The Body

Visual Research (2006 - 2009)
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Site

The Body


Searching for Art Amongst the Ruins:
Site Specificity at the Port Arthur Penal Colony

It is a commendable feat that in March 2007 twenty-five artists participated in a site specific exhibition – The Port Arthur Project (1) – within the grounds of Australia’s toughest former penal colony, Port Arthur. Many artists who have critiqued site, or engaged with critical issues through their public art have often experienced resistance from the public itself. However artists exhibiting in public sites, or sites outside of traditional gallery spaces, have the potential to open up and reveal complications within sites that is incredibly valuable. The Port Arthur Project (held in collaboration with the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority and the Tasmanian School of Art) offered a particularly rich opportunity for artists to engage with the complexities of site specificity within a complex public space.

The concept of exhibiting site specific artwork in a public context is often problematic. Historically, the exhibition of artworks outside the gallery has evolved from a phenomenological, material and institutional critique (with a formal lineage to minimalism). That critique has shifted to encompass a far broader range of ideas perhaps better deemed context relative, or site sensitive, rather than site specific (2). Although artists have often referenced political or social aspects of site when designing public works, conservative urban developers, bureaucracies and community opinion have tended to exert control over what is deemed ‘appropriate’ to a public site. Their assessment of appropriateness has resulted in the removal of works that engage with issues related specifically to the site.

Writing on public art in Australia, John Barrett-Lennard suggests that the notion of ‘the public’ is “a site of exchange and conflict between particular identities and abstract social constructions” (3). He also notes that, historically, expectations of public art have been to “transform, or at least modify, a place or environment to alleviate existing problems in that location” (4).

To tackle the complexity embedded within the Port Arthur Historic Site is extremely ambitious. Port Arthur embraces a rich and potentially controversial range of issues which demand that artists consider public sensitivity, community relevance and political and administrative restrictions that may modify their engagement with the site.

The Port Arthur Historic Site is replete with paradox. Located on the southeast coast of Tasmania, the partially ruined site is visually beautiful. Yet it is also a memorial to a violent past. It is a museum, a tourist site, an educational site and a vestige of Australian colonialism. As a ruin it is also an emblem of failure. Each of these aspects held within the site can be understood equally by their reflected opposites. The ‘memorial’ in its ruined state can be seen as an anti-memorial or non-site. The site as ‘museum’ is also a house of horrors type of tourist attraction. As an educational site, Port Arthur could be charged with presenting a didactic history, a white man’s history and a linear history. As a crumbling emblem of the failure of the penal colony, Port Arthur implies that issues embedded within the site belong to a previous time in history.

These problems from the past are further complicated by more recent history. On April 28, 1996, Hobart resident Martin Bryant chose to start a killing spree at the Broad Arrow Café and gift shop at the Port Arthur Historic Site. He claimed thirty-five lives on the grounds of the old penal colony. Understandably, the trauma of the event left a deep scar on the community around Port Arthur. It also revealed a myriad of complex issues relating to the Historic Site: notions of memorial and commemoration; the need to acknowledge a dark side of history and human nature; and the delicate issue of how to mediate between the affected community, and curious tourists bound to visit the site seeking to know more about both the recent and the historic past.

As the remnant of a dark and difficult colonial past, Port Arthur has always been a difficult place to visit from a psychological perspective. It was designed to be so. It was established in the 1830s for criminals considered to require particularly harsh punishment. The colony’s isolation, and the architecture and planning that went into its construction, all assured the incarceration of the men would be gruelling. Martin Bryant’s act of violence exhumed layers embedded in the site previously relegated to the safe vantage of historical inquiry.

It is interesting to look at this layering through the writing of Pierre Nora. His essay, Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire, discusses the construction of sites of history (lieux de histoire), sites of memory (lieux de memoire), and what he terms milieux de memoire, or real environments of memory (5). Nora proposes that in recent times, history has accelerated to a point where it has subsumed memory, resulting in a preoccupation with memory.
Nora suggests that real memory, experienced through rituals, customs and the experience of living, is “a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (6). History, by contrast, “is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past” (7).

Our interest in lieux de mémoire where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn— but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory (8).

Almost immediately after it was decommissioned in 1871, Port Arthur positioned itself as a site of history, for tourists to view the ‘horrors of a penal colony’. In 1916, Port Arthur established the Scenery Preservation Board, a title that aptly highlights the paradoxes of the site. By the 1920s and 1930s there were museums, hotels and guides. Still considered a colony at that point, tourism eventually prompted the relocation to a nearby town of the functional elements of the community such as the post office and municipal offices. This shift was intended to seal the history, hermetically, into a kind of spectacle or theme park that would be attractive to tourists and consequently more lucrative for the local community (9).

By 1996, Port Arthur was firmly fixed within a historic framework carefully constructed over 80 years. The violent events of 1996 propelled the Port Arthur Historic site from Nora’s lieux de histoire, to a milieux de mémoire. Contemporary history and memory was now overlaid onto the ‘historic’ history, revealing the site as a place of real suffering. This confusion of memory and history was reflected in the redevelopment of the interpretation centre and bistro, which was rebuilt after the massacre. The Port Arthur Historical Site web site notes that the architecture of the new buildings was deliberately contemporary to ensure there was no confusion between the “historic and the recent elements of the site” (10).

School children, including me, were taken to the Port Arthur Historic site to see history first hand. Didactic signage, authoritative guides, a picnic lunch, all contributed to the sense that we were there to have a particular experience of history. It was the kind of setting where you might expect to see a historic re-enactment occurring on the grounds, where girls squealed on the ghost tours and boys tried to lock each other in a solitary confinement cell.

When Martin Bryant first began his shooting spree many people allegedly were drawn to the sound of the gunshots, thinking it was an historical re-enactment (11). The panic created by what Bryant was actually doing merged with a compelling intrigue about the horror of what may have happened there in the past— resulting in a tragic and surreal moment.

Of the twenty-five artists commissioned to make works for the site, only one engaged with the events of 1996. Matt Warren’s work, Cantus 35, is a 20 minute sound composition that reflects on his aural memory of gunshots heard on the radio news reports during the siege. The work is housed in the tiny confines of the original sentry box on the site’s foreshore.

The notion of protection inspired by the term ‘guard’ or ‘sentry’ intertwines with the fear of being trapped or confined in a small space with an armed man, as happened in the small Broad Arrow Café where Bryant shot and killed twenty people at close range. Contemporary history, layered with the more distant history of the sentry posted there, describe the same action: a man with a gun whose aim was to kill anyone attempting to escape. Rather than a re-enactment or a violent recall of these sounds, Warren attempted to create a soundscape that was meditative and allowed reflection.
The events of 1996 have resurfaced the broader history of Tasmania’s violent past. As the site of historical violence, and now with the added vocabulary of contemporary massacre, one cannot look past the mass murder of Tasmanian Aboriginals. This history is located within Australia at large. It has specific resonance within Tasmania where the conflict between the British colonists and the Tasmanian Aboriginal people resulted in the almost complete annihilation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal population.

Indigenous artists Lola Greeno and Vicki West made an artwork out of woven grasses, paying tribute to the people of Oyster Bay who lived along the coastline where Port Arthur is located. However, the work makes no reference to the history of the site, or the disappearance of their people. Instead, the simple form – using dodder vine and tea tree – is a somewhat fragile attempt to remember simply that Aboriginal people were once there. It is probably more interesting to note that Greeno and West are there themselves – there is a surviving lineage. There is much contention about who the descendants are: white people believed no full-blooded Aboriginal people from Tasmania had survived colonisation.

The complexity of combining notions of site specificity within the realm of ‘the public’ requires an incredibly sophisticated approach. Frequently, site specific public works that reference social, cultural and political histories have been the subject of great public debate. As noted earlier, these debates have often resulted in the removal or alteration of works to accommodate the ‘public interest’.

The extensive curatorial practice of independent American curator, Mary Jane Jacobs, has included important public art exhibitions that engage with site specificity, community, culture and public space. Jane Jacobs was invited to the conference Revelations, associated with The Port Arthur Project. As the keynote speaker, Jane Jacobs made particular reference to her exhibition, Places with a Past, held in Charleston, South Carolina in 1991 (12). Although not without controversy, Places with a Past was considered a critical success and is often cited as a seminal exhibition that reconnected art with its capacity to complicate rather than interpret site through public art.

Places With a Past involved nineteen local and international artists who drew from the history of Charleston’s military, slavery, and religious past. Unwritten histories – found within the traces of Charleston’s architecture, archives and the everyday lives of people who lived there – were referenced. Through imagining and recreating pasts, artists explored the capacity for artworks to contribute to pluralistic histories rather than a linear, singular history. A New York Times reviewer noted of the artists, “Almost all of them have a need – almost a mission – to bring into the open histories that remain largely unrecognised or unwritten” (15).

Artists in the Revelations exhibition responded in a similar way. Many artists were determined to establish that people with everyday, ordinary experiences inhabited Port Arthur, despite it being a penal colony. However, with the recent violent events and the dark nature of the history embedded in the site, everyday moments were reduced to somewhat insignificant moments. For example, Nicole Ellis’ installation, Keep the Fires Burning, 2007, consisted of an image of a slowly burning fire projected into an empty hearth. Ruth Frost’s digitally layered images of transparent, ghostly children were projected into the static environments of austere historical interiors. Leigh Hobba recreated the lost sounds from the old church’s long mute bell tower, and Elizabeth Woods’ I wonder what they thought about, 2007, painted the grassy interior of the ruined church with a floral motif that would soon wash away.

Artists seem determined to implant missing memories (or missing histories). Yet a walk around the ruin offers the imprint of so many small histories embedded in the surfaces of the architecture. For example, despite the roofless and crumbling walls, it is still possible to make out the slump in the threshold of a doorway where footsteps fell on the soft sandstone, wearing it away. Engagement with a psychological reading...
of surfaces, materiality, architecture, the nuances of site—these were
the genesis of the site specific dialogue of the 1960s and 1970s. The
historical basis for site specific works rests in the notion of
‘artwork lying or even relying on ‘the surfaces which enclose us’”(14)
as the content of an artwork in and of itself.

Architecture itself can be used as a means of critiquing and revealing
a substructure within our social, political or historical understanding
of self. The experience of buildings and their sense of permanence
reflect a particular ontological and phenomenological understanding
of the world (15). Therefore, as a ruin, Port Arthur contains an even
more complex psychological presence.

This sense that our buildings are our witnesses depends on a kind of
kinship between body and building. Not only should buildings protect
and last longer than bodies, they must be themselves a kind of body;
a surrogate body, a super-body with a face, a façade that watches us.
We use buildings to construct an image of what we would like the body to
be. Buildings are thereby credited with considerable representational
force ... Damaged buildings represent damaged bodies. (16)

During the building of the prisoners’ quarters, a distinct understanding
was brought to bear of how architecture and environment, infrastructure
and design, could contribute both to psychological and physical
punishment. It is surprising that few artists chose to engage with
the material surface of the site itself, as a layer that revealed this
substructure. It was ordered that the prison’s buildings be as dark
and as rough as possible, ensuring only that the cells remained dry
and spotlessly clean (17). Within the prison particular cells, into which
very little or no light would filter, were isolated for solitary confinement
purposes. Instructions for the architecture of the buildings ordered
there be “not the slightest degree of ornamental work about any of the
buildings, which should be strong but rough as is most in character at
a Penal Settlement”(18).

The prison, modelled on the Pentonville, panopticon radiating prison
(19), also housed works by the artists involved in the project. The
panopticon included a specially built church in which prisoners could
stand, enclosed in stalls that would not allow them to see anything other
than the Minister at the front of the church and the words carved high
on the back wall: ‘The Truth Shall Make You Free’. (19) Here, Brigitta
Ozolins performed her work ‘The Truth Shall Make You Free’, 2007,
in which repetitively she wrote this phrase in ink over each page of the
novel Quintus Servinton by Henry Savery. Said to be Australia’s first

novelist, Savery was transported to Port Arthur Penal Colony for forgery.
He is buried on Port Arthur’s Isle of the Dead. Ozolins’ palimpsest of his
largely autobiographical text, with the repetitive affirmation from The
Bible, recalls the absurdity of these moral lessons. It is easy to imagine
the complexity or simplicity of the notion of ‘truth’ in the minds of the
prisoners and the impossibility that this affirmation could actually equal
freedom.

Wedged like a ship-in-a-bottle, Aspiration was under construction with
richly scented wood shavings lying thickly over the floor. The small size
of the boat lodged the work distinctly within the realm of the imaginary.
It was not a real boat nor was it a remnant. Langridge was drawing
reference to the many convicts employed as boat builders during the
working phase of the colony. Although a number of convicts attempted
escape by boat, or by throwing themselves into the water, all attempts
proved unsuccessful. Some proved fatal.

It is a rare opportunity for site specific artists to be invited to make
works on a site as rich and complex as the Port Arthur Penal Colony,
let alone a site that houses its very own panopticon. (20) Exploring memory
was understandably a preoccupation for the artists exhibiting in
The Port Arthur Project. Because the site is so full of rich social, historical,
architectural and material remnants, it also affords a rare opportunity
for site specific artists to engage with a broader and more complex range
of issues within the site. However, the way memory was engaged with

Image 3, Brigitta Ozolins, The Truth Shall Make You Free, 2007 (Image courtesy of Noel Frankham.)

seemed more like a multimedia version of history, than a real exploration of memory itself. Perhaps the artists were demurely side-stepping contentious subject matter to avoid community controversy, or to comply with management guidelines. However, the lack of reference to the hardship and violence experienced through the history of colonisation, penal settlement and then the 1996 massacre, gave the exhibition the feel of a somewhat cheerfully illustrated history book. There was no intensely revealing elaboration of that complex and particular history. While not altogether unsuccessful, it was palpably clear from a large selection of the works that there was an absence of exploration and critique of history, real memory and indeed the historical notion of site specificity, found so richly in the surface and the architecture of the site itself.

Endnotes

1. The Port Arthur Project: Re Interpreting Port Arthur Historic Site Through Contemporary Visual Art. Also the corresponding symposium: Revelation: Installation Art and its Capacity to Interpret and Elaborate Places of Historical Significance. Both were part of the annual ‘10 days on the Island Festival’ held in March 2007.
4. ibid, p.14
6. ibid, p.7
7. ibid, p.7
8. ibid, p.7
12. Mary Jane Jacobs curated two important public art exhibitions that are considered ground breaking in public art. Places with a Past in Charleston, South Carolina, and Culture in Action in Chicago, both in 1991.
15. Bernard Tschumi, in Architecture and Disjuncture, Cambridge Mass, 1996, observes that architecture itself is an obvious spatial expression of politics. He writes (p.5): “Historical analysis has generally supported the view that the role of the architect is to project on the ground the images of social institutions, translating the economic or political structure of society into buildings or groups of buildings. Hence architecture was first and foremost the adaptation of space to the existing socioeconomic structure. It would serve the powers in place … and … reflect the prevalent views of the existing political framework.”
18. ibid p.15.
19. These words recall those above the gates of the Nazi Prison, Auschwitz: ‘Work shall set you free’.
20. That Bryant is still in jail seems a remarkable opportunity for reflection. This fact recalls an artwork by Kiki Smith, made in 1986, in which she positioned a statue of a small boy within the police building being constructed on a site overlooking Spandau Prison where Rudolf Hess was the only remaining Nazi war prisoner. During the show’s duration, Hess died, resulting in the immediate demolition of the prison. Smith’s figure watches impartially as these events unfold, at first in vigil over the prisoner still there, then remarkably as witness to the transformation or erasure of the site.