Article

ART AND THE STATUS OF PLACE[1]

Margaret Roberts

This article takes a new look at minimalist and related spatial artwork, by arguing for its significance to the environmental concerns that have long been with us, but which have recently gained renewed urgency and clarity with the warnings that tolerance of historically current forms of human inhabitation may be reaching its limits. The enormity of the dangers of climate change means that a broad movement for social change is needed to avoid its worst effects, and it is worthwhile considering how art may contribute to such a movement. Because art's role is to engage in different ways with social meaning and value, this article will look at how art engages with the social value given to physical space. The role of the value of place – as sociologist Anthony Giddens terms physical locale – and its links to risks of climate change, is shown in his account of modernity and its consequences.[2] While Giddens' account makes no mention of the role of art in relation to the value of place, it is drawn on here to discuss the social and political meanings implied in the relationships artworks construct with the places in which they are located.

The minimal art of the 1960s and 70s is a key example to discuss in relation to the value of place, as it is credited with discovering a new relationship between art and its physical location. This new relationship is identified by Robert Morris by the way in which it "takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of [the] space" shared by the work and the viewer.[3] He claims this as a major shift in the relationship, achieved through the construction of a "unitary form" whose closed gestalt prevents the viewer from being pulled "out of the space in which the object exists" and into the illusory space of the artwork, redirecting attention instead to the literal space shared by both object and viewer. By changing the relative value of each space in this way, this relationship proposes to overturn the convention of the spatially autonomous art object inherited from modernity. This alteration occurs because literal space is made a recognised partner with the artwork, instead of having the secondary support role it plays in the dominant mode Morris described as "default".[4]

This new relationship is illustrated in his own work of the 1960s, of which *Untitled* (*L-Beams*) is a good example. This work is composed of identical right-angled objects, referred to as *L-Beams*. One version of the work has two *L-Beams*, another has three. Each *L-Beam* is positioned differently from the other(s) – either sitting upright or forming an up-side-down V by propping on its two inner tips, or, in the three-beam version, lying flat on the floor.[5] As the 'arms' of each *L-Beam* are both 8 feet (2.4 metres) long, and the 'thickness' dimensions are each 2 feet (60 cm), they have a scale that is not dissimilar to that of adult visitors. This is best illustrated by the three-beam version, in which visitors are taller than the *L-Beam* lying down, shorter than the upright *L-Beam* and about the same as the propped one.

The physical space occupied jointly by visitors and artwork is the subject of *Untitled (L-Beams)* because the work presents visitors with a spatial conundrum for which the place they jointly occupy is part of the answer. Viewers are invited to ask why the two or three right-angled objects that make up the artwork do not look the same, even though they can also see that they *are* the same. Visitors are thereby invited to think about the directional nature of the artwork in terms of its location in the literal place they also occupy, instead of being invited to enter an imagined or illusory space at the expense of the literal space they inhabit, as is more characteristic of the spatial relationship art inherits from modernity.

Despite Morris's emphasis in his "Notes on Sculpture" on the need for a gestalt to prevent the viewer being pulled into the default mode in which illusory space dominates, the relationship *L-Beams* constructs between the space of art and the literal space of its location does not require the former to be quite as closed off as he suggests in his writing, in order for attention to continue to be maintained on literal space. The multiple forms of *L-Beams* modify

the work's gestalt nature because, while they may not employ quite the same ''illusionism'' that Morris sees as the problem, they do offer the potential to be spatially rearranged in thought to test their relationships with each other and with their literal location. This invitation to conduct spatial thought-experiments to contrast and compare with the found spatial arrangement in literal space, gives *L-Beams* a little more in common with the 1970s work of Helena Almeida than Morris's writings suggest. Almeida's work explores spatial concerns that are similar to those of minimal art, but without employing the refusal of illusionism that Morris claims is so important.

In one of her bodies of work, Almeida employs photography to document and construct concise installations or performances by marking the 'edge' of literal space with matter such as hair or paint. The effect of placing these materials on the surface of photographic prints is to make the print read as a 'screen' dividing the represented space within the image from the literal space in which it is located. The works' focus on the 'screen' constructs a surprising two-way relationship between the image and its physical site. The surprise is that it acknowledges the visitors' side of the 'screen' as well as the illusory space on the other side. It is simultaneously photographic documentation of the artist performing in her studio, and a continuation of that performance into the live space of visitors.

Figure 1: Helena Almeida, *Inhabited Drawing* (10 photographs & horse hair, detail on right), 1975
(images courtesy of the artist).

One example from this body of work is *Inhabited Drawing* (1975, Figure 1), containing multiple images of the artist drawing, from her side of the screen, lines that are sometimes within the image, and sometimes on the viewers' side of the screen as literal horsehair, ink or pencil on the surface of the print. Not only can the figure in the image seem to miraculously puncture the 'screen' dividing the two spaces, she seems to regard both spaces as equally valuable for locating lines. The work suggests that, not only can something constructed in literal space be brought into represented space (as happens when something is photographed), but movement can also occur in the opposite direction, that is, something can be placed in literal space from a position within represented space. While the latter movement is understood as an artifice within the terms of literal space, it implies that the literal space in which visitors are located has value because its material language is used to complete an action apparently begun in the represented space of the image. It is also valued because it is seen as a desirable destination for the agency that is apparently located in the image.

Figure 2: Helena Almeida *Inhabited Drawing* (one black and white
photograph and one horsehair), 1975 (image courtesy of the artist).

This point is made again in a different way in another *Inhabited Drawing* of 1975 (Figure 2), made up of just one image. One upturned hand holds a curved horsehair within the photograph, and the other holds a pen to the 'screen', at the tip of which is the end of another curved horsehair sitting on the surface of the print. Again it shows the possibility of two-way movement between the spaces. We don't know if the hair held within the photograph is waiting to be put on the surface next, or whether the hand is collecting the hairs that the pen is bringing in from the viewers' side. But it indicates the possibility that something constructed in literal space can be brought into represented space and vice versa, thereby implying a continuity or equality of value between spaces that are otherwise incommensurable.

The spatial incommensurability is revealed in the humour or trickery suggested by the fabrication of continuity. Just as the artist employs photography to construct this work, she also employs the viewers' ability to recognise the spatial incommensurability that is being so easily violated. The incommensurability can be understood in terms of the spatial needs of the body: viewers can be expected to recognise that interpretation of the space occupied jointly by viewers and artwork is relatively unambiguous because it is influenced by the spatial needs for orientation and safety of the living bodies of those who occupy what they are also interpreting. It contrasts with the open and ambiguous criteria available for the interpretation of the space of art and images precisely because is not literally occupied in this way, giving it the potential to accommodate and employ multiple and contradictory meaning, including endless 'fabrications'. This incommensurability is not so much questioned in these works, however, as employed to challenge the different relative values of each space. In particular, it challenges the low value of literal space implied when an artwork's physical location is regarded as irrelevant to the success of the work, as is expected of autonomous artwork and images. This challenge is made through revaluing literal space by giving it a more significant role in relation to the space or content of the artwork. This revaluation is achieved through a type of immersion, but not in the usual sense of merging the space of art with the literal space in which it is located, as do many artworks of recent decades – ranging from Lucas Samaras's Mirrored Room in 1966 to Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* in 2004, for example.[6] In their different ways, both L-Beams and Inhabited Drawings can be described as immersive only in the sense that they immerse visitors in a literal space that is altered by being noticed, and thereby revalued relative to the space constructed by the artworks or images that occupy it as well.

It is the social and political implications of such revaluations of literal space that I would like to focus on next. First, though, the meaning of place as literal space needs further clarification. Its distinction from the virtual space of the image has already been shown in the discussion of the two *Inhabited Drawings*. However, its relationship to the notion of place as a particular location is a different matter. In each of the artworks discussed so far, the literal space employed could be found anywhere. This contrasts with forms of site-specific art such as that referred to as institutional critique, which need to be sited in particular locations – such as a particular institution or city – rather than in what is being referred to here as literal space. This latter distinction may seem obscure because literal space is always also a particular location. However, it is not always the *same* particular location. Literal space is what all particular locations have in common, whereas what identifies a particular location is what makes it unique. Literal space enables movement between and across particular locations, whereas the artwork-sites that need to be particular locations because of the nature of the artwork, are more likely to be occupants of literal space that have been constructed or taken root in a place, such as a museum or other institution, or which have defined a location in some other way, such as an historic event or practice. Site-specific artwork focusing on such particular locations may use a different language to the one being discussed here, because, for example, they may be primarily concerned to comment on a museum or museum practices generally, or to draw on a history that is unique to one place. The relationships that artworks such as *L Beams* and the *Inhabited Drawings* construct with their locations, on the other hand, use a spatial language that draws on the common cultural knowledge of the meaning and value of literal space, the possible social and political significance of which can be drawn from the social theory of Anthony Giddens.

The 'place' discussed in Anthony Giddens's account of modernity is not a particular location in the sense discussed above, or at least is only a particular location in the sense that its devaluation is traced in Giddens's account through the spatial and temporal reach of modernity. In his account, modernity emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and became more or less worldwide in its influence, as time-space distantiation and disembedding mechanisms evolved and produced the dynamism and reflexivity characteristic of what he calls the "high" or "radicalised" modernity of today.

One of its consequences was to progressively reduce the status of place from its highly valued position in pre-modern times, when localised activities determined much of the spatial and temporal dimensions of social life. Forms of time-space distantiation were limited in pre-modern times to writing and the calendar, but this changed radically with the invention of the mechanical clock, and then its diffusion throughout key Western countries by the late eighteenth century. Radical change occurred because clocks displaced socio-spatial markers and regular natural occurrences as a way of telling the time. Time then became standardised, made uniform and 'empty' of place, permitting the division of the day into 'zones' undifferentiated by particularities like the weather or the season or the position of the sun. Worldwide standardisation of calendars in the twentieth century completed the separation of time from place by matching the uniformity of time measurement by the clock with the uniformity of the social organisation of time.

Place was further devalued through the separation of space from place. The status of any particular place or locale became determined by connections which occur at a distance, out of sight and hearing. So "what structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene". What occurs at a distance is made more important than what is present, than the "'visible form" of the locale, which, in its turn, "conceals the distantiated relations which determine its nature".[7] This separation is illustrated by universal maps produced by and for Western voyages of discovery, which represented space as standardised units without reference to a "privileged locale", dislocating space by making it independent of any particular place or region.

The separation of time and space prepared conditions for disembedding which enabled
> the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space.[8]

Disembedding shifts the basis of social activity and social relations from the trust involved in personal contacts between individuals or groups, to a trust in largely inaccessible processes and systems. Giddens illustrates this process with discussions of the disembedding mechanisms of money and expert systems.

Thus in Giddens's account, the social institutions of modernity are formed through processes (of time-space distantiation and disembedding) which devalue the concrete actuality of place, where space and time are one. Unburdened by place, the relative constancy and past-orientation of the institutions of tradition give way to the dynamism and future-orientation of those of modernity. His claim regarding the dynamism of modernity is
> not that there is no stable world to know [in modernity], but that knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable or mutable character.[9]

This knowledge and its potential effect on the practices in question, produces the open-ended constitutive reflexivity of modernity, in which "most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, [are susceptible] to chronic revision in the light of new information and knowledge".[10]

In Giddens's account, constitutive reflexivity creates the dynamism and instability of modernity because the other components of the model – distantiation and disembedding – have substituted expert systems of knowledge for place as a key factor determining social relations and value. There are two sides to this instability, but one is the high-consequence risks of the run-away juggernaut that he claims modernity has become. These risks are to the inhabitability of the planet through ecological decay or disaster, as well as the risks of large-scale warfare, collapse of economic growth mechanisms and the growth of totalitarian power.

The pessimism of this account is matched by an unexpected optimism regarding the possibility of "steering" the juggernaut away from its current direction. The optimism is the other side of the instability derived from constitutive reflexivity, described as a consequence of "the heavily counterfactual nature of future-oriented thought".[11] While, in Giddens's view of the "utopian realism" that he favours, the over-riding "realism" is the urgency of minimising the high-consequence risks of modernity, the redirection of modernity also needs to be achieved through its other important role of "envisag[ing] alternative futures whose very propagation might help them be realised".[12] His view is that future developments cannot be directed from any over-riding plan, envisaging instead a "constant signaling … carried out 'on the ground' by low-input units, rather than guided from above".[13]

Artworks designed to revalue their physical locations can be counted among the many "low-input units" that envisage alternatives to the low social value that place has as a condition of modernity. While implicit in these proposals is a critical stand in relation to the spatial values of modernity, it is done by positive means – by proposing a revaluation of place that, in Giddens's account, would need to characterise a post-modernity in which the worst consequences of modernity are avoided. This account enables both Morris's *L-Beams* and Almeida's *Inhabited Drawings* to be understood as employing visitors' spatial imagination to focus on its relationship with their physical place rather than to participate in the "disembedding" of space from place that is encouraged when the interdependent nature of that relationship is overlooked.

Later strands of art practice that draw on the spatial discoveries made by artwork such as minimalism can also be considered within a framework drawn from Giddens's account. For example, recent spatial artworks connected to "relational aesthetics" may also be enacting an anti-disembedding strategy. One such work is Lucas Ihlein's project, The Sham, in which for two months in 2006 he restricted himself to the environs of Petersham in Sydney (the suburb in which he had lived for two years) as an experiment in "merging art and life" but in which the art retreated to being a temporal frame for an increased focus on the nature of his daily occupation of the literal space in which he lived.[14] The spatial and temporal restriction of the project affected how he lived there, as, for example, it required him to source all his needs locally. Another is the 2008 work by John Alexander Borley, *Time and Again*, of eight one-hour walks through the streets of Melbourne. Each of these walks was with a volunteer companion and was repeated as exactly as possible, at the same time every week, for a total of eight weeks.[15] Both these works are amply documented by texts that meet an expectation that temporal events such as these be recorded. However, these texts also have a randomness and incompleteness that shows a regard for the literal places that are important parts of the works but are necessarily absent from the documentary record.

Each of these works find ways to recognise and revalue "place", as Giddens uses the term. They are "low-input units" whose socially critical nature does not depend on a consequent impact on the environment, even if it could be measured. They are better judged according to their refusal to participate in disembedding mechanisms that contribute to the low status of place in modernity, and consequently to its vulnerability to the neglect and damage that is linked to the risks of climate change.

Margaret Roberts is a Sydney-based artist working with installation and its documentation, whose work can be seen on www.margaretroberts.org.

1   This is an amended version of the paper presented at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (NSW Chapter) 2007 conference, Art and the Real: Documentary, Ethnography, Enactment, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. The development of its ideas is indebted to ongoing conversations, in particular with artists Gail Hastings and Stephen Sullivan, and sociologist Denise Thompson (though any limitations are entirely my own).

2   Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

3   Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture Part II", *Artforum*, 5 (2), October 1966: 21.

4   Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture Part III", *Artforum*, 5(10), June 1967: 25.

5   Images of Roberts Morris's *Untitled (L-Beams)* are readily available in literature on minimal art. For example, for the 2-Beam version, see: Michael Benedikt, "Sculpture as Architecture" in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 83; for the 3-Beam version, see Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 52 and http://www.burrac.com/ah/45/45.htm (last accessed on 30 October, 2008.)

6   http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/eliasson/default.htm
        http://www.albrightknox.org/ArtStart/Samaras_l.html last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

7   Giddens, op cit., 19

8   Ibid., 21.

9   Ibid., 45.

10   Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 20.

11   Giddens, Consequences, 154.

12   Ibid.

13   Ibid.,164.

14   http://thesham.info last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

15   http://www.timeandagain.info/ last accessed on 30 October, 2008.