

Site specific art: New, old or dead?

By Anne Fabbri

Place of Memory: an archaeology of site-specificity, 1969-1999, on view at the Temple Gallery Old City until Jan. 15, revives memories of some good features of the 1960s and '70, particularly the young people who wanted to change the old order, their slogans and their priorities.

"Never trust anyone over 30," they said. And we believed them.

"Make love, not war," they chanted. And we thought they meant it when they eschewed materialism and personal gain to dedicate their lives to the betterment of mankind.

What happened?

Now, and just in time, the art historians have moved in to document "site-specificity" in art and to explain its origins and consequences. This exhibition, organized by Kevin Melchione, director of the Temple Gallery, and Kara Barnes, member of the staff of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, consists of photographs of site-specific installations in Philadelphia during the past 30 years.

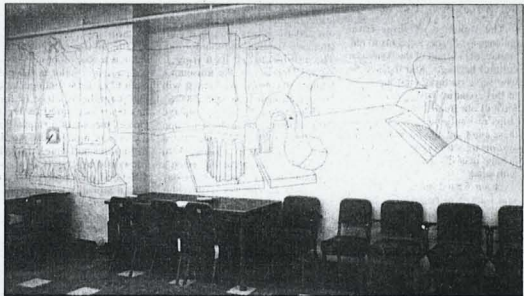
Although works of art created for a specific site have existed since the cave paintings at

Chauvet, France, 30,000 years ago, it was not called "site-specific art" until the 1960s. Then the movement developed as part of young artists' rebellion against the establishment responsible for the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the needless death and destruction. Artists were trying to communicate directly with the people, not for monetary gain but to raise the level of consciousness in a community. There was nothing to buy or sell.

Photographs documenting four site-specific works from 1969 through the '70s can be seen in the current exhibition, along with photographs illustrating subsequent developments through the 1980s and '90s.

The exhibition begins with Bill Beckley. In 1969 he altered the landscape by creating "Vertical Horizons," paint applied to trees and plants to visually link the area to a horizontal patch of snow. Documentation comes from the photograph, "Sunrise to Sunset."

Altering the landscape was just one part of the movement, representing a renewed interest in the environment. Another part of site-specific art was political in intent, as seen in the photograph from 1970 of Marcia Kocof's and Tom



Angel Rosenblatt, "Freedom and Incarceration," City Hall, 1976, one of the installations chronicled in "Place of Memory: an archaeology of site-specificity."

Hatton's "1/2 of an Airplane." A sandwich board, filled with replicas of gold bars, was carried around Center City. It was symbolic of the overwhelming costs of waging war.

Not site specific, but returning art to its original purpose, were the posters, not shown in the exhibition, using figures from Picasso's

"Guernica" to depict the horrors caused by the Fascists' bombing the civilian population in Guernica, Spain, then used to protest the United States bombing of Vietnam. Few men and women in that generation accepted the official shibboleth, "We destroyed the village in order to save it."

Artists, after hostilities ceased in Vietnam in 1974, turned to a concern for their immediate environment. They wanted to make everyone aware of the decay surrounding us by altering specific areas and hoping someone would notice. Jody Pinto's "Excavated Spaces — No Man's Land" and Abraham Rothblatt's "Freedom and Incarceration," both done in 1976, represent two facets of that movement. Pinto used problem areas, such as the well enclosure, and turned them into visually positive sites. Rothblatt changed visual perception of a space, interior or exterior, by means of tapes, tubing and wires.

The photographs in the exhibition document his reaction to the jury experience and the ordeal of sitting in the dreary waiting room for jurors. "Freedom and Incarceration" are the titles of his interior alteration of the environment. He applied tape to the walls. As a postscript, when the walls were repainted, the maintenance men carefully removed the tape after the painting, thus perpetuating the design.

"People responded to it," Rothblatt explained.

"We thought it would make a difference," he added.

The exhibition illustrates the changes that occurred within this art movement. Originally spontaneous and impromptu, without funding or official sanction, the artists began working within the

establishment. Curators planned and secured funding from foundations for exhibitions in abandoned prisons, railroad stations and other sites, or artists received grants for their own individual projects. Instead of political protest about government policies, artists raised our individual perceptions. They created community parks, such as Lily Yeh's "He-He" Park, or works of great sensitivity, such as Vigil Marti's installation, "For Oscar Wilde," in the Prison Sentences, 1995. However, these are distant cousins to the earlier works in the 1960s and '70s that seemed so spontaneous.

Rachel Bliss made 50 clay figurines for "Displaced Rape Victims." Over a two-month period, she placed them in gutters, alleys and deserted lots. Some were found and saved; others lost in the debris. They all left a message.

Has the movement died? Probably not, because creative people will always find an outlet to express themselves. Funding isn't a prerequisite for art.

Brian Wagner is still creating in an abandoned SEPTA trolley shed a huge sculpture from wooden sticks that once held brooms, rakes and other tools. Protest journals continue to be written. Other artists continue to pursue different means of communication with new audiences. Gabriel Martinez, Matt Haffner and Stuart Netsky employ posters and the printed word or image. Astrid Bowly distributed cards throughout Center City reading, "Seeing is remembering."

"I don't think idealism is dead," said Bowly, "And I was born in 1961."