

Site as Performance

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Kathleen Irwin. *The Ambit of Performativity. How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance*. Helsinki: University of Arts and Design Helsinki, 2007.

“To move the work of art is to destroy it,” – this familiar quote by artist Richard Serra has become a catchphrase for all site-specific work. Indeed, the relationship between the site and the performance is an enigma. To what extent does site contribute to the artistic process of making a performance and the diversity of meaning it offers, even when performance is complete? The site-performance relationship has more often been mythified than it has been analysed, especially by artists themselves. Kathleen Irwin’s book “*The Ambit of Performativity*” is all the more welcome, since as a scenographer she not only has access to the reception of a site-specific performance, but can address the way site contributes to performance in the artistic process.

Although Irwin modestly calls her work “a broad contextualization of an interdisciplinary community-based project entitled “*The Weyburn Project*””, her dissertation is in fact a significant contribution to the theoretical discussion of site-specificity. The author successfully connects the different understandings of performance and performativity in different fields and – as the title suggests – views site in interdisciplinary perspective. Irwin’s focus is on the generative function of site that exceeds the realm of aesthetics and contributes to all aspects of experience. In a certain sense, Irwin’s book can be called an ontology of site in performance context.

The author offers a thorough historical overview of site-specific performance in art and theatre since the 1960s. Much in line with its first applications in art, Irwin views site not only as an aesthetic category, but also as an embodiment of political and social practices. In this context site-specific performance holds the possibility of transgression or reiteration, both of which contribute to the understanding of site as well as performance. Irwin uses her own work, a large-scale site-specific performance titled “*The Weyburn Project*” in an abandoned mental asylum in Weyburn, Canada to elaborate on the complex relationship between identity, site and community. A mental asylum, in its richness of meaning, is indeed an intriguing example for discussing site-specific scenography. The Weyburn hospital formed the core of local identity: it was a significant employer, but also a stigma on the community. “*The Weyburn Project*” consisted of several performances and interventions carried out in (and inspired by) the same site.

Irwin’s main argument and certainly her greatest contribution to the discourse of site evolves around the concept of spatial performativity. In the first chapters she eloquently

connects the debates on performance in art theory and theatre studies. To prove her central point – how space is generative of meaning in a performance – Irwin extends the connection to the notions of performance and performativity in linguistics (*sensu* Austin). She studies the normative practices that construct the identity of a particular site and its relationship to the material body of the site. She argues that the process, how the physical site starts to embody certain meanings and values, is comparable to Butler’s concept of performative practices in gender studies. Thus, in Irwin’s view, all sites have a performative nature and can be viewed as potential heterotopias. A theatre (or art) performance questions the borders of reality and fiction. Since site is available at all times in its physical presence, it opens a negotiation between the past of the site and its inevitable absence. The concept of spatial performativity extends beyond the usual discussion of site-related cultural and/or personal narratives, memories, emotions that participate in the performance. In Irwin’s own words, spatial performativity is “a way of addressing how site relentlessly inserts itself into the way meaning is created within the double contexts of “found-live“ space and performance space“ (p. 80).

Irwin suggests that sites are performative as such; the liminal situation of an artistic performance only acts a catalyst and frames the spatial performativity. The way site contributes to the performance is fragmentary and citational. On the practical level of reception, not all layers of the site are available to the same extent. Knowledge about the site, the values and meanings it embodies, influence the reading of the performance as well as the site. The absence of certain layers and the surplus of meaning created by the subjectivity of experience constitute the backbone of the collage-like nature of site-specific aesthetic experience. “The Weyburn project”, as an assemblage of performances, illustrates this type of fragmentation well. Within the context of postmodern aesthetics (Charles Jencks, Gilles Deleuze, Lucy R. Lippard) Irwin welcomes the citational effect of spatial performativity.

However, this welcoming approach sidelines the question of the artist’s contribution. In her analysis of diverse overlapping meanings, the author does not make room for the description of the artistic process of selecting, filtering, and integrating the meanings into the totality of the performance. Her position is not far from suggesting that site makes meaning regardless of the artist’s intentions and the artist merely bears witness to it. In so doing, Irwin casts the artist into the role of a receiver, whose position is similar to that of the audience. The scenographer/artist has no power of influence over the performative aspects of site. With this claim Irwin undermines her second objective (p. 119, 138) – to discuss the role of the scenographer/artist in the site-specific performance.

By not elaborating on the artistic process, Irwin leaves the position of the artist rather ambiguous. Her concluding description of a scenographer’s work states that a scenographer considers the historical and social contexts of the site and “employs these perspectives and nuances to make dense the experience of performance in and through that place” (p. 125).

Little attention is paid to the specific means or possibilities that scenography has in framing a place and creating a site-specific performance. The role and the work of the site-specific scenographer blends into those of a writer, producer, location manager, interviewer, or even anthropologist. Instead of articulating the specific role of the scenographer, the author resorts to the somewhat outdated debate on the ideological differences between the role of a theatre designer and scenographer.

One possible reason that strengthens such an impression of the absent scenographer is the lack of descriptions. Irwin clearly assumes an intelligent reader, who is familiar with the works of Brith Gof, Forced Entertainment, and several other groups and individual artists. But without specific references (neither visual nor verbal) to the particular aspects of the performances in question, it is hard to treat them as establishing examples that clarify the artistic relationship to site.

While compositionally the emphasis remains on scenography, the internal accent of Irwin's analysis seems to have shifted to the role of the local community. The discussion of the "Weyburn Project" (especially in the chapter entitled "Exhibiting Madness: Situating Performance in an Abandoned Mental Asylum") is oriented more towards practical issues of community involvement than the connotations of a mental asylum as the carrier of social and cultural norms and fears. For people not involved in performing or producing the chapter provides valuable insight into the impact of practical decisions on the artistic outcome. However, Irwin's scope is broader. Not only is she concerned about the ethical aspects of producing community-based art, but she also considers the social and political effects of such gestures on the community's social sustainability. Performance interrupts the ongoing processes in the site as the present act of performance is inserted between the fragments of time/history as well as social and cultural norms that the site embodies. Irwin stresses that the performance itself is included in the spatial practices of the particular site and that it leaves an imprint there.

As a treat the book includes a DVD with a documentary film on "The Weyburn Project". While "The Weyburn Project" was integral to conducting her research, the reading experience of Irwin's "Ambit of Performativity" is fulfilling even without the film.

Last, but not least, Irwin's dissertation is among the first examples of artistic research in scenography carried out at the University of Arts and Design Helsinki. Along with the outstanding works of Liisa Ikonen and Laura Gröndahl, it gives reason (or at least hope) to speak of the emergence of a Helsinki school of research in scenography.