

Activist Mapping and Positioning Legacy for Discourse

Commonalities of practice: re-contextualising historical situations of protest in the work of three artists.

If space is where culture is lived in, then place is a result of their union.

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This research collates the work of three artists: Jeremy Deller, Mark Wallinger, and Stan Douglas, who each designed investigative methodologies to contemporise historical incidents of protest to highlight them as manifesting elements of ongoing resistance.

An appreciation of the interlinked strategies found in the work of artists Deller, Wallinger, and Douglas support structures for a variety of art-based critical interventions. The intention for my own practice led from these examples is to process particular histories of protest to archive, critique, and commemorate protest activities for Limerick City, activities that reference the significance of unconformity in the period 1966–1973. Situations that are referenced from a protest perspective are reframed for ongoing conversations on place.

Collectively, the outcomes of these three artists underline the importance of a definition of urban space as being citizen-led. Art-based outcomes that take into account past incidents of protest associated with the site are intended to interrogate how those conditions feature in a contemporary setting. An art-based critique under this guideline introduces the concept of a cultural pause for a consideration of place. According to Agrew and Duncan, place has three constituent parts:

- *Location*: an objective point in space.
- *Locale*: a composite of all traces in the area.
- *Sense of place*: the emotional, experiential, and affective traces that people experience in particular environments. (Definition in the book *Cultural Geography* to be inserted).

Legacies of protest become pivot points for these artists to contextualise social memory and foreground the significance of understated historical incidents to confirm the importance of citizen perspective in their legacy. New perspectives then exist to resist the empty abstractions of urban development. Capitalism encourages the reception of space as transient and a commodity, what Lefebvre has described as empty abstractions, the facades of urban space which reflect ongoing versions of a utopian legacy in industrial modernism. These artists contribute to how an art-led dialogue of resistance can be negotiated for this territory. Their methodologies balance macro and micro conditions:

Macro

- The curtailed mission of the alternative society and how the failure of utopian modernism features in deconditioning the city.
- Alternative communities and resistance and the management of protest histories.
- Traditional forms of protest challenging modernism and their legacy.

Micro

- The relevance of understated historical elements.

- The political histories that can be defined from social memory.
- How counterfactual and speculative material interacts with historical fact in an institutional setting and how they can contribute to an interrogation of institutional boundaries by the public.

Using diverse strategies for outcomes, the artists under review exemplify a critique of industrial modernism primarily addressing its subjectivity.

In a consideration of three works, *A History of the World, State Britain*, and *Abbot and Cordova 7 August 1971* explores how contentious socio-cultural narratives function as a form of antagonistic monument. These three examples operate as contentious points in space using the cultural license of fine art to interrogate urban sites where negotiated artworks introduce protest-based interventions as permanent markers (Creswell, 2004). When this process is validated by the Establishment sites of social memory now exist to question the subjectivity inherent in the managed urbanism, which manifests itself as a generative order of society.

There is a legacy of how protest was marked in urban sites from the sixties to the present. Histories of the situationist movement in Europe and the anti-war movement in the US feature for this. The physicality of that commentary in urban space (that is, the much referenced situationist graffiti 'Never Work!') remains (then and now) in the illegality of the act. Graffiti and the protest acts of marches are direct interventions that, in an illegal or semi-illegal fashion, temporally contest boundaries of power. Though dramatic, the material generated by these situations is not designed to have a presence outside the situation. All other types of art-based interventions that reference protest situations must now address the subject within the civic systems that manage these sites. The design of this is a key factor in the construction of the type of artworks exemplified in *A History of the World, State Britain*, and *Abbot and Cordova 7 August 1971*. The process of negotiation is an important part of how a site manages contentious material.⁶³ Outcomes should reflect how negotiation with the civic boundaries was conducted and brought into the work.

Collectively, the voice of the citizen is maintained in such outcomes; ones that focus on resistance in the transitional periods of the late 20th Century. When the intersection of methodologies evident in the work of Deller, Wallinger, and Douglas are considered together, they suggest the possibility of a collective strategy in parts for art-based research in this area. Practice that is led from this extracts protest elements from social memory for a contemporary public through art-based means. An understanding of this intersection can function as a resource when disparate, under-represented, and contentious material is navigated for a contemporary dialogue of place.

It can be recognised that an intersection of the research methodologies suggested by these three artists is evidence of an art-based process that allows for an interrogation of understated examples of protest-based historical material in urban space. The critic Clare Doherty sees place as 'an intersection of mapped location, urban mythology, power dynamics and social interaction'(2008 p.). Collectively, the

⁶³ The effectiveness of the conceptual weight of this exchange is most evident in the example of Wallinger's project *State Britain*.

commonality evident in these three examples, by these artists, highlights a process that encourages a contemporary audience to engage with material in an activist sense. By this, the audience is encouraged to properly identify with a sense of place that recognises that and understanding must incorporate a contemporary reading of contentious events of the past (Doherty, 2008).

1. Social Archaeology

An activist perspective in sourcing methodologies in this fashion allows for the contemporising of understated historical periods, which questions the public legacy of 20th century capitalism. Deller's conceptual mapping in this manner celebrates the dialogical possibilities held in under-represented historical situations. He balances archival research, oral histories, and vernacular design for diverse displays, which question the historical project of capitalism. This type of research defends the inscription of identity of the citizen evident in vernacular material. These displays focus on how the mission of capitalism and its neo-liberal legacy dominated the communal and traditional forms of life created by those who participated in it unevenly as workers. In designing performative outcomes, Deller recalibrates folk rituals to emphasise the voice of the worker, highlighting a deregulated communal narrative side-lined by the process of capitalism he sees disrupting the organisation of social equality. His recalibration of vernacular material generates perspectives for both the gallery and the museum through fine art outcomes that foreground the importance of social memory. These outcomes give plausibility to the myth, genealogies, and folk tales of the worker. As a curator, Deller is concerned about how information is preserved in certain genres and not others and this is a key starting point for research (Fentress and Wickham, 1992).

2. Action Research

A definition of this, in the context under review, refers to gathering material from those who participated in an event of protest to compile this material and contextualising it as evidence of resistance. The process of communicating material in this fashion is what has been described as 'history from below', a process that resists the cultural editing of history by systems of power. Assembling material with an activist focus involves establishing critical boundaries based on how past elements of citizen resistance function as being open-ended and ongoing. For example, in his work *State Britain*, Wallinger's exact replication of vernacular material from an actual protest functions as a cultural pause. It negates the possibility of cultural editing by foregrounding the process in which a particular protest was both castigated and legitimised by the authorities. Wallinger's repositioning of the actual material from the situation as cultural testimony insists that the audience engage with the subject of the protest as an ongoing conversation. In this example, such engagement highlight a definition of boundaries as being citizen-led.

3. How Psychogeographical Spaces are Defined to Feature as Critique

This refers to the lateral process involved in sourcing of certain locations, that is, sites that channel past protest events as the basis for contemporary interventions. Such interventions seek to intersect the past with the present in an attempt to interrogate a narrow (modernist) reception of urban space. Based on a reception of psychogeography as a practice based on emotional mapping (the antithesis of a conventional recording of city space), a psychogeographical approach contests the given that the pathways of the city exist solely to facilitate commercial ownership. By the nature of its practice, psychogeography interrogates geographical space to reflect on how memory and culture connect to that space. Its premise is that places are contradictory and an appropriate research for art-based outcomes should align historical material that is speculative and counterfactual with history that is edited as normative.

Douglas designs performative based work that serves to resist the myth of progress by re-animating certain locations as 'psychogeographic spaces'. These are not specialised places or areas defined as standalone territories. Based on unacknowledged, disregarded places that may be censored by the mission or modernism, they fold the past and present and can function to correct meaning. He sees these locations as contentious due to their understated histories and as such they represent critical junctures centered on ruptures.

The unacknowledged protest-related events that he maps for contemporary reception in artworks are ones that embrace the site itself as a critical platform. He engages with the site to explore the structural displacements that are a consequence of the critical junctures he has identified for a definition of place. Outcomes that are led by psychogeographical practice now provide an imaginative topography for how past situations of protest feature in a contemporary reception of place. This is a focused political channelling of psychogeography which updates the initial reception as being a resource to defy the consumerist consequences visualised in the spectacle of late-capitalism, what the situationist, Raoul Vaneigem, called 'the colonisation of everyday life' (IS nos. 7, 1962-63). The core guidelines of psychogeography, as set out by the Situationist International in the 1960s, remain, that it is a particular process of mapping to explain situations that can be defined as occurring at the point where psychology and geography collide. The noted socio-cultural writer, Michel De Certeau, has states, 'What the map cuts up, the story cuts across' (1984 p.).

Is history simply a matter of events that leave behind those things that can be weighed and measured – new institutions, new maps, new rulers, new winners and losers – or is it also the result of moments that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language (Greil, 2001 p.5).