

Site-Specify in Contemporary Art

Visual Culture

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This essay will discuss what site-specific art is, how it is created, how working in this manner can enrich our understanding of art and how it can effectively comment on political and cultural issues in modern society. It will discuss site-specific art primarily with reference to Alice Maher's *Cell*, exhibited in Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, and Dorothy Cross' *Attendant* in an underground toilet in London, 1992.

Site-specific art emerged as a response to the detached, nomadic objects in 'White Cube Galleries' during the Modern Art movement in the early twentieth century. Artists sought a new way of working, interacting and responding with both space and people. Nicola Oxley wrote that 'the spectator should, rather than looking at it, inhabit it as he or she inhabits the world' (1996, p.8). The term itself was first coined in the 1970's by artist Robert Irwin, when he and a group of other artists began to produce art commissioned for large public spaces. Gillian McIvor, a site-responsive artist and member of the London based group Luna Nera, says this kind of work occurs when artists actively engage in research of the site as part of the process of making work (2003). What was, and remains, so evolutionary about this art form is that it only works in the space it was created for, and can't be moved or sold. Tate comments on this aspect of site-specific art on their online glossary- 'If removed from the location it would lose all or a substantial part of its meaning'. Artists who work this way stimulated a new conversation in art- Could art exist outside the white walls? Michael Archer wrote that it was Robert Smithson who formulated a distinction between site and non-site. Smithson concluded that site was a particular place in the world while non-site is a representation or reproduction of that location in a gallery, through photographs, transported materials or maps. Archer believes that making this distinction was imperative

for the genre, because although artist such as James Turrell, Nancy Holt and Michael Heizer were working outside of the gallery, their work still depended on the gallery system's 'interpretative framework' (1994, p.33). This way of working not only enhanced art but also allowed artists to comment more powerfully on social issues, push boundaries, and make their mark in the art world. The context that site-specific work provides not only expanded the way artists worked but shifted the way the public viewed art and space. It allowed the everyday man or woman to look at art, on their way to work or the shops, and enjoy it and understand it. It transformed spaces, making aspects of society or thinking visible: suddenly people were interacting in everyday spaces in a memorable and interactive way. As Nicola Oxley writes, 'Art must merge with life' (1996, p.9). When an artist begins their investigation into a site, the locality, history and topography are among the things considered. Luna Nera for example describes themselves as 'concerned with creating site-responsive mixed media work' (Luna Nera 2004). They work primarily in spaces with a specific previous function, such as a factory (Berlin 2002), to highlight the social and economic shifts in recent times and to provide a completely immersive experience for viewers. Anselm Kiefer said that no empty place is really empty: everywhere is filled up, "almost claustrophobically" with all the traces of the past. 'The past is always there in the present. Artists working site-responsively are working with these traces or "ghosts" as raw material, aware that whatever we put into a place will be mingled with whatever was there before.' (McIver 2004)

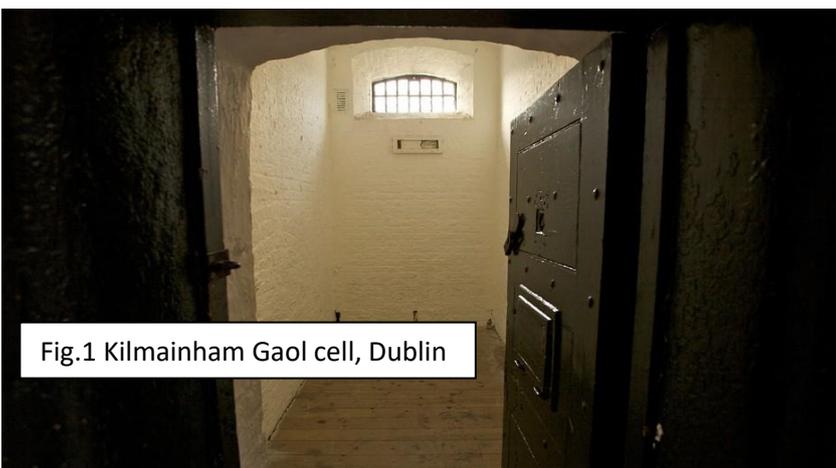
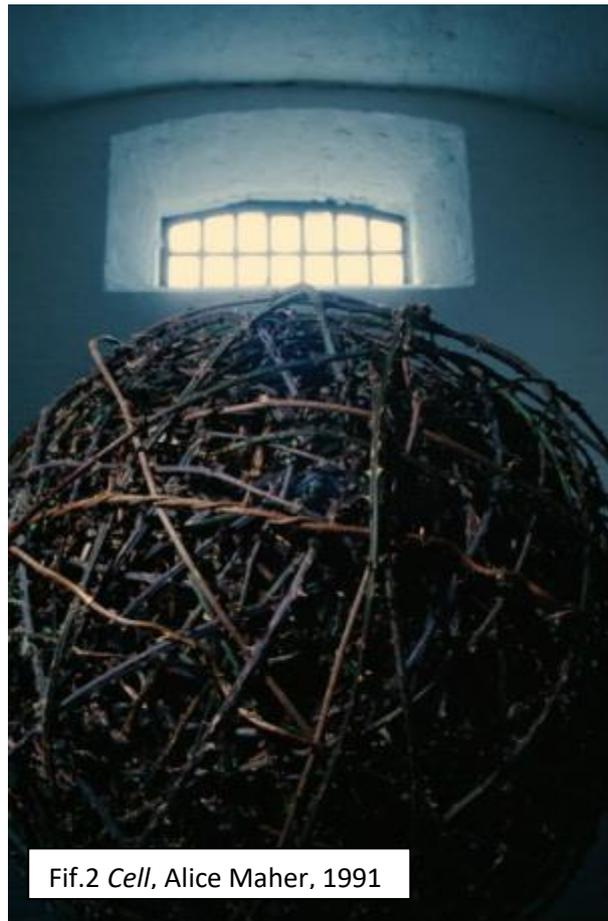


Fig.1 Kilmainham Gaol cell, Dublin

One and a half meters in diameter, *Cell*, a sphere of intricately woven brambles, lived and breathed in its site- a cell in

Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin in 1991 (fig.2). It was the first site-specific sculpture Alice Maher had undertaken that 'stood only for itself' and is said to have marked a 'seminal shift in Maher's approach to making art' (Leach 2013). As with Maher's *Berry Dress* and *Nettle Coat*, this site-specific installation piece is made from organic materials. The branches were collected from her hometown in Tipperary- in this way they have a history of their own, they've inhabited another space and time, stirring the cell's seemingly empty structure. The branches have deteriorated and decomposed overtime-a natural process beyond the control of Maher or the viewer. Twenty years on and the ball of thorns still exist, shrinking and warping. Maher spoke of this 'temporary' aspect of her work, saying that she wouldn't do anything to preserve it, that her work shouldn't live forever (NCAD, 2016). This perhaps echoes the quality of life of the prisoners in the cell: quiet, barely existing, deteriorating. 'Up until the early 1990s, Maher's work had been largely figurative: with 'Cell' she began an engagement with the history of materials, where the meaning came through the actual form and context of the exhibition' (Morris 2012). A single square of natural life pierces directly above the sculpture through a window. Maher, working in a site-specific manner, took this into consideration while constructing and placing the piece- the ball of thorns seemed to breathe with the light in the



Fif.2 Cell, Alice Maher, 1991

space. We can see that not only did the site inspire the work, but it also enriched it and allowed us to make sense of it. *Cell* connects culturally, historically and politically with its setting. The jail, which is now a museum, was where the leaders of the 1916 revolution were tortured and often executed. The cell itself is next to where Grace-Plunkett's 1923 jail paintings were shown while also directly under the dungeon Anne Devlin, a United Irishwoman, was tortured for refusing to testify on behalf of the British State. The static, yet chaotic sphere embodies both the strength of the people during a time of political upheaval and the injustice of the falsely imprisoned. However, if we interpret the jail not as a place of physical imprisonment but rather a site of mental confinement, the piece takes on a different meaning. This shows the importance of the site: how the setting is the defining

feature of the piece and how it is the starting point of our understanding. Nearing the end of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, Maher was very aware of the political and social setting of the time: 'Belfast was a warzone; Ireland was a church zone' (Maher Oct 2012).

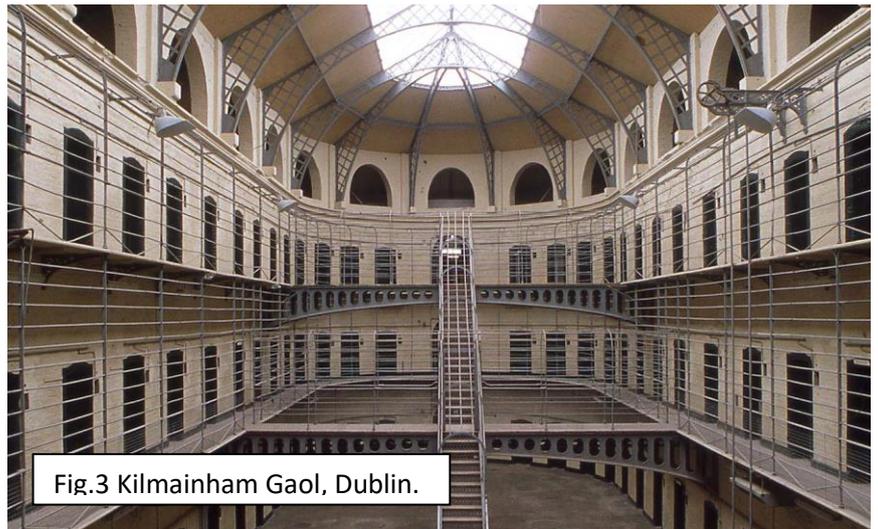


Fig.3 Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin.

Brain Keenan, a hostage in Lebanon for four years, recounts his experience of seeing *Cell*. He went to the exhibition just four months after his release from imprisonment in Beirut in 1991; he said 'it's not about the past, rather the present' (2012).

'It struck me immediately...a kind of sense that: 'Oh my God, I'm looking at myself. I am looking at a visual representation of all those years I've spent locked up...It was pushing the walls back...It had taken root and it was growing there... It is something intuitive, something emotional or something psychological that's being figured here' (Keenan 2012).



Fig.4 Underground toilet entrance, East End, London

It's a universal experience: choosing to turn left or right at the toilet doors, following the word or icon you've been brought up to identify with and obey: Male or Female. In today's society however, this is not always the case. The

boundaries of sexuality, gender and especially nationally are expanding and changing.

Dorothy Cross deals with this changing cultural and political landscape with the humour of Marcel Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*, in her site-specific installation *Attendant*. In the mixed immigrant neighbourhood in East End London, an abandoned Victorian toilet became the star attraction of the 1992 Edge Biennial (fig.4). This site has the aesthetic appeal Cross is attracted to; its worn, cracked walls and tiles represent a definite era in history, one whose 'repressive attitudes toward the body and bodily functions is reinforced architecturally by its underground placement' (Lydenberg 2005, p.37). The viewer or participant in this case, descends down tiled steps, only to be met with two options, to turn left for 'Irish' or right for



Fig.5 *Attendant*, Dorothy Cross

'English'. In this moment of choosing, a person can assert their nationality or smite the

other. Both however lead to the same outcome; a bathroom. She is perhaps challenging Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Less Travelled By', in which he writes:

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.'

Cross is perhaps commenting on the pointlessness of declaring nationality or decision making in general: that going left, declaring Irish, makes no difference and helps you in no way. Like Maher, Cross is skilfully using the site to comment on political and cultural issues.

Two urinals are hung on the wall of the bathroom, one the shape of Ireland, the other England. Cast in bronze, Cross humorously pays homage to the material of some of the most respected sculptures in history that usually stand on a central pedestal. *Attendant*, however, is 'mounted on the wall at a more human level, directing our gaze below rather than above' (Lydenberg 2005 p.36). Lydenberg writes in 'GONE, Site-Specific Works by Dorothy Cross', that the installation of the piece invites the familiar function not

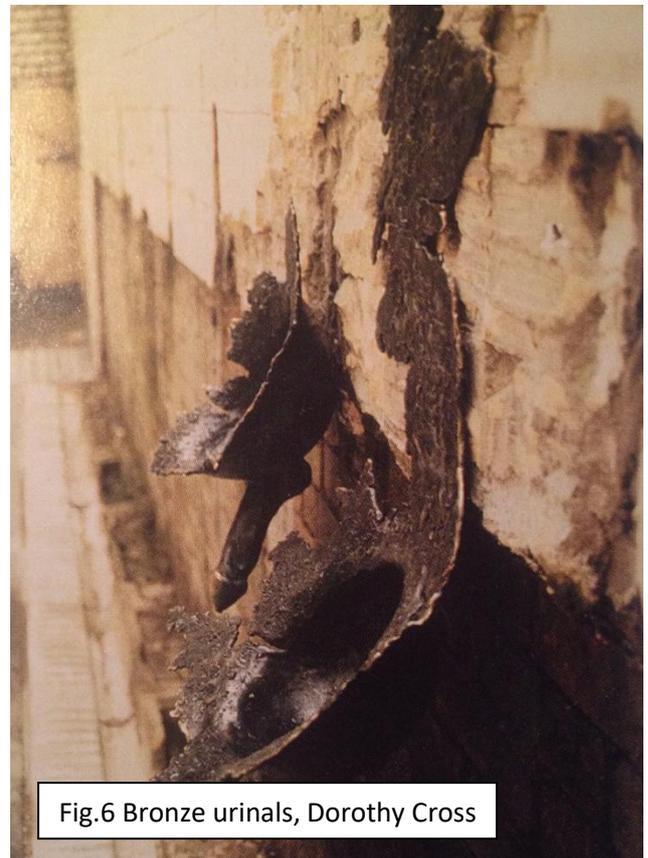


Fig.6 Bronze urinals, Dorothy Cross

adoration: that is it not celebratory, rather critical (2003, p.33). The urinals are interesting because the participant 'can both assert a national identity and lay claim to another in the simple and satisfying manner of a dog marking out his territory' (Isaak 26). Two pipes in the shapes of penises run from the urinals. Leaning towards each other and running into the

same drain, Cross plays with the expression 'meeting of the waters'. She pays respect to the Irish immigrants who would have once worked in the bathroom with the title 'Attendant' and with a single green bulb under the sign. When discussing this piece it's very important to include both the immediate site and the surrounding area. While the archaic structure could elude people to the reality that the issues facing Irish immigrants in the twentieth century are still affecting people today, the ascent from the toilets after viewing proves to us that there is still a very big problem. By placing the installation in the East End, the artist forces people to walk through a marginalised area that is affected by discrimination. In this way Cross broadens our understanding of the situation then and now. The location makes us question how far we've come with respects to discrimination, sectarianism and inequality in the last few decades. Perhaps more important than the actual piece, is the setting. Cross uses the landscape as a political canvas, to which she adds little but says a lot. The powerful impact wouldn't endure outside of the setting.

As with all site-specific work, Cross and Maher become the artist and the curator, using the physical, cultural and political setting as a material and a gallery. Maher collected the raw materials from her hometown, but she made use of the light, the dimensions of the cell and the history of the immediate site, while Cross played off of the tiles, the green bulb, and the neighbourhood. While I might suggest that Maher's installation is more site-responsive than specific, the exhibition 'Becoming' in IMMA 2012 showing a recreation of *Cell* in a white gallery room show that in fact, the power of the piece is dependant off it being in Kilmainham Gaol.

Site-specific art does not, as I have outlined in this essay, begin when the work is designed and constructed. Rather it begins and ends in the site: 'The land is not the setting for the

work but part of the work' (Walter de Maria 1977). While Maher's and Cross' sculptures show that site-specific art can be taken out of its intended setting, they demonstrate that the site is what gives the work its power and meaning. The Irish artists exemplify both contemporary fine art practice and site-specific practice.

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