

## ***senseless and placeless***

I always find driving across the Humber Bridge an exhilarating experience, as I traverse the great span of the Humber estuary I have a very strong sense of where I am and where I am going. Recently as I drove toward the bridge I could see it was shrouded in mist, the vast open vista I was anticipating was not there, a place that was once familiar had become unfamiliar. As I drove across the bridge I quickly become enveloped in this mist, it was difficult to see either side of me, or in front momentarily I was rendered senseless and, by implication placeless. I became a hostage to the passage of time, the time it took me to drive across the bridge and for the mist to clear. My senses were held in abeyance, suspended like the bridge and framed by a sense of the temporal, the constant aspect of our lived experience. The certainties I had about my memory and sense of the Humber Bridge as place when starting out on my journey had become literally and metaphorically shrouded in mist. It is the possibility offered by uncertainties about sense and place rendering us both senseless and placeless that I wish to explore in this text, by examining the conditions that govern the way the artist and audience engage with contemporary art in a rural landscape within the context of place.

Urban cultural values are the paradigm used for any discussion, writing or reading of and about contemporary art. These values in turn determine the way the artist makes art and how we, the audience, look at art. In the same way the gallery and museum, as social and institutional place, are the norm for exhibiting and looking at art. Likewise the exhibition in a disused space, such as a warehouse or empty shop, has become ubiquitous in the urban cultural landscape. All these places have a cultural and social role within the local, regional and national community, becoming fixed points located in the urban landscape. For the artist such places provide a validation of their cultural identity, with each exhibition or project measuring up to the previous one in another city, town or country. The ramifications of the use of this urban paradigm by the institution, artist and critic is that the audience inevitably ends up using these same criteria to measure their own experience of engaging with and understanding of contemporary art. The audience or, more importantly, their role within contemporary art practice is, I would suggest, worthy of reappraisal, as they cease to become a

passive participant in the viewing experience and adopt a more proactive participatory role in the area of art production. The main protagonist, as I see it, in such a debate is place, as it is to (a) place that the artist and audience respond, although as I have stated above the established hierarchy of art, artist and institution would indicate that the audience is almost conceived of as an afterthought, an inconvenience if you like. But it is to the audience that we must look to when considering these inescapable aspects of urban cultural values that are present when transposed to a rural context.

Miwon Kwon has proposed the notion of there being a 'right' and a 'wrong' place stating that when we sense a place 'of instability and uncertainty, lacking in comfort, a place unfamiliar and foreign might be deemed "wrong". And by extension, a place that feels like "home" might be deemed "right".' (1) A seemingly logical and obvious assumption, but she goes on to develop her argument by saying that 'right and wrong are qualities that an object has in relation to something outside itself. In the case of a place, it indicates a subject's relation to it and does not indicate an autonomous, objective condition of the place itself.' (2) One of the implications of the urbanisation of art discourse is that the artist and audience are invariably seen as urban creatures. As such, how is their relationship to place in a rural context characterised, is it 'right' or is it 'wrong'?

Located within a rural context the artist finding themselves in an unfamiliar place could, on the face of it, be said to be in the 'wrong' place, i.e. having been transposed from the urban, both physically and culturally in terms of their usual reference points. In recent discourse around contemporary art practice there has been a lot of talk of the artist (and curator), as being nomadic, no longer located in a fixed location, always ready to respond to the call of institutions around the world. The artist here seen as a nomad more in the sense of not being at home, rather than not having a home, able to respond to a new sense of place wherever that may be. Importantly this idea of the nomad is still predicated on an urban model of art production and reception, as evidenced by the places of exhibition invariably in art institutions in urban centres around the world. With the growth of air travel, together with the (relative) ease of crossing borders there is now, exists a somewhat romantic vision of the artists embarked on their nomadic wandering from place to place, crisscrossing each other as

they move around the world, making for constant shifting of the arenas for making and viewing art, albeit still couched within the terms of the urban art discourse. One of the reasons behind such discourses is the increasing advance of globalisation and its resultant homogenisation of our cultural (and other) experiences. But shouldn't his nomadic existence cause the artist concern – are they not disorientated by this constant moving from place to place? It is fair to surmise that this leads to a confusing situation in which the artist is unsure as to whether they are in the 'right' or the 'wrong' place. My contention is that there is no confusion, as the artist will always be in the 'right' place wherever that place may be. Given that it is not place, as an actuality, that determines whether it is 'right' or 'wrong', but the relationship the artist has to place. It follows, then, that because the artist's presence in a place is always framed and validated by an art discourse, the artist will always be in the 'right' place. However, I feel that the confusion arises when considering whether the audience is in the 'right' or 'wrong' place.

It is to the audience that I now wish to focus my attention, in particular a rural audience because, as I indicate above, much of the discourse around the subject of site specificity and place has centred upon the artist, curator and institution. Of course there is an irony attached to the adoption of the terms nomad and nomadic by the art establishment. Traditionally the nomad was someone without a home who wandered the rural landscape looking for food, water and shelter. It is generally assumed, with the advent of globalisation, that this phenomenon is only relevant, economically and culturally, to the urban landscape. The rural, however, has not been immune to the effect of globalisation, which is keenly felt within the rural with the increased industrialisation of farming and the subsequent loss of employment opportunities, leading to the break-up of local communities and infrastructures. Rural dwellers have, in effect, also had to resort to again becoming nomadic, having to move around in search of employment and housing. As the migration of indigenous rural dwellers in search of work to or near to urban centres has increased, so there has been an increase in the urbanisation of rural areas. I am thinking here specifically about the increase in house building in areas usually within daily travelling distance of large urban centres, resulting in an influx of new residents which, in turn, is the creation of a new type of rural population: a hybrid of rural and urban, and one that is constantly on the move.

It is this cross-directional trajectory of nomadic activity that causes confusion as to whether a rural audience can ever be in the 'right' or 'wrong' place, bringing me back to my opening anecdote about crossing the Humber Bridge. This confusion is analogous to my metaphorical use of the mist that enveloped the bridge, making a rural audience senseless and placeless, caught between two places – the urban and the rural. As I have already stated, the artist and audience are products of urban cultural values and because of this the artist will always be in the 'right' place, wherever that place may be. For the audience, however, the situation is less clear, particularly when it comes to engaging with art in a rural situation. The audience, finding themselves momentarily 'senseless and placeless', need to relocate, so they are in the 'right' place. This audience could be construed as a microcosm of a worldview, one that is already familiar with the everyday necessity of travel and the exploration of its temporal boundaries.

The coach is a familiar place, as is the experience of taking a coach journey, which has the potential to offer itself up as a forum of social interaction. An interaction that takes place within the realms of the temporal, the time spent travelling becomes an intrinsic part of the audience experience. One could say that taking the audience from place to place to look at art is akin to the guided gallery tour on offer in any art gallery anywhere in the world. However, the role of the audience in such a guided gallery tour is always that of passive onlooker. The audience on the coach journey, moving from place to place looking at art, becomes an active protagonist and interlocutor with the place and the art. It is all aspects of this interaction that enables the audience to relocate itself, finding itself at last in the 'right' place. I must stress that the audience I am describing – a cohesive, interactive and supportive community – will only exist for the duration of the journey. It is an audience that it is firmly rooted in the present. My interest is in establishing a relationship between artist, place and audience, resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between each of them, as well as those between the rural and the urban.

These two sets of questioning polarities, right or wrong, urban or rural, seem to be at the crux of our lives today. As we move from place to place we encounter certainty

and uncertainty, the inference being that we are, whether as artist or audience, constantly shifting between being in the 'right' and 'wrong' place. I wonder, though, if the prevailing urban discourse doesn't render us both senseless and placeless?

Notes

Miwon Kwon 'The Wrong Place' in Claire Docherty ed. *Contemporary Art -from Studio to Situation*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 2004. p. 35

ibid.

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