

Specificity and (un)translatability

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This in-between text is a space for the deceleration of the use of the term *site specific*¹, in order to think it in dilated, *transcreated*² time and appropriated within the context of Brazilian art.

The rapid acceptance of the term *site specific*, translated into Portuguese as ‘specific place’ (*local específico*), or, more precisely, art developed within a specific place, generates a residual – unqualifiable – space that renders more encompassing approaches to the term unviable. The impossibility of thinking the physical space avoiding nostalgic issues of the place intensifies as late capitalism deals with realities permeated by signs of global domination. Thus, the process of physical intervention in a place obfuscates the needs for other (inter-territorial) apprehension orders of the places by images, words, visual signs and texts. On the other hand, the waiving of the place as a physical space can generate the position of uncritical assimilation. The stance between such two positions is an attempt to draw the inter-cultural lines of the epistemic barrier.³

We shall seek here to build a method to describe such translations from one context to another. Some concepts elaborated by art theoretician Sarat Maharaj — in the essay *Perfidious Fidelity: the Untranslatability of the Other* — have helped us to think the viscosity of the concept of the translation that we seek to tackle. In his text, Maharaj develops the idea of translation in a wider sense; of the textual into the visual and/or perceptive, thus reaching places of common (in)comprehension. This system problematises the local and global orders of this comprehension so as to render it complex. The author, in his essay, describes visual couplings between terms of different idioms in the translation efforts. He names *opacity* and *transparency* as different instances of the process of translation that are aggregated to the term Other.

Our attempt will be, however, one of spatialisation of the concepts related to the translation of the term *site specific* as an operation of critical reading, of the possibility of apprehension and presentation of a process. An operation not only of within language but one of materialization or visualization of the very process between two forces: that of suffering assimilation and that of identity and difference, in “...reversible instances between I and the other”⁴, between the distinct contexts in translation.

The term *site specific* will be treated, therefore, in two moments: its original context and culture; and its local, Brazilian context, as a way of generating both an identity and difference that will help us to establish the territory of translation *versus* immediate translation as an undifferentiated field. Then we shall establish the critical space between these two poles. The method will be adopted in the attempt to understand such instances, sometimes taking up the risks associated to hybridity in the process.⁵

This text-in-between comes to be the site for the visualisation/spatialisation of such process.

The method of un(translatability) and *différance*

The method adopted here seeks an approximation to philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*. *Différance* has been variously translated into Portuguese as: *diferência*, *diferença*, *diferança*. The term deals with the conception of a thought in process where both the object and process take up the same space and the same time.⁶

In the conference *La Différance*, delivered in 1968 at the French Philosophy Society, Derrida described:

It is because of différence that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called spacing, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (temporisation). And it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, stricto sensu nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions.⁷

Derrida's hypothesis questions the representation possibilities that inhabit reality. The possibility of rendering external the images of things in their own essence is opened up. Derrida states that the intellectual system (the episteme) builds an opposition between reality and representation. According to Derrida:

External/Internal, image/reality, representation/presence, such in the old grid to which is given the task of outlining the domain of science. And what of science? Of a science that can no longer answer to the classical concept of the episteme because the originality of its field – an originality that it inaugurates – is that the opening 'image' within the simple difference and the uncompromising exteriority of 'image' and 'reality' of 'outside' and 'inside' of 'appearance' and 'essence'.⁸

specificity

The practice of the site specific, today disseminated in contemporary art, emerged with Minimalism in the circuit of American art from the end of the 1960's onwards as a possible answer to some of the paradigms of modern art, such as the autonomy of the artwork regarding its context.

As quoted by Catherine David in a lecture at the Goethe Institut in Porto Alegre in October 1998, contemporary art faces three paradigms inherited from classical thought and that also apply to modern art. They are: illusion of ubiquity, which refers to the notion that the artwork will bear the same meaning wherever it may be; the illusion of transparency, which regards the notion that the artwork is all contained within itself and speaks for itself; and the illusion of permanence, which states that an artwork bears its fixed importance independently from its historical context. The autonomy of the artwork, which is generated from these three paradigms, facilitates the system of its commodification. According to Douglas Crimp, in his book *On the Museums Ruins*,⁹ the dependency on the place and situation of the first *site specific* artworks bore a critical intention with regards to the commerce of art in their refusal of mobility and circulation. Thus, art's insistence in specificity could be considered one of the important critical axes that contemporary thought exerts on some aspects of the modern project.

Initially, the expression *site specific* was more often employed to define a piece that incorporated the physical conditions of a certain locality as an important part in its perception, presentation and reception. Architecture served, then, as a basis for such interventions. The formalisation of the work was determined by the physical space and depended on it. The work by American artist Richard Serra exemplifies well the paradigms in force in the first apparitions of the so-called site specific art: "*The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their location.*"¹⁰

From then on, the notion of site¹¹ expanded and now included other aspects of the place until then not considered. Works by Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren rethought the *site* as a phenomenological place in Minimalism, grounded on a critical reflection on the museum and the gallery, thus exposing aspects of their functioning and revealing the false neutrality playing the part of support for the artwork. Such widening has rendered the notion of site more inclusive and complex, also changing the way in which the artwork related to such place. Social, economic, historical and political aspects thus become important ingredients of this relationship.

From the 1990's onwards, the practices oriented towards a specific place began to operate from the perspectives of impermanence, discontinuity, ambiguity and deterritorialisation. The place and work transcend the identitary, fixed and sedentary notion to gain a nomad and itinerant model, the frontiers of which are of difficult visualization. The artwork's belonging exercise in relation to this place gains new outlines in a territory that is now fluid and disperse. The place of the artwork ceases to be only a literal place to become an informational site¹², as characterised by author James Meyer, who draws up a range reaching from the physical place (but not prioritising it) up to photographs, texts, videos and objects that are not confined to a specific or literal locality, and which consigns to other places and situations in an infinite exercise of associations and chaining.

Art institutions and discourses in the artistic milieu have massively used the term *site specific*, not only in its language of origin but also in other languages. The indiscriminate use of the term, as well as ignorance with regards to the historical context in which it has emerged, seems to smother its initial critical intention and to dilute its concept down to one more genre of contemporary art. In Brazil, the term was absorbed untranslated. It is common for us to read and hear the expression *site specific* in discussions on Brazilian art and among artists who speak of such practice.

Is it possible to use the term in contemporary Brazilian art so as to characterise aspects of the work in its context or place? On what references do the present-day so-called *site specific* practices in Brazil are grounded?

What we call *site specific* in Brazil is much more related to the first notions of attachment of the work to the physicality of the phenomenological place (or the site), as formulated by Miwon Kwon, than to the developments of its discussion. And even within this typology, the critical notion of attachment to the place as a refusal of commodification that is implied in the first notions of *site specific* does not seem to mean much within the Brazilian art circuit, which was never economically heated to the point of us being able to or willing to resist it.

How to use the English term *site specific* in Brazil, in our Art context, without the problematisation it brings over?

The term *site specific* is meaningful with regards to a specific context. Its transposition to the Brazilian context should undergo an elaboration, translation or cannibalisation, lest the reflection content and critique implied in the term are emptied. Then, we should revisit the bases of comprehension in diverse contexts.

expecificity

The term *site specific* points at the relations of specificity that the work holds with its context, beyond the relations that are possible to establish, such as relations of interiority, such as relations of form, colour, texture, composition etc. Thus, we can state that part of the discussion on *site specific* regards the exteriority of the work of art. It is in relation to its context that the work begins to form its meaning or complexity. It is in the relations with its surroundings that the art object or installation sparks off its potentiality.

The first suggestion to start off the process in which the expression *site specific* lands down from the English language onto the context of Portuguese is the substitution of the letter 's' in the word *specificity* for the letter 'x' [*especifico/expecifico*], thus characterizing a possible relation with the word *exteriority* and the relationships that are outside the work proper, that is, in its surroundings.

expessura/thickness

Continuing the reflection process on the term *site specific*, I suggest associating this concept to the several layers that can be related to the notions of specificity and locality of an art project. Contemporaneity has brought along a veritable profusion of layers to what we call a place. Sociological, anthropological, physical, geographic, philosophical, artistic or other aspects seem to intersect in the discussion about place, locality or location. To describe a place today is a hard task, for such place features more like a multifaceted prism than an object proper. The allusion to thickness [*expessura*] seeks therefore to point in that direction of spatial reading. A thick space is a space that does not yield to the first reading and that always concentrates other meaning layers, which can be accessed.

expressitu

Here we add a remission to the fragment *situ*, which originates in the Latin *situs* and means place or position [*espesso/expesso/expessitu*]. The issue of specificity in relation to a place, which is one of the concerns of *site specific* artworks, also approaches the differentiation of places. The moment we state specificities, we point at what this place has in difference to others. As we work specificity, we produce difference and particularity. And this seems to be the *hidden attractor* both of the term and of the *site specific* practices, as stated by author Miwon Kwon. In a globalising world and, therefore, of flattening of differences so that capital may flow more fluently, the affirmation of difference and of specificity seems to generate salient areas in the smooth spaces of late capitalism, showing therefore the contestatory and critical character of the practices that feature specificity as ingredient.

According to Frederic Jameson¹³, the flattening of irregular topographies is clearly a technocratic gesture that seeks an absence of place and of local identities. In its turn, the *cultivation of place* and its differences would have the ability to retake the place's pre-history, its archaeological place, its subsequent cultivations and transformations in time.

Thus, we could revisit the differences that constitute it. For David Harvey¹⁴, the constitution of identities that are attached to a specific place or situation has become very important in a world of diminutions of spatial barriers to allow for trade, traffic and communications.

The evoking of the notion of *situ* in this operation of translation intends, therefore, to touch issues pointed at by these thinkers.

A possible construction for us to engage in such transport operation of a few meanings of the term site specific into the Brazilian context would be:

The name
expressitude

The adjective
expressituado

context

In the exhibition *Do corpo à terra* [From Body to Earth], organised by Frederico Morais and carried out at the Belo Horizonte Municipal Park in 1970, artists from Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro were invited to develop specific actions for the event. Luiz Alphonsus burnt a 30 meter-wide cloth banner; Teresa Simões made rubber stamps to print the words-denunciation *dirty, verboten* on the pavements. However, for critic Francisco Bittencourt, “it was Cildo Meireles (who set fire to live animals) and Artur Barrio (who threw bundled up meat and bones into the Riberião das Arrudas river) that the manifestation took up the sombre tone of a limit situation. Nobody before them had reacted with such intensity to the reality of that moment within the aesthetic field. The work carried out in Belo Horizonte surpassed the simple aesthetic polemics – such as in the case of the stuffed pig by Nelson Leirner at the Salão de Arte de Brasília – in order to gain a feature of a people’s struggle for life.¹⁵ Such manifestations, taken place during the military dictatorship, were defined by Frederico Morais as *guerrilla art*.

The exhibition *Do corpo à terra* described above may be used here for us to understand the relations of specificity of the artwork with regards to its context in the Brazilian scenario.

The temporal parallel with the discussion about specificity that was going on in the USA, characterised in the word *site specific*, unveils a historical coincidence with the issues being discussed in this exhibition at the same time in Brazil. As they were invited to develop work for the exhibition, the artists did not stick to the literal notions of the physical space, but perforated into the deeper layers that touched the very political organization of Brazilian reality at the time.

The intensity of relation that such artworks bear with their social and political context seems to overflow the first or phenomenological concept of the American *site specific*. Furthermore, if the critique of the system of commodification of the artwork interested the Americans as they exerted attachment to the physical space, a few Brazilian artists directed their concerns towards the possible discussions around the political reality of dictatorship in Brazil. In the local context of the 1970’s, the artwork trade bore little or no importance in the reflection of Brazilian artists. In this sense, there is a space of difference between the practices that take into consideration the specificity in these two poles: the Brazilian context and the American context of Art.

Grounded on the relations of exteriority, thickness and locality in the exhibition *Do corpo à terra*, it is possible to think the use of the term *expessitude* to approach the particularities of the artwork in its relationship with its context.

Translation as critical reading

Grounded on the transport of meaning exercise proposed above, we can take the term *expressitude* as a possible rendition of the expression English *site specific* in the Brazilian context. We can understand that the translation, as critical reading, is a procedure to think the *fissures* or openings for intervention in language.¹⁶

What is sought here is a poetic and creative operation and not a literal translation. A literal translation of the term *site specific* would probably originate something like *sítio específico* in Portuguese. Such literality incurs in the risk of confusion with regards to the artwork as a physical place. In English, the expression *site specific* is used as an adjective to characterise the specificity of the artwork. The expression *sítio específico* in Portuguese qualifies the physical place as being specific and not the artwork. It works as a name.

Thus, it is necessary to operate a probing process into the history, particularities and singularities of the terms to be translated, in search of its problems, imperfections and contradictions. The act of translation does not bring in definite terms, but it is seen as an operation to problematise languages; presents the imperfection of languages as it lets show the problem of meaning tied to the manner of signifying.

This attachment to the act of signifying is nothing more than the relation specificity. Language is understood from its relations of specificity with the place and its history. Edilamar Galvão recalls that Walter Benjamin “states that a language only signifies to itself. That which language communicates is not communicated *through* language, but it is communicated *in* language”¹⁷ Language is revealed as a place, and the word in a specific construction of this place.

¹ Although the expression *site specific* is a construction of the English language, the process of translation implied here focuses more sharply on American specificities rather than on other English-speaking countries that use the term.

² CAMPOS, Haroldo de. *A Operação do Texto*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1976, p. 10.

³ Maharaj describes the apartheid generated by the sense of opacity at the service of the epistemic barrier doctrine, created to institutionalise the radical sense of ethnic separation and cultural difference. The I and the Other should be locked within their pure spaces. Hybridity is an optimistic attempt to cause untranslatability to triumph. The double link takes place through optimism and pessimism, the opaque and the crystal-clear, that activates the play-off between the two poles.

⁴ In MAHARAJ, Sarat. *Perfidious Fidelity: the Untranslatability of the Other*. Global Visions. London: Kala Press: INIVA, 1994.

⁵ Hybridity according to Maharaj is like a double link between negative and positive forces. Something hybrid is created by the opacity between one language and another, by the sum of such opacities (each language seems to have its own system, sense, meaning building).

Hybridity could be related to the idea of the failure of translation, of the illusion of transparency in the passage from one idiom into another.

⁶ EINSENMAN, Peter. *The futility of objects – Decompositions and process of differentiation*, in Lotus, no.42, Milan, February, 1984, p. 63–75. Apud: ARANTES, Otilia Beatriz Fiori. *O Lugar da Arquitetura depois dos Modernos*. 2nd. ed. EDUSP, São Paulo, 1995, p. 85.

⁷ DERRIDA, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. by Alan Bass, Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, p. 13.

⁸ LUPTON, Ellen and MILLER, J. Abott. *Design Writing Research. Writing on Graphic Design*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999, p. 4.

⁹ CRIMP, Douglas. *On the Museum's ruins*. USA: MIT Press, 1995, p. 17.

¹⁰ SERRA, Richard. *Writings, Interviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 203.

¹¹ The expression *site* here is appropriate in view of the expression *site specific*. It refers to the place of the artwork.

¹² MEYER, James. The functional site; or, the transformation of site specificity. In: SUDERBURG, Erika. *Space, Site, Intervention: situating installation art*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 23–37.

¹³ In David Harvey, From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on Condition of Posmodernity, text for the UCLA GSAUP Colloquium, May 13, 1991. Apud: KWON, Miwon. *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*. USA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 156.

¹⁴ In Frederic Jameson, Posmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Apud: KWON, Miwon. *Op. Cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁵ BITTENCOURT, Francisco. Dez anos de experimentação. In *Catálogo da Exposição 7*. Depoimentos de uma geração 1969-1970; Galeria de Arte BANERJ, Rio de Janeiro, 1986.

¹⁶ GALVÃO, Edilamar. O Estranhamento da Tradução na Criação. In NUNES, Sandra (org.). *Estranhas Travessias*. Osasco: Edifeo, 2004, p. 59–63.

¹⁷ *Op. Cit.* p. 63.