960s that were referred to as “environments”, was shaped by the rise of ecological considerations. We can even affirm that environmental art envisions the site of the work according to the most elastic perimeter possible where local (proximity as new giver of value) and global (the conscience of the impact on the planet of individual actions in the Anthropocene era) ways of thinking meet and engage. Environmental art can thus be considered within the varied modalities that touch on the art of gardens (and even agriculture) but can also be deployed by way of more traditional mediums or new technologies. It is therefore an art practice that may be defined by its content as well as by its means (including the strategies of activism) and its imprint. Its very definition engage the articulation of these different strata.

6. Art in the street

From the lacerated posters of Villeglé and Hains to Banksy’s interventions, street art includes a wide range of urban interventions amongst which graffiti and tagging figure prominently. At their origin, these were incursions marked by their individuality : transgressive, in relation to the right to post, the respect of private property, and the search for validation outside of official art venues; audacious, by the location of their chosen surfaces and the challenges inherent to accessing them; and opaque, due to the difficulty of deciphering their meaning and the ensuing oxymoronic cult of signature co-existing with anonymity and incognito. Parallel to their gradual integration to the art market in the 1980s, street interventions became increasingly concerned with the function of cultural politics and the democratic promotion of a more popular and accessible art (urban murals, for example). In some cities, they also gave rise to designations of authorized graffiti zones that attempted to control their proliferation. By virtue of these managed, often seasonal, approaches they necessarily began to participate into the regime of the event imperative that dictates contemporary cultural production while also raising important questions related to the privatization and erasure of public space.

A primarily urban phenomenon, street art also includes the ways in which cities grant a privileged status to art, encouraging “public art” sculptures and installations in plazas, in parks, and across the facades of new buildings. Some cities, like Chicago, have chosen one or two exemplary works and elevated them to the status of a city’s emblem or logo. These urban incursions, particularly when they seek to be permanent (in the perennial logic of the monument), have elicited much controversy – Richard Serra’s *Tilted arc* in New York, Daniel Buren’s *Deux Plateaux* in Paris, and Michel Goulet’s *Lecons singulières* in Montreal come to mind. A frequent source of dissent, works of public art inevitably engage with the inherent and necessary challenges of living together in a democratic society, which Claude Lefort has suggested would best be represented by an empty pedestal.

Beside this declination, and in the spirit of favoring *in situ* experiences at the greatest possible number of sites, the 2019 Spring School will distinguish itself by its nomadism within Montreal and across Quebec. In collaboration with our institutional partners, the envisioned course will permit participants to dig deeper into the targeted subjects of study while also embracing both the history and contemporaneity of important historical sites in Montreal and across Quebec. This will include opportunities to address new markers of Indigenous territorial claims, to explore the museum complex that now occupies the very site where the Nouvelle-France was lost, to visit private and public architectural spaces devoted to art, and to discover the singular decorative ensembles and public art realizations in the City of Montreal.

Translation: Mariah O’Brien

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(NB : Titles here corresponds mostly to the bibliography predominantly in French used for the French version of the call for paper. Of course, it has no intention of being exhaustive).

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