

# What Happens When Site-Specific Art Outlasts Its Surroundings?

Architecture can be declared a landmark, but all too often the fate of artwork that has been made for a particular environment remains uncertain.

By Zoë Lescaze

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Dorothea Rockburne, installing her mural “Southern Sky” (completed in 1993) alongside a framed study of it at the AT&T skyscraper in Manhattan. It and “Northern Sky” were specifically designed for the space.

Credit: Dorothea Rockburne Studio

LAST JULY, AFTER months of frantic protests and petitions, Philip Johnson’s audacious postmodern icon on Madison Avenue, the AT&T skyscraper known for its

gigantic arch and notched Chippendale roof, became a landmark, a designation that blocked proposed changes to the facade. Architecture fans rejoiced, but no one said anything about the second-floor lobby, where a pair of radiant red and gold frescoes, two of the artist Dorothea Rockburne's most important works, remained. The Olayan Group, the investors who own the building, have so far agreed only to communicate with Rockburne, who currently has a long-term installation at Dia:Beacon in upstate New York, through a second party. The firm says her paintings are still in place, "fully protected," and that they are "safeguarding their future," but Rockburne doubts they will survive the interior renovations that were announced in December. According to the artist, there is nowhere else for the murals to go.

That is because Rockburne's 30-by-29-foot frescoes are site-specific: both conceptually inspired and physically determined by their context. She says the paintings, commissioned in 1991 when Sony owned the building, depict electromagnetic fields as seen from vantage points directly above the tower. Even if the works could be removed without harming them (unlikely, given they were painted directly onto wallboard) and exhibited elsewhere, Rockburne feels that they wouldn't "sing" in another setting. "They wouldn't make any sense," she said, shaking her head. "To take them apart would turn a significant in-situ situation into decoration."

This purist notion of artwork inviolably tied to its context, once a subversive strike against tradition and the marketplace, seems almost quaint now, as artists, dealers, museums and patrons interpret "site-specificity" in ever more elastic ways. The phrase itself has been co-opted as marketing speak in recent years: "site-specific" might even steal the crown from "curated," the reigning art-world term applied to everything from playlists to pop-up shops. In 2017, one downtown New York store advertised "site-specific" probiotic bento breakfasts, astrology readings, dance parties and chess matches.

But it's not just pop promoters who sprinkle the phrase like pixie dust onto humdrum happenings. "In museum speak," says the New York City-based curator Vere van Gool, "it's become a sauce term" — a word used to add flavor to just about anything. Last summer, the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia announced that it would be "activating" its grounds with a "site-specific mesh canopy," and, in 2015, the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., a suburb of Detroit, engaged the artist Nick Cave to stage "site-specific photo shoots." At a time when consumers like to know the exact farm where their kale sprouted, it's perhaps unsurprising that site-specificity is being used to burnish projects and products alike. When art, music, sports and information can be digitally accessed anywhere, works billed as local become oddly exotic.



Picasso's stage curtain for the ballet "Le Tricorne" (1919), which for years hung in New York City's Four Seasons restaurant (shown here in 1959). The work is now housed at the New-York Historical Society.

Credit: © 2019 Estate of Pablo Picasso/ARS, N.Y., photo by Ezra Stoller/Esto

Still, it's ironic that what has become a marketing ploy and institutional term of convenience emerged in defiance of both the market and institutions. The pioneering site-specific works of the 1960s and 1970s marked a break with the notion of art as movable, salable stuff on walls and pedestals. "That's all a hangover from the Renaissance," wrote the artist Ellsworth Kelly in 1952. "The future artist must work directly with society. ... The future art must go to the wall itself." Other like-minded artists, including Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Daniel Buren, began transforming spaces to foreground the experience of being there. Land artists conceived monumental earthworks that blurred or erased the edges between art and its environment. Some works were intended to change over time or even to decay and disappear, as was Robert Smithson's "Partially Buried Woodshed" (1970). The piece involved dumping 20 truckloads of dirt on an unused shed at Kent State University and letting entropy take care of the rest. The point of all these projects — whether they were enduring or ephemeral — was that they altered their surroundings.

Site-specific works have since become status symbols for private homes and public institutions alike. But they were not always in high demand. One of the most acrimonious art controversies of the last century ended with the removal of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" (1981) from Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan after a U.S. judge and local office workers complained that the 120-foot steel wall was oppressive. Despite Serra's testimony that moving the work would destroy it, the government panel deciding the case voted to cut the piece into fragments and cart it away, thereby rendering it "exactly what it was intended not to be: a mobile, marketable product," said Serra.

TODAY, SITE-SPECIFIC work has become far less specific. Artists who feel a piece can only exist, or be meaningful, in the place for which it was created are increasingly rare. Part of this has to do with our culture of endless improvement, short attention spans and fickle tastes: Nothing is permanent, and every month brings a new upgrade. The orthodox sense of site-specificity has given way to reform interpretations that allow

works inspired by one setting to be relocated and modified to suit others. In other words, what might be set in one stone can usually be set in another.

Richard Wright, who creates intricate wall paintings in response to the architecture of his chosen rooms, takes an approach that is equal parts pragmatic and Zen: He fully expects his work to be painted over when exhibitions end or collectors move. Wright and his assistants will create new incarnations of the paintings when the time comes for new shows or when the collector settles in a new space, explained Kay Pallister, a director at Gagosian Gallery, Wright's dealer. Anyone who purchases a wall painting is effectively acquiring an idea rather than the thing itself. His works are "made bespoke to each unique place and nuance of the site," Pallister wrote in an email. "Each feature, plug socket, smoke alarm" is considered. In the case of one New York collector remodeling her apartment, Wright painted a new, altered version of an old work there to accommodate the added lights and air-conditioning units.



Robert Smithson's "Partially Buried Woodshed" (1970), on the campus of Kent State University in 1983.

Credit: © 2019 Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at ARS, N.Y. Photo by Alex Gildzen taken in 1983, from the Partially Buried Woodshed Papers, Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives

Taking a flexible approach to site-specificity is essential to making rent and entering museum collections. But this strategy has more than pure practicality on its side, some artists say. Even the most seemingly unmovable pieces can benefit from a change of scenery. Tom Burr initially created 2017's "The Railings (May, 1970)" as one part of a larger site-specific installation inside a gutted Marcel Breuer building in New Haven. The piece was shaped by the conditions of that space (code compliance required Burr to cordon off a depression in the floor with some kind of barrier), New Haven history (the railing is inscribed with the speech Jean Genet delivered on the town green defending the Black Panther leader Bobby Seale) and local references (its X shapes echo those of the railings on Yale's campus). When the installation closed, the Art Institute of Chicago acquired "The Railings" and installed them outdoors in a different configuration. As

Jordan Carter, a curator at the Art Institute, pointed out, Genet first met the Black Panthers in Chicago amid the protests and violence of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Changing sites allows the piece, as Burr wrote in an email, to be “forever finding new points and places of reception, new things to bump up against.”

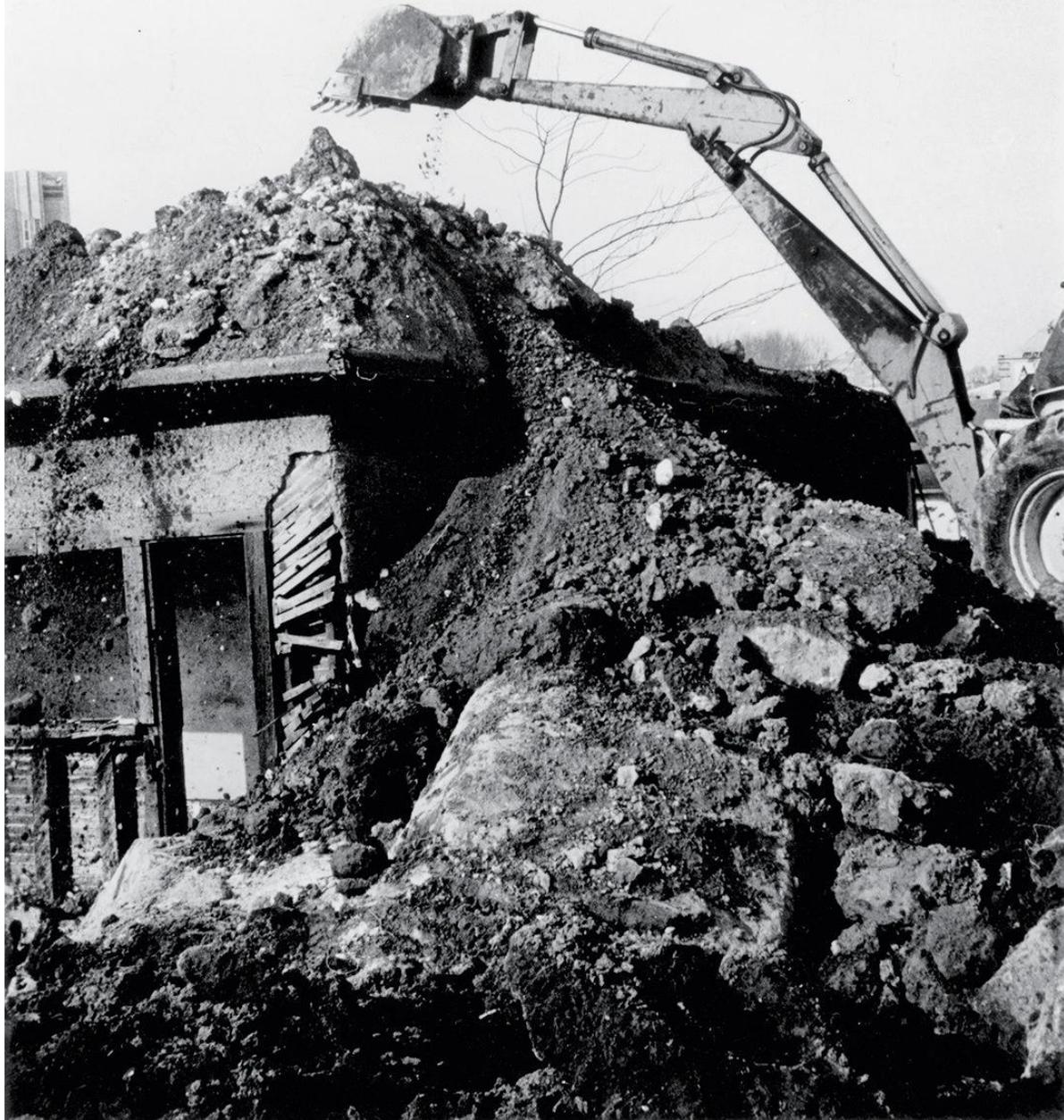
Kelly was an early champion of this nimble approach. Several of his most important site-specific commissions have moved, including “Color Panels for a Large Wall” (1978), which was originally conceived for a Cincinnati bank, where it hung in two rows of nine monochromatic canvases. When the company anticipated corporate changes in 1992, the artist went to the Cincinnati Art Museum, but he didn’t like the space. Kelly got the panels back in exchange for two smaller pieces. The work was then installed at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., where it replaced a site-specific tapestry by Joan Miró. To fit the space, Kelly reconfigured the panels into three rows of six, an arrangement he reportedly preferred to the original.

Kelly thought deeply about how his work interacted with architecture — an early epiphany occurred in a Paris museum, where he was more inspired by the windows than the masterpieces on the walls — but he enjoyed seeing it in different spaces. According to Jack Shear, Kelly’s widower and the executive director of his foundation, not one of the artist’s site-specific works could be conceptually destroyed by moving it, as “Tilted Arc” was.

In fact, Kelly would have been more upset if certain site-specific works *didn’t* move. “Sculpture for a Large Wall” (1957), a major early commission for the Philadelphia Transportation Building, barely survived the defunct bus hub’s decline. Shear recalled the night he and Kelly visited the abandoned building and peered through the windows to check on the piece, Kelly’s largest at the time of its creation. A grim scene greeted them. Pigeons had moved in, the work was filthy and the porous metal panels were falling apart. “I don’t know if you’ve ever seen aluminum furniture that’s been left out in the

elements — it gets pretty funky pretty quick,” said Shear. Devastated, Kelly expressed as much to his gallerist Matthew Marks, who bought the work and, after extensive restoration done by Kelly himself, sold it to Ronald and Jo Carole Lauder, who in 1998 gave it to the Museum of Modern Art.

Partially Buried Wood Shed - Kent State  
Earth deposited onto roof until  
central beam cracks - January 1970  
R. Smithson



Smithson's "Partially Buried Woodshed" being installed in 1970.

Credit: © 2019 Holt/Smithson Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at ARS, N.Y. Photo courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, N.Y.

PAINTINGS MAY CRACK and fade, but site-specific installations often have highly particular needs, especially those that are meant to remain in place for all time, requiring artists to consider their long-term survival from the moment of conception. When the artist Jean Shin, who works with found materials, was given a commission in Baltimore through the Art in Architecture program of the General Services Administration (the same federal agency that commissioned “Tilted Arc”), conservators were concerned about the materials: used clothing. Natural fibers become “cafeterias for insects,” said Jennifer Gibson, the program’s director. Conservators are primary players in any GSA project, according to Gibson, “because whatever we commission and realize, our intent is to keep it in perpetuity. It’s not a casual, ‘Oh we like it, we’re going to put it up and hope it works out.’”

This level of maintenance is common in site-specific works. Cliff and Mandy Einstein commissioned a work by Turrell for their Brentwood, Calif., property in 1989, after seeing a version at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), Los Angeles. Called “Second Meeting,” it was the artist’s first free-standing “skyspace” (a carefully lit room with an aperture framing the sky). “I think if someone had told me what the maintenance would be on [our] Turrell over 30 years, you might have questioned whether that was a good buy,” Einstein said. The piece requires a rare variety of German light bulbs, and its teakwood benches get soaked with every rainfall, something Turrell considers part of the overall experience. Keeping the piece pristine is like taking care of a boat, said Einstein. Caring for a Turrell begins, in a sense, before it is even installed. The Einsteins spent months getting some old power lines removed from a nearby hillside before Turrell could install “Second Meeting,” and Dallas Price-Van Breda, a collector and an early founder of MoCA, dug up a beloved rose garden to make way for her custom skyspace only to halt construction when a disagreement between Turrell and his then Los Angeles dealer, Doug Christmas, unfolded. “I didn’t want to keep going because I didn’t know if I was going to end up in a lawsuit or what, so I had a pile of dirt out there for quite a while,” she said. She ended up waiting three years.

The sheer scale and physical investment of Turrell's work can make his collectors stay site-specific as well. Price Van-Breda said she will never move, and neither will the skyspace. The caissons supporting the works are four feet in diameter and go 20 feet below ground. "No one in their right mind is going to want to dig that up and try to take it somewhere," she said.

But these works can be altered, or ruined, without moving an inch. Despite their sense of permanence, they are surprisingly vulnerable. When Turrell installed "Tending, (Blue)" at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in 2003, no one guessed that a new skyscraper would ruin the piece's effect, forcing Turrell to declare the work destroyed in 2013.

While the artist would be willing to adapt or recreate the skyspace, the situation is a part of a larger imbroglio and the museum is "in a holding pattern," according to Jill Magnuson, the director of external affairs. "Who would anticipate having to redo a commissioned, permanent work?" she said.

Nor could any crystal ball have foreseen the city of Charlotte, N.C., selling the land where Maya Lin had installed "Topo" (1989-91). The piece, a commission involving spherical holly bushes, was destroyed, according to the artist, after developers removed it in 2008. Certain settings — federal buildings, museums, municipal land and the properties of trusted collectors — create a sense of long-term security, but no one can predict what owners or audiences will consider sacred decades down the line. No one could have foreseen, for example, that in 2012, then private citizen Donald Trump would lease the old post office building in Washington, D.C., and that Irwin's aerial installation there, "48 Shadow Planes" (1983), would end up sharing the space with crystal chandeliers and a giant U.S. flag. (Some observers believe the work suffered greater indignity when it was hung above a food court before the building changed hands, the greasy fumes from which stained the snowy fabric scrims a murky gray.)

Art always takes on new meanings when it enters the public sphere. Sometimes it's the viewer, not the artist, who decides a work is site-specific. Certain pieces that were designed to go anywhere become beloved parts of particular buildings or civic icons once in place. With enough time, taking them away becomes a borderline criminal offense.

The removal of a Picasso tapestry from New York's Four Seasons restaurant in 2014, for instance, sparked a chorus of protests, even though Picasso had created the canvas originally as a theater curtain long before it arrived at the Seagram Building.