

The art of collaboration: Contemporary art in historic sites

At the Palace of Versailles this summer, a towering crane from which cascaded a waterfall dominated the view of the seventeenth century landscaped gardens. It was one of a series of installations by contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson hosted by the palace from June to October. Eliasson's installations are part of the palace's annual programme of contemporary art that began in 2009. Their programme is one of the most high-profile examples of a historic site collaborating with contemporary artists, and it reflects a growing curatorial strategy of staging art within heritage sites that has developed over the past few decades. While contemporary art exhibited outside of the art gallery is certainly no new phenomenon, curated displays of contemporary art within a historic site, either commissioned works or contemporary works chosen for the site, is a relatively recent development. Looking at the contemporary art programme at the Palace of Versailles as a case study provides a starting point from which to explore motivations behind such programmes and the rise in popularity of contemporary art shown at historic sites. Exploring the distinguishing elements of such exhibitions from other platforms of display will help gain a better understanding of such projects and their value, and reveal benefits for both the artist and the heritage site. The contrast between historic site projects and other spaces of display demonstrates that, despite challenges, this environment of exhibition is both flexible and worthwhile, and at the heart of the projects is the act of collaboration.



Waterfall, 2016, Olafur Eliasson. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

While the coverage of contemporary art shows at historic sites is wide in the media, little academic research has explored this subject, and few studies have considered the rapid growth of their popularity. The development of such projects is difficult to trace, yet a distinct rise in their prestige and increase in number can be seen from the 1990s onwards. The form of exhibition in focus is the curated display of contemporary art at an historic site – a location preserved due to its historical or cultural value – and may refer to specifically commissioned art or the display of existing works. These projects can be seen as linked to a number of developments in arts and heritage sectors over the past few decades, including the increase of performance art and conceptual art, the rise of independent curators, and growing programmes of outreach within heritage institutions.¹ While site-specific art, public art and conceptual artists working outside of the gallery have been much written about, few scholars have focused on contemporary curatorial projects at historic sites. One exception is an article by art historian Ashleigh McDonald.² McDonald's exploration of such collaborations notes the difficulty of tracing the development of contemporary art curation within historic sites. She sources one of the earliest examples as a display at Killington Park, National Trust in 1993.³ The exhibition, entitled 'Haha: Contemporary British art in an 18th century garden' comprised the work of fourteen artists, who had been commissioned to create works in response to the gardens. Though this is one of the first contemporary art projects undertaken by the National Trust, one critic of the show writing for *The Independent* newspaper states: "I feel that the game should now be up altogether with 'responding to sites'"⁴. His comment implies this was not the first collaborative project to take place at a historic site. However, it is not until sixteen years later in 2009 that the National Trust established a body for the official organisation of creative contemporary art programmes⁵, suggesting significant progression in the number and profile of the projects. Other examples of organisations established dedicated to these practises include Meadow Arts in 2001 and Arts & Heritage in 2000, who have worked with English Heritage. These projects demonstrate the distinct rise in their popularity over the past two decades.

Motivations for collaborations

Looking at what has been written about such collaborative projects or similar curatorial practices, as well as what has been said by media critics and curators, we can see that there are benefits of such projects for both the historic site and the contemporary artist. As well the opportunity to engage new audiences and media attention, the cultural value of the collaborations is a strong motivation. Art historian Cathy Stanton talks about the interaction of public history and art institutions, saying not only do "such alliances offer exciting expressive and intellectual possibilities", but furthermore, "they appear to be a way for public history sites to capitalize on the considerable energy and momentum—and hence the large audiences and media visibility—being generated within the art world at present."⁶ Indeed, media interest and new audiences are principal concerns of a heritage site's art programme. Yet, simultaneously, curators and historic site directors have extolled the "intellectual possibilities" of such as displays as a key motivation.

¹ For example, see: 'Reconsidering conceptual art, 1966-1977' in Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson, 'Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology', (MIT Press, 1999), pp. xvi-xxxvi

² McDougall, Ashleigh, 'Place and Collaboration: Contemporary Art Curation Within Historic Sites', *Desearch*, Issue 3, 2013

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art-an-unnatural-device-tom-lubbock-on-ha-ha-a-display-by-14-artists-in-the-grounds-of-killerton-1484618.html>

⁵ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/trust-new-art-contemporary-arts-inspired-by-our-places>

⁶ <http://www.meadowarts.org/exhibitions>; <http://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/>

Despite some negative feedback from critics of the contemporary art displays at Versailles over the past eight years, the art programme is largely considered a great success, with extensive media coverage, public interest and great support from the palace's director. Olafur Eliasson's displays are the ninth contemporary art exhibition to take place at Versailles; the first was a show by Jeff Koons in 2008. The response to Koons' display was largely shock, with newspapers and art critics commenting on the exhibits as incongruous and an offence to historic sites. Edouard de Royère, creator of the Fondation du Patrimoine and one of chateau's principal patrons commented: "I am not against contemporary art but I am absolutely shocked at its descent on Versailles, a magical, sacred place... Any tourist that comes from China or Australia will go home with this extraordinary picture of France. Even for three months, Jeff Koons at Versailles is a mistake."⁷ Although Koons' work is polemic in the art world, two years later in 2010, similar reactions were provoked with the staging of an exhibition of Takeshi Murakami's structures around the palace's interiors, with opponents criticising the 'disneyfication' of the heritage site.⁸ However, much publicity has been positive, and Catherine Pégard, who took over as director in 2011, stated that she is committed to continuing the programme started by former director Jean-Jacques Aillagon, praising its value. In an interview with ArtNews in 2010, Pégard acknowledges both the new audiences that will discover Versailles as they come to see the contemporary art, as well as the power of the artworks to engage with unique aspects of the site, "revealing its mysteries".⁹ In the interview she states that she sees the continuation of the contemporary art programme as a mission that will "deepen the dialogue that has been initiated between Versailles' heritage and contemporary art, between past and present."¹⁰ Pégard's commitment to the programme reflects the value that it has brought to the site, eschewing criticisms that the projects 'interfere' with the historical identity of the place. Programmes such as Versailles' have demonstrated the potential of art to engage new audiences and draw media attention as well as provoke a new conversation with history.

Site-specificity and architecture as an evolving environment

Artists have been creating site-specific art for decades, seeing it as an opportunity to make radical art outside of commercial markets, as well as being attracted to the chance to engage with and comment upon a specific space. According to art historian Miwon Kwon, site specific art emerged in the 1960s in part as a reaction to the capitalist art market.¹¹ Kwon cites artist Robert Barry who described his site-specific installation as "made to suit the place in which it was installed" and could "not be moved without being destroyed".¹² In contrast, contemporary art in heritage sites are not necessarily site-specific, but may be pre-existing artworks brought in for the exhibition or commissioned works to be relocated after. These works are not politicised reactions to a site, but collaborations with the space on view for a short time.

Unlike a site-specific artwork, which is not a collaborative project, the motivations and restrictions of the historic site have an impact on the displays. The level to which those responsible for organising the exhibition at the historic site influence the display is dependent on the site. At Versailles, a limited amount of flexibility is afforded to artist. Joana Vasconcelos exhibited at Versailles in 2012. In

⁷ Cathy Stanton, "Outside the Frame: Assessing Partnerships between Arts and Historical Organizations", *The Public Historian*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Winter 2005), pp. 19-37

⁸ Quoted in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/jul/03/art2>

⁹ <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/versailles-president-catherine-pegard-on-anish- Kapoor-lee-ufan-and-the-palaces-artists-260845>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, (London: The MIT Press, 2002)

¹² *Ibid.*

an interview for newspaper Le Monde, the artist spoke about the negotiations and limitations on her display with the site. She says: "I dreamt of having two of the candelabra in the Galerie des Glaces taken down, in order to put *The Bride* at one end and *Carmen* at the other, white and black, pure and lascivious, but this was not to be. Apparently, they are sexual works and not appropriate at Versailles."¹³ Vasconcelos also stated that she wanted her work *Perruque*, a shell of an egg cracked to release long strands of hair, to be situated in Marie-Antoinette's bedroom, close to the royal bed, but she says, "the management of the chateau would not allow it. In the end, I had to say that if *La Perruque* was not shown there, there would be no show at all."¹⁴



Perruque, 2012, Joana Vasconcelos. Photo: Luis Vasconcelos.

The tension between the artist and the site is a core feature that distinguishes this form of exhibition from other curatorial practices and platforms of display, and has both negative and positive consequences. These projects are a challenge to the artist who must work with many barriers and potentially an audience unwilling to engage with art within this context. Furthermore, the site's curators must negotiate a meaningful conversation between the aesthetic intrigue of contemporary art and the historicity of the site. However, although challenging, the interaction between the artist's creativity and the historical narrative of the site is a large part of why these collaborations appeal and have been deemed successful.

Engaging with a place that has a distinct "sense of place"¹⁵ is a great attraction of site specific work, presenting opportunities for new perspectives and creativity for the artist and curator. Art critic Brian O'Doherty's formative essays of 1976, 'Beyond the White Cube', explore the importance of

¹³ Quoted in: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jul/03/joana-vasconcelos-versaille-feminism-review>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ashleigh McDougall, 'Place and Collaboration: Contemporary Art Curation Within Historic Sites', *Desearch*, Issue 3, 2013

context to art. He describes artworks in a gallery as “untouched by time and its vicissitudes.”¹⁶ O’Doherty suggests that art in a gallery exists outside the remit of time, it already belongs to posterity – and thus is a good investment for a potential buyer. His second essay discusses the relationship between the viewer and an artwork inside a gallery, which he sees as characterised by a forced detachment. These two points of discussion are uncannily appropriate to discussions of historic sites. Historic sites are preserved and presented to appear outside of and unaffected by time, and the viewer is consigned to the position of detached onlooker. O’Doherty’s influential series of essays extol the impact of external environments and influences on art, and hold the genre of site specific art in high esteem for their capacity to reveal, highlight and comment on specific features of a place and culture. Although his essays do not mention contemporary art programmes in historic sites, the notion of art engaging with a sense of place and a site’s ability to interact with new contexts are relevant notions to this discussion.

A historic site is not a static place; like all architecture, it has a constantly evolving narrative. Contemporary art has the potential to provoke a conversation between the site and its present context. Historic sites are preserved for their cultural-historic value or the aesthetic merit of the architecture or landscape; they have a distinct identity and cultural, emotional and mnemonic associations. Historic sites preserve the past, yet are always in conversation with their surroundings, shaped by the audiences passing through who bring their own contextualisation. Directors and curators at historic sites might choose to emphasise specific parts of a site’s history, demonstrating the fluidity of the site’s identity over time. Recognising this, contemporary art seems less at odds with an historic site; it is a means by which the building can be understood as part of our culture, rather than as a fossil of history.

Catherine Pégard describes Versailles as “a historical site with tremendous patrimonial value”, possessing “inexhaustible mysteries” and containing a “continuous sequence of images, which build up into excess or accumulation.”¹⁷ This sense of an emotionally loaded space, both aesthetically and culturally, is a key distinguishing element of a historic site as a platform for art display from other spaces. The artists who have exhibited at Versailles have responded to varying aspects of the palace’s aesthetic and historical narratives. Each conversation between the site and the artworks is unique.

Olafur Eliasson’s sculptural and photographic art of the past twenty-five years explores altered depictions of reality, optical illusions, and interactive sensual experiences. His approach to Versailles similarly seeks to provoke new perceptions. The waterfall by the grand canal is inspired by an original but never accomplished design by seventeenth-century garden designer André Le Nôtre. In its symmetry and impressiveness, it is a perfect fit within the gardens. The work engages the senses of the visitor in a powerful way; through its immense size, seen from the palace about a kilometre away, and deafening sound of the gushing water, the experience is overwhelming. All nine works situated around the gardens and the palace are interactive or sensual in some way. Inside the palace, many works involve mirrors, stationed to invite the viewer to look in and see a distorted version of themselves reflected. Eliasson comments on his intentions for the works, saying Versailles will “invite visitors to take control of the authorship of their experience instead of simply consuming and being dazzled by the grandeur. It asks them to exercise their senses”.¹⁸ Playing with identity, entitlement and memory, as well as pertinent physical motifs of water, mirrors, gold and the sun,

¹⁶ Brian O’Doherty, ‘Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space’, first published 1976, Art Forum, first book edition, The Lapis Press, 1986

¹⁷ Catherine Pégard in ‘Olafur Eliasson Versailles’, Exhibition Press Kit, 2016

¹⁸ Ibid.

Eliasson's works instate the viewer within the experience of Versailles, removing the barrier between a distant history and a mute present. Eliasson's intentions for the works reflect a key stimulus for collaborative contemporary art and historic site projects: they reconceptualise the site and its historical narrative within the contemporary visitor's experiences.



Deep Mirror (Yellow), 2016, Olafur Eliasson. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

Conclusion

The value of collaborative projects between historic sites and contemporary artists is clear for both parties involved. The rise in popularity of such practices is testament to their perceived merit. The programme at the Palace of Versailles is a high-profile example that exemplifies the unique qualities of such curatorial practice, the constraints and challenges of such collaborations as well as the benefits. Although closely related to the genre of site-specific art, historic site projects differ in their collaborative nature. These dialogues are two-sided, not just an artistic reaction on a site, but a conversation with one. The motivations of the curator, site director and the artist each contribute to the final works, as the historic site's responsibility to their viewers, the historicity of the site and its preservation are as influential as the artist's creative designs. Though this may be a restriction on the artist, it is this act of collaboration that distinguishes these art projects from other platforms of display, and makes each conversation so unique. The projects that have taken place at Versailles for nearly a decade demonstrate the distinct dialogues that arise from different artists responding to one site. Collaborative historic site-contemporary art programmes will undoubtedly benefit from wider study into the differing projects that are taking place at diverse sites, and the chance to explore and reveal new opportunities and directions for the future.

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