



Citation: S. Matetich (2022). S.o.S. – Simulation of Sight. *Aisthesis* 15(2): 177-184. doi: 10.36253/Aisthesis-13993

Copyright: ©2022 S. Matetich. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<http://www.fupress.com/aisthesis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

S.o.S. – Simulation of Sight

SARA MATETICH

Università degli Studi di Salerno
smatetich@unisa.it

Abstract. Each *Site Specific* is always and above all *Time Specific*, that is marked by Time and by the times from which it is generated, defined and set in a place. Space is a significant environment a work that works in the Work that re-means, in its transformation, the very connotations of performing action. To contain the never-ending process of meaning to which such a work would be subjected, it will be Time: that granitic categorial essence that philosophy, together with Space, indicates as fundamental for any cognitive and speculative exercise. Moreover such an artifact, incorporating History and stories, re-reads – making them readable – living testimonies that animate the place of existence of subjects and objects that last the relative time of their existence, in an attempt to make them and itself eternal. As if the work could take charge of the task of triggering the memorative (making memory) device of the Real, a mysterious aesthetic mechanism that interfaces subjects and objects in the common project to adapt, know and make the world – which is more than the Real, imbued as it is of significant connections and correlations. The object work of art in its positioning (making room) in a place, invites the subject –through an imaginative pact – to signify the world through a simulation of sight that allows Man to pre-see his own possibility of existence before the unknown the real proposes him, responding to his personal S.o.S. he sends daily, threatened by the indecipherable fear of sinking in the unknown.

Keywords: Site specific, Space, Time, Thingness, Memorative device.

For over sixty years the *Site Specific* has included and labelled those different forms of art whose common feature is mainly the fact of having been specifically conceived and made for\in a given place. Starting from the link with the Space in which these multiform forms of art are installed, the following work aims to investigate the unique relationship that each *Site Specific* maintains with Time and the consequent peculiarities that derive from this special link. Space is a significant environment, a work operating in the work that re-means, in its transformation, the very characteristics of performative action. It is ultimately Time that will contain the endless process of significance to which a work thus spatialized would be subjected, as a granite-like categorial essence that philosophy indicates – together with Space – as paramount to any cognitive and speculative exer-

cise. Each *Site Specific* is always and above all *Time Specific*, that is marked by Time and by the times in which it's generated, defined and set in a place, which not always will remain at its disposal. Being some *Site Specifics* temporary, the space destined to them will not be able to collaborate to give them sense forever, yet a thought must be given to the new destinations of some of these products: one should think of the museum, a natural container of art, which is not always able to contain such an object transposed from its significant place of origin and, more often than not, forced to retreat into its mere *thingness* when dislocated. Also, many of these works are conceived *in situ*, that is in their active dialogue with the physicality of the hosting place, its architectural elements and – last but not least – with the socio-political situation that characterizes it. An amalgam of History and stories. In order to start to lay his fingers on the work, the artist is therefore required to know the events and connotations of the space that will enter¹, connoting it in turn, the materiality (in the sense of Heidegger's *thingness*²) of its product. The artist is responsible for taking charge of the memory of the place, the unique system of production of the present, destined to make itself memory. The representation of the past, that is the plot woven into the present time by memory, can only manifest itself through the paradox of an enigma. The paradox of a work rooting its essence in memory lies in fact in its being intimately linked to the discovery of traces useful to a true reconstruction of history and – even more – to its indissoluble game with imagination.

¹ One should not refer here to any kind of curatorial request, but rather to a necessary aesthetic claim of common sense.

² See Heidegger (1962): 11: «Place and temporal location individuate and distinguish otherwise absolutely similar things. But insofar as each thing has its place and temporal location, there are never two [absolutely] things. The particularity (*Jeweiligkeit*) of places and their manifoldness is grounded in time. The basic characteristic of the thing, i.e., that essential determination of the thingness of the thing, to be “in each case this,” is grounded in the essence of space and time».

An insidious question, which leads the entire problem into what will eventually appear to us as being a trap, namely resorting to the category of similarity to solve the enigma of the presence of the absent, an enigma common to imagination and memory. [...] It first designates the great enigma of memory, in connection to the Greek problem of the *eikon* and its embarrassing doublet of *phantasma* or *phantasia*. We have already said that the mnemonic phenomenon consists in the presence to the mind of an absent thing that – furthermore – no longer is but once was. Whether it is simply evoked as a presence, and in this sense as a *pathos*, or it is actively sought out in the operation of recalling that ends in the experience of recognition, what is remembered is a representation, meaning a re-presentation. (Ricoeur [2000]: 9; 240)

Container and content of the past, the place – seen as an operating Space – becomes an exemplary, contaminated matrix from which to develop the project of a work in open dialogue with Time, in its ambiguous nature of present absence. In addition to the past time, a Site-Specific work also has to do with another temporality: that of the duration of its crossing. This is where the first short circuit between space and time occurs. A Site Specific occupies a space, an empty space that re-signifies the place and the stories inhabiting it – or gravitating around it – but at the same time allows itself to be re-signified by those who will spend their time crossing the work, making themselves an amalgam of History and stories, of Time and times. Inside it, works the acquisition of a plural identity basing its legitimacy in the indissoluble “memory-history” combination, the one we – translating the indications by Paul Ricoeur referred to the fiction story – can match with the equally essential combination of reality and artistic transposition, giving – eventually but not finally – the viewer the same fundamental role Ricoeur attributed to the reader:

do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? And are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the

narrative models of plots – borrowed from history or from fiction – are applied to them? (Ricoeur [1990]: 138).

Moreover the artifact, incorporating History and stories, re-reads – making them readable – living testimonies that animate the place of existence of subjects and objects that last the relative time of their existence, in an attempt to make itself, along with them, eternal. As if the work could take charge of the task of triggering that mysterious aesthetic mechanism that we can define the memorative device of the Real, which relates subjects and objects in the common project to adapt, know and make the world (which is more than the Real, imbued as it is with significant connections and correlations). At this point it is possible to reach the first conclusion, which in turn constitutes the premise – as well as the theoretical proposal – at the basis of this article: there is a specific type of artifact which, more clearly than others, shows its peculiar nature by working, getting its hands dirty, with the most classic categories of philosophy, such as Space and Time, in their Kantian meaning of “universal and necessary conditions of sensitive experience”. This very peculiar art form collaborates towards the comprehension of spaces and times in their own – no less important and necessary – meaning of historically recognizable environments and periods. Moreover, this art form is participated, mostly actively, by the spectator – both stranger and internal user – who with his own gaze will open the work to redefine Space and spaces, Time and times, testifying its validity to the condition of being able to make an imaginative pact, this way guaranteeing a common vision. It is not like that to the work of art in general, the relationship is not associated with the user, but it is precisely in the peculiar form of art of *Site Specific* that the impact of the participation to the outcome of the story – in itself unpredictable – starting from the work, takes shape. Maker and spectator collaborate in the determination of a space of common experience of which the artifact becomes sign of a successful agreement. Past and future tend to lis-

ten to desires and dreams, mistakes and regrets, imprudence and prowess spread over the times, to become a strong voice of the Present, which is that place the dependence to the past relates to («*tre-affecté par le passé*») with hope for the future, that place of the antithetical and incessant sway between the statement of guilt and the request for forgiveness. Again Ricoeur directs us, this time resorting and paraphrasing Reinhart Koselleck:

As space of experience we must intend every inheritance from the past, whose sedimented traces somehow constitute the ground on which lay desires, fears, predictions, projects, in short all kinds of anticipations that project us towards the future. However, this space of experience can only be due to polar opposition to a horizon of expectation which, on the other hand, is irreducible to the space of experience; it is the dialectic between these two poles that ensures the dynamics of historical consciousness. (Ricoeur [1998]: 7-31)

Evidence must therefore be found that the work of art (as a significant object that is open to the possibilities of meaning) is able to participate with the subject (spectator, user and at the same time co-author of the process of signification of the work) to the dialectical play between space of experience and horizon of expectation, the only one capable of guaranteeing the production of a historical consciousness. The most important theoretical issues one can find along the way are analyzed here.

1. ON TIME AND SPACE

Each work, each artifact in general, but more emblematically an artifact designed in the form of Site Specific, takes Time as an explicit variable of its own phenomenology. The artist must become a reader of Time in order to be able to suspend that moment of it in which its essence is condensed by dislocating it in a form that knows how to give it a voice. His task can be assimilated to that of the historian who must «detect this unexpected new with all its implications in any given period and

to bring out the full power of its significance» (Arendt [1994]: 320). It is up to him to discern the enlightened event from the enlightening event that illuminates a beginning, which had remained hidden in the past. And so endlessly: because every beginning will become end for the eye to come. The artist must be part of the horizon of experience of the work, and at the same time of that of its action, not neglecting the more than arduous task of becoming a wise conductor among the ruins of a past on which – and from which – to construct and organize the current unexpected of the act edifying his own work. He must know how to act as a beacon in the necessary mediation between private time and public time. By following again the indications of Paul Ricœur we can say without hesitation that even for the author of an artifact and more generally of any type of creative action, the useful principle of thinking (and conceiving) his own work as an imaginative variation on time³ as something capable of establishing new configurations of temporality, as well as unprecedented and variable (imperfect) mediations between external time (the public time of history and calendars) and internal time (the interior time of one's own experience). The imagination – affirming its effectiveness in the transformation of Time – plays a fundamental role in producing this variability, or temporal instability. The fundamental role of imagination in the entire process of creation, placement and signification of a Site-Specific work will be addressed here later. For the moment, it is enough to just highlight the complex plot of temporality inherent in a work of this kind: a temporality no longer linear, but acted upon by the memorable spontaneity of the experience of a subject who works with the aim of filling an empty space in order to make it eternal. The work must turn itself into space to clear the space away in order to open itself to a dialogue with time. But what space is willing to be contaminated by the work of art? What space welcomes and doesn't reject the new so that both have a voice? Is

the dwelling space so hospitable that it clears the space away for something different from itself? An illustrious thinker believes so, thus persuading the reader:

Whereof does it speak in the word “space”? Clearing-away (*Räumen*) is uttered therein. This means: to clear out (*roden*), to free from wilderness. Clearing-away brings forth the free, the openness for man's settling and dwelling. When thought in its own special character, clearing-away is the release of places toward which the fate of dwelling man turns in the preserve of the home or in the brokenness of homelessness or in complete indifference to the two. [...] Clearing-away is release of places. In clearing-away a happening at once speaks and conceals itself. (Heidegger [1969]: 206)

Martin Heidegger characterizes the essence of Space by presenting it as a territory granting access and arrangement in order to make room in it by arranging and ordering (*Einräumen*). There is more: Heidegger identifies the arranging (making-room) as the action that «prepares for things the possibility to belong to their relevant whither and, out of this, to each other» (Ibid.: 122-123). It is thanks to the arrangement of something in space that the necessary relationship between things present to whichever human dwelling sees itself consigned is granted. Things, therefore, help assign Man his own dwelling. And it is precisely these things, these works of art I refer to here that, eminently (like sculpture, which Heidegger explicitly refers to in the essay from which the last passage has been taken), have the task of forging space in Space to become a nexus (both significant and existential) for those who live there and for the others who will be hosted by that place to become spectators of the Event. The opening of this event, spatialized in its being right there, manifests the non-concealment of Time channeled in the time of the present creation of the work. It is at this point that the contact between Ricœur's theory, which indicates the possibility of narrating the aporia of Time through an artwork, and that of Heidegger, which places the spatialization of an Event in its objective nature of possi-

³ A notion that Ricœur in turn borrows from Husserl and which refers to the analysis of a narrative work.

ble disclosure of Truth, becomes clear. By making these two indications interact, one could identify the burdensome scope of the task entrusted to an artefact which, emblematically, is revealed in a Site-Specific work precisely due to the peculiarity of disclosing its most intimate nature while determining the connection between Space and Time. Moreover, by incorporating in it the temporalized possibilities of revealing a possible truth – which is not the absolute Truth, but the possibility by a non-concealment of uncovering itself – it makes a space habitable, meaning readable in its potential to become a dwelling for the necessarily aesthetic sensitivity of the human being. Hard is the work of the artist-craftsman of such a work: he must suspend Time to incorporate it into his work. His temporalized work must, in turn, make space within Space in order for it to be made dwellable to Man. Therefore a weight is assigned to the object being created, a weight corresponding to the amount of responsibility pending on the creating subject. In fact, as anticipated, the burden will not weigh only on his invisible and fragile shoulders: the created object triggers the mechanism of that memorative device which, through the imagination, will have to connect it with the subject and together they will be called to make the World, that is the set of possibilities of knowledge offered by the opening of a place in its relationship with the historical period that connotes it with vices and virtues.

2. ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MEMORATIVE DEVICE

First of all, a clarification: the choice of the attribute connoting the device – eminently aesthetic – that is going to be examined here, does not intend to simply indicate the possibility of a passive and past making of a real already realized and, therefore, considered in its being already there. Such device is memorative because it makes memory, which is the present of the future and, above all, its only chance of being. Here is another necessary premise: in the relationship between

subject and object the artist disappears. What fades is his craftsmanship, not his genial act: he is no longer the one who made it but is, among others, the one who participates – subject among the subjects – to the making of the present, to its possibility of being seen.

In order to fine-tune this device, it is necessary that between the subject and the work there is the intuition of a bond, whose regulativeness can only be asserted by the imagination, no longer attributable only to the oscillation between its productive and reproductive quality, but to its creative determination. This faculty – inevitably Kantian in its origin – becomes medium (apparatus), capable of operating a variation of meaning that will translate the object into work, no longer distinguishing between object and work, but allowing the latter to open up to the possibility of becoming a sure indication of meaning. The re-meant object does not change its quality of being thing in order to become work of art: indeed, the subject is not able to assign – through his imagination – a *plus* of meaning to the object, such to transform it in work of art. What happens first of all, is that the subject is able to catch the aesthetic symptoms in a given object. The human faculty, naturally predisposed to grasp the aesthetic symptoms exhibited in an artifact, is the imagination, Kantian imagination to be precise. The power of this imagination resides first of all in its productive quality, a power it will fully attain only in the Critique of Judgment when, having declared its autonomy (albeit in accordance with certain rules) and released from the existence of a real referent, it will be made free, autonomous, to produce by itself the representation of something that is not real, yet is the necessary condition for the human being to experience and communicate it universally. It is through this concise definition of creative – and active – imagination that we should understand the nature of its role as the driving force of that productive mechanism of unprecedented sensitive forms of aesthetic knowledge. It is through this peculiar form of imagination that we identify and detail that memorative device to which we have referred, as a special device capable

of intuiting and identifying, exemplarily in Site-Specific art products, that something useful, necessary to the establishment of the present. Kantian «free regularity of the imagination» must agree with the regularity of the intellect: this means that the imagination (which is free) does not schematize according to the concepts of the intellect, but demands that – through its compliance to rules – an agreement to certify its normative attitude (the ability to establish rules from time to time) is eventually reached. The two faculties (Kraft) agree only subjectively (they do not integrate into the scheme of a concept) by putting in place an animating action between freedom (the imagination) and legality (the intellect). What if this animating action no longer resides in the play between the two faculties – imagination and intellect – but rather, and more creatively, between imagination and Space of the work, or of the operating action? The object work of art in its positioning (clearing-away) in a place becomes *Simulation of Sight* as an imaginative reproduction (i.e., present only as displayed in the form of mental image by the subject) of a significant potential of the present that, once felt, will be universally shared among the members of the same aesthetic community and, hopefully, understood by those who will come. From the place of the work, an open and temporalized space, the eventualities of a possible location in time and – for the user of the work – of a possible understanding of Time inside time, stand out. Such understanding will not be discussed, because it retains the characteristics of the Kantian «knowledge in general»: it will be an acquisition based on the senses, that is felt and not verbalizable other than via categories aesthetically shared through common sense. In conclusion, one cannot avoid pointing to an exemplarity that clearly shows and, ultimately, clarifies the operation of the device that is being referred to here: this will be done by referring to the provocations of artist Christoph Büchel and some significant dislocations carried out by him. Through them, the evidence of the variation in meaning from object to work, in order to put the memorative device in action, as well as the production of *Simulations of*

Sight, as aesthetic visions necessary to the opening of a world, will be shown.

3. ON THE SIMULATION OF SIGHT

Christoph Büchel, a Swiss artist, is paradoxically quoted in the news section of newspapers worldwide more than in art magazines! This is because of his provocative projects that base their essence precisely on the simulation of sight process. Among these, there is the construction of an Islamic Mosque inside a deconsecrated church: *The Mosque*, built at the Venice Biennale in 2015 at the Iceland pavilion (the access to the church was closed earlier than planned due to complaints from local authorities challenging the «creation of an unauthorized place of worship»). During that exhibition, Björg Stefánsdóttir, director of The Icelandic Arts Center⁴, declared it was a mosque and, at the same time, was not a mosque, it looked real without being real: at the end of the exhibition, the mosque would be taken down and thus the installation would be over. According to Stefánsdóttir, this is art.

Art is allowed to shuffle the cards of vision, confusing beliefs and places, making room to re-enable and re-live (making them dwellable by the new) desolate places, re-territorializing them, re-destining them, incorporating them with other meanings, extraordinary and for this reason exceeding (and exceptional). Art has the task of surprising and intriguing the viewer who must accept the risk of having his vision shocked in order to open himself to the Sight of Simulation: in that Church a god who is not welcome is worshipped... this is the oscillation of meaning that leaves the viewer teetering. This is the ridge between object and work by which the imaginative device that has the task – among other things – to make History, is finally triggered.

It is exactly on the power to make History that Büchel ponders when he proposes to re-signify the eight prototypes commissioned by Trump for

⁴ The work of Büchel was set in the Icelandic Pavilion of Venice Biennale.

the construction of his border wall to separate the United States from Mexico. Those eight sections of wall, one different from the other (and each characterized by extraordinary protective capabilities), costing about 300 to 500 thousand dollars each, had been temporarily placed in Otay Mesa, next to the barrier that already separates San Diego from Tijuana. The proposal/provocation by Büchel was to declare those eight prototypes «national monument»! In this regard, the artist specified that there was no political criticism in his motion:

«My political position, that's not interesting in this context», he told the *New York Times*. «When you look at it there, and you see everything, it's quite a strong conceptual impact. Visually it is really striking. That's why this should be preserved, because it talks so much about our history». Those objects would have been able to say a lot of our story, more than History itself is capable of doing. The *thingness* of those objects held a huge transfigurative power that would allow them in its relationship with the subject, to become other than – and re-signify – itself to signify a piece of history to be transmitted to the future as an effective and unique statement of guilt and request for forgiveness. Yet that powerful suggestion went unheeded and those prototypes are now gone: they were demolished. And with them a chance to make history has vanished: that of triggering the memorative mechanism of meaning that makes the Real, in its possibility of being understood.

Another of his installations, transported to the Venice Biennale in 2019, is *Barca Nostra*. The artist moved to the Arsenal the wreck of a boat that sank on 18 April 2015 in the Sicilian Channel. That shipwreck costed the lives of almost all the migrants (estimated to be between 700 and 1100 people). Only 28 of them survived. And so, where the first ships of the Crusaders used to depart, where now luxurious cruisers stroll, some even outraging onlookers by performing dangerous bows, where the sight opens to the beauty of the lagoon, here is the stumbling block placed by the artist.

And it is this act of stumbling that makes visibility possible, that simulates the sight. It is this

stumbling that testifies the absence of the artist from the trigger of the aesthetic mechanism of signification aimed at transfiguration (which does not transform) of the object into work. Büchel doesn't make anything. But he has a genial prevision: he imagines the disruptive effect the wreck will have finding space right there, in the glossy place of festivals and catwalks, of market art. And it is in that prophetic vision that the artist strips himself of his ability, returning to his being simple subject in the presence of an object with which an imaginative bond (of an eminently aesthetic nature) is established, one that seals the curious attention given «to what exists or might exist».

So, that boat is really just a wreck, but it is at the same time Simulation of Sight, eminently produced by a work of art, that investigates other possibilities of being of the object, *of the space it inhabits* and of ourselves in front of it.

This undertaking is possible thanks to the singular ability that an artifact possesses (and that a Site-Specific work manifests exemplarily) to reconfigure the space in which it takes shape that, in turn, modifies the mode and the very form of life and world of those who, encountering it, will occupy a renewed space where to stay, that is to live. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of a Space, eminently in *Barca Nostra*, triggers the possibility of equipping time with a sensitive dictionary, through which decoding the events of History, making its story more readable. History and stories, Time and times were shipwrecked again on the Venice lido, with the intent to re-actualize the time of death of those in that boat who had glimpsed their only possibility of life, which becomes for us an authentic, present and powerful anticipation of death, to keep saying it with Heidegger. Yes, because it is in a work of art – and that boat transforms its being thing from an object to a work of art when what remains of it is dislocated and therefore given new meaning – that Time is embodied, making itself visible.

Paul Ricoeur specifies that it is only in the form of the tale that there is the possibility of realizing and configuring time, but this extraordinary power of making time human does not reside in the sole

activity of the narrative tale. Or, better, the power of the story, and its ability to become a necessary condition of the temporal experience, dwells in all those art objects that, by inhabiting a space, open up countless, truthful possibilities of storytelling. The variety of stories that emanate from them does not compromise the possibility of making History, but participates in the formation of that choral act of hearing the stories (which of course is not mere listening, but a participation through the senses) in order to make History. Of course, the time of the work is not Time, but participates in the process of its embodiment, as well as in the triggering of that creative mechanism that designates every human being as an actor/creator participating in the narrativization of the tale of the times, the only ones that can identify the passage and the meaning of Time. Moreover, the narrative possibilities that a work of art opens by resignifying a place, making itself space in a place, form the shelter that every human being identifies, guided by his innate tendency to strive to understand reality in order to make it habitable; they are the embodied forms of Space and Time, seen in their Kantian meaning of «universal and necessary conditions of sensitive experience» through which humans can *get their hands dirty* by playing the moves of that creative game which is played every day in order to seek the point of our being in the world.

In conclusion, *Site Specific*, Public Art, Political Art, are nothing but original (albeit not original) art forms that embody their possibility to withstand the shock of Time in their ability to signify the world through a simulation of sight that allows us to pre-see our own possibility of existence in the presence of the un-known that the real presents us with responding to the S.o.S. (Save our Souls) we daily send, threatened by the overwhelming terror of sinking in the unknown.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H., 1994: *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954. Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace&Co., New York.
- Heidegger, M., 1962: *Die Frage nach dem Ding. Zu Kants Lehre von den transzendentalen Grundsätzen*; transl. by James D. Reid and Benjamin D. Crowe: *The Question Concerning the Thing: On Kant's Doctrine of the Transcendental Principles*, Rowman & Littlefield International, London-New York, 2018.
- Heidegger, M., 1969: *Die Kunst und der Raum*, transl. by Charles H. Seibert, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007.
- Ricœur, P., 2000: *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*; transl. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pallauer, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.
- Ricœur, P., 1998: *La marque du passé*, "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale" 1, pp. 7-31.
- Ricœur, P., 1990: *Soi-même comme un autre*; trans. by K. Blamey, *Oneself as Another*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995.