



Location and Context in Contemporary Art: the Case of Mark Lewis

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ABSTRACT

The following paper is intended to establish an approach to the work of artist Mark Lewis to explore the contexts in which his work takes place. The contextual, the space and the social, and also the situational as an impression of the recent currents that have influenced artistic production and curating of contemporary art, emphasizes the devices that Lewis incorporates to his artistic career, reflecting on the dislocations between space, time and viewer in his spatial and visual installations. From an artistic production based on the audio-visual exhibition, time based media and film language, Lewis builds the symbolism of anachronistic systems of our cultural experience into his representation, confronting it with the vicissitudes of the everyday life of public space of the city and those that recalls in our cinematic and cultural memory.

Keywords : Space, context, audio-visual arts, film, Mark Lewis

INTRODUCTION

The artistic production based in time visual media and image is what generates Mark Lewis's artistic career. Mark Lewis began with photography to keep on evolving afterwards towards the moving image, understanding that this image is made from its exact "situation" and the visual and temporary setting of the spectacularity of photographic representation. This display that Mark Lewis draws into his work is circumscribed to temporality but also to location and the search of a distinctive place, a concrete place in the process of his work and to the context in which the action of his work develops.

When Mark Lewis began to work with video, starting from his idea of shaping history and the developments of film language, he kept the photographic ideas like "Index" (Krauss, 1977), marking and structuring of the place of filming. He will use photography and video as an index of situating and placing, and as artistic concept when discussing the deconstruction of visual and film language. This emphasis in place, context, set, location is the starting point to elaborate an analysis of the reception of contemporary works of art based on the discourse of contextualization, social interpersonal relationships with objects and spaces, archive as "Index" and theories about the social-contextual turn, the spatial turn and the relational, temporary and locative interaction processes that demand a series of artists that work around the audio-visual installation.

Re-staging of context, public domain, cultural reception or the speech about site-specific, place and space are a part of a series of artistic movements that have been taking place in contemporary artistic production from the mid 90's till the present time.

THE CONTEXTUAL AND THE SOCIAL AS ARTISTIC DISCOURSE

The discursive systems of the context and the social issues have impregnated artistic and curatorial practices in a very particular way in the biennials of art of the last decade. For example, the Istanbul Biennial of 2005 directed by curators Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, whose proposal was considered from a methodology defined in the processes of the contextual and the specificity of place. The response of artists to these parameters should have delimited itself "in a struc-

ture of exhibition that unfolds and that reveals its context –the city of Istanbul". Esche's and Kortun's proposition also had provision for "a conscious estrangement from the surrounding reality" that are explicit in their works" (Doherty, 2004b, p. 7).

The contextual as artistic frequency has been proposed by a series of authors, putting on the front the insertion of these precepts in marginal currents of the art market, that just challenged the productive relation of art with institutions and exhibition spaces and individual authorship in the fact of making contemporary art. In that way Paul Ardenne (2006) defines in his book *Un arte contextual: creación artística en medio urbano, en situación, de intervención, de participación*, an approach to the contextual, based on the improvement of art as purely visual principle and traditional forms of authorship and artistic production.

In the same way, Claire Bishop tells us in her text *The Social Turn* (2006) in which elaborates the expansion of the range of artistic activity in the social and contextual frontiers, connecting with the theories of relational art of Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) of mid 90's. Bishop talks about "the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies" (2006, p. 178), about the auscultation of social interactions that creates a determined reality, and about the sacrifice of aesthetic ideas and of the romantic idealism in the socially engaged art. Using often the strategy of *re-enactment*, as Simon Critchley describes it (2010) in the literal sense of the term, where the historic requests of the avant-garde artists are re-articulate and re-actualized.

Critchley expresses it comparing it with the appearance of the last avant-garde of "situationism" and *détournement*, where "the dominant mode for approaching an experience of the communal is through the strategy of reenactment" (Critchley, 2010, p. 5). This group of artists like Jeremy Deller, Atelier Van Lieshout, Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe, etc., use community, mediation, being-in-common, getting-close-to-reality as sites of resistance, as sites of memory in which they reveal its poetical truth.

INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN CONTEXT AND SPACE: THE SPATIAL TURN

One of the characteristics that stand out in this social-contextual turn is the intervention of place as a container of discursive and aesthetic potentialities, generating complicities and identifications on behalf of the artist. Miwon Kwon has circumscribed theories about place in his celebrated text *One Place After Another: Site specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004), where he narrates the genealogy of site-specific art and the paradigmatic change of art from the 60's and 70's, in the insertion of context and place as functional elements of the art of neo-avant-gardes. In this way Kwon expresses this new proposal of context and place:

The (neo-avant-gardist) aesthetic aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like painting and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and the self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods—all these imperatives came together in art's new attachment to the actuality of the site (2004, p. 12).

The involvement of artists with context and place would have then consequences in the way of understanding, making and thinking the object of art. The paradigms of a post-autonomous art required a hybridization of languages, of an enunciative heterogeneity. Artists and curators receive nourishment of different disciplines like anthropology, sociology, architecture, urbanism, etc., in the practices oriented towards space and place more than to the autonomous object of art, in which the cultural criticism implicates also a historic, archival and genealogical rewriting of place.

The concern about the significance of space of many authors, Doreen Massey (2005), Homi Bahba (2012), Fredric Jameson (1991), David Harvey, (1989) as an object of analysis, is also symptomatic. Location, placement and geography when confronted with other areas like politics, sociology or globalization actualize the sense of place and aesthetic interpretations within the debate. Position in space and context takes part of what has been called the "spatial turn" (Warf, 2008) within the spatial and temporary debate in which the social and political implications have been taking into account from the post-structuralism and Laclau's debates (1990).

NORTH CIRCULAR (2000): THE CONTEXT AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PLACE

In this temporary, spatial and contextual debate is positioned Mark Lewis's work, which deals in two senses: formal and metaphoric: On the one hand, discusses the obsolescence of film language and its temporary narrative representations that constitute our memory of visual culture. And on the other hand, contextualizes and locates those spaces that metaphorically refer to our history as a fossilized process of our modernity as a "failed project" (Dziewior, 2005, p. 61). Lewis includes in his work the contextual as a reflection and inspiration of the systems and cultures acquired in our memory, from criticism to spectacularity to criticism of location. Lewis belongs somehow to that type of art that Claire Doherty calls "the new situationists" (2004a).

Mark Lewis works with concepts of space and time, and for the work *North Circular* (2000) Lewis has placed the space of production of his work in an emblematic place that reconstructs the idea of modernity, and is related to its velocity. *North Circular*'s name refers to the orbital motorway of north London started at the beginnings of XXth century, and represents a symbol of modernization, which generates, as Paul Virilio would say, "a dromologic space" (2007)

Here, we would have to remember what Marc Augé has defined as spaces of super-modernity: "non-places". So Lewis places the viewer in a "non-place", whose obsolescence comes from the presence of the past in the present time of

place in which Lewis develops the action of his work. The locations of most of Lewis's works define that category of "non-places", which is characteristic of modernity. In that way we can see in the movies of Lewis locations like airports, suburban urban developments, abandoned football fields, motels, etc. Augé, distinguishes the space and the anthropological place like that one that is based on the storytelling as a foundation space. The difference, contrast and transition toward the "non-place" is described by Augé in this way:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or Non-Places concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places (...) (Augé, 1995, p. 78).

Lewis contrasts in *North Circular* (2000) (fig. 1) the "non-place" of an empty parking lot with the abandoned building. Making a reconstruction of the "anthropological place" throughout the appearance of three children inside the building. Lewis inserts the gestural micro-narrative of the bodies of children playing in a building, in order to transform the once abandoned "non-place" in the suburb into a place marked anthropologically. As Catherine Wood comments "Lewis, locates his work in real, found places and pulls them into an intermediated, fantasy space" (Dziewior, 2005, p. 18-20).



Figure 1: Mark Lewis, *North Circular*, 2000.
Sources: www.marklewisstudio.com

Most of the Lewis's work focuses on the stage of memory and history of the failed project of modernity, represented in the place of architecture (Ross, 2012, p. 120-125). The critique to functionalist architecture, to separation between structure and experience of life and place, is what moves Lewis to situate location of their shorts in residual places of modernity. A great part of the works have the building as the main "character" like *Spadina: Reverse Dolly, Zoom, Nude* (2006) or *Queensway: Bread and Zoom* (2005), and the characters that appear, make gestures, inhabit, play and perform everyday actions creating a space of estrangement, creativity and rupture of routine gestures and spaces.

COLD MORNING (2009): THE CREATION OF EVENT, TEMPORARY SITE EXPERIMENTATION

"Contemporary visual art is an urban phenomenon in both in its historical formation and cultural form in a sense that transcends locality to the extend to which the metropolis transcends the city" (Osborne, 2013, p. 133).

In *Cold Morning* (2009) (fig. 2) Mark Lewis investigates about the possibility of experience of place from a temporary event, exploring the relation between time, space and representation. This work was developed in an incidental way; by chance he saw the everyday scene in downtown and recorded it with a continuous uncut way as in a documentary. The force of the piece *Cold Morning* (2009) resides in the capacity of denoting the space for excellence of the metropolis, the "non-place" of super-modernity (Augé, 1995). Following Edward Soja's theories (1996) on the "Third space" in contemporary metropolis, Lewis represents in this "visual haiku" the definitions postulated in this theory, with concepts like the heterogeneous, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined.



Figure 2: Mark Lewis, *Cold Morning*, 2009.
Sources: www.marklewisstudio.com

The idea of modernity, as historic and cultural phenomenon has been imposed as a temporary concept, but as Peter Osborne asserts (2010, p. 151-169) temporality has conditioned global modernity and has supposed a predominance of time over space, even the denial of place as a social variable to

take into account in the experience of modernity. Lewis forwards to that denial of place using a modern cultural form based in time, as it is the movie, to reflect just with an almost static temporality about place and “non-places” of super-modernity.

CONCLUSIONS

work, use the post-minimalist form of contemporary art, but also it operates under concepts of memory, history, time and visual culture. The approach of his work to the idea of space, the context and the intervention place throughout an operational conceptualism of contemporary art, allows us to reveal the contradictions of urban space and our relationships and everyday experiences with that space in a double sense: as people that live and walk those spaces daily, and as cultural symbolic form representing our visual cultural history, that is constructed through movies. In this sense, we can see an effect of deterritorialisation of space and context in the series of film sequences that Mark Lewis transforms into contemporary art experience.

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