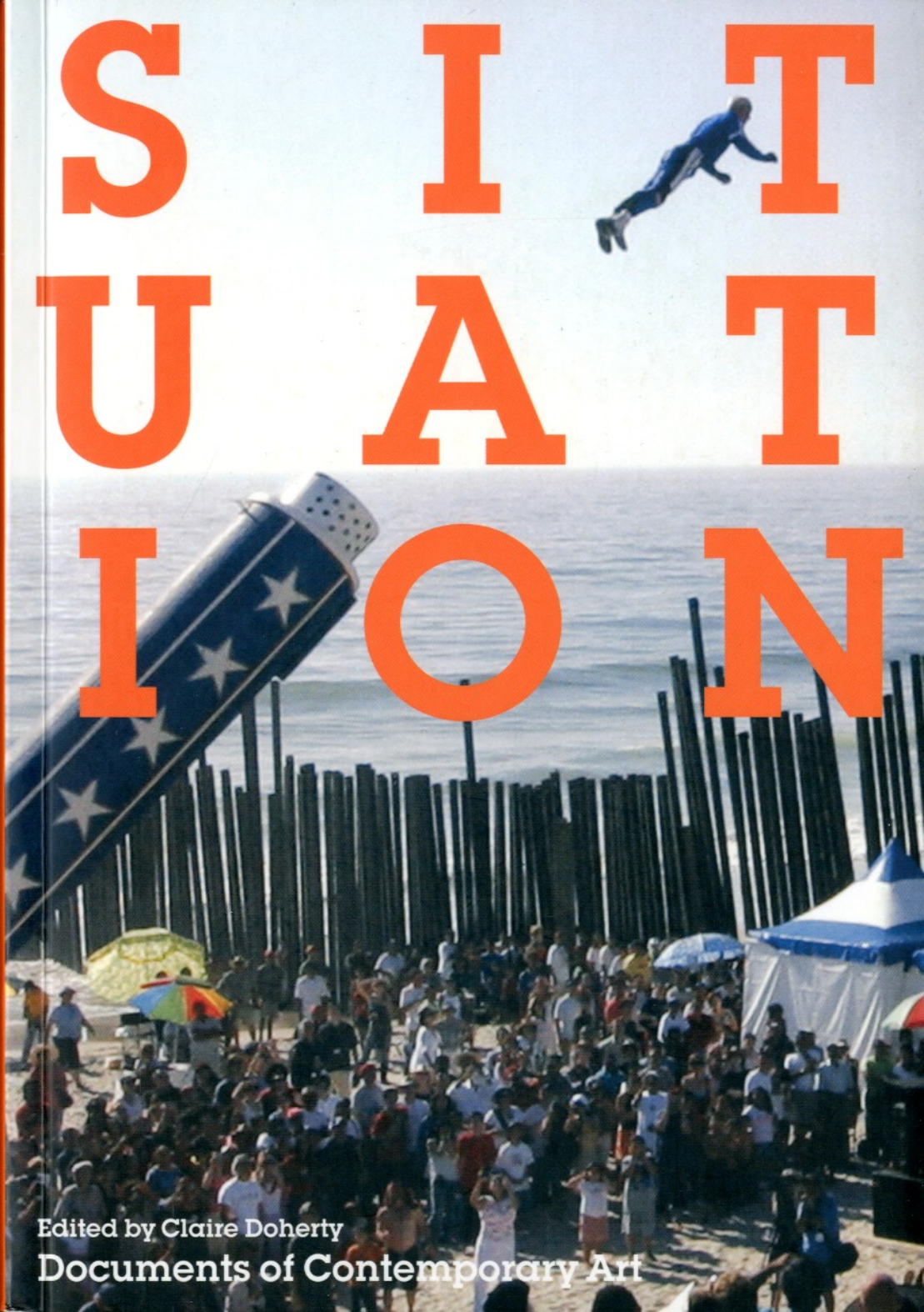




Edited by Claire Doherty
Documents of Contemporary Art

Whitechapel Gallery
London
The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

S I T U A T I O N

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Co-published by Whitechapel Gallery
and The MIT Press

First published 2009
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Gallery Ventures Limited

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ISBN 978-0-85488-173-4 (Whitechapel Gallery)
ISBN 978-0-262-51305-0 (The MIT Press)

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Situation / edited by Claire Doherty.
p. cm. — (Whitechapel, documents
of contemporary art)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-262-51305-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Arts, Modern—20th century. 2. Avant-garde
(Aesthetics)—History—20th century. I. Doherty,
Claire.
NX456.S538 2009
709.04—dc22

2009015617

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Whitechapel Gallery



Series Editor: Iwona Blazwick
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Project Editor: Hannah Vaughan
Design by SMITH: Namkwan Cho, Justine Schuster
Printed in China

Cover, Javier Téllez, *One Flew over the Void (Bala Perdida)* (2005). Single channel video projection of
action performed on the border of Mexico and the
United States. © Javier Téllez.

Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Limited
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London E1 7QX
www.whitechapelgallery.org
To order (UK and Europe) call +44 (0)207 522 7888
or email MailOrder@whitechapelgallery.org
Distributed to the book trade (UK and Europe only)
by Central Books
www.centralbooks.com

The MIT Press
55 Hayward Street
Cambridge, MA 02142
MIT Press books may be purchased at special
quantity discounts for business or sales
promotional use. For information, please email
special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu or write to Special
Sales Department, The MIT Press, 55 Hayward
Street, Cambridge, MA 02142

Documents of Contemporary Art

In recent decades artists have progressively expanded the boundaries of art as they have sought to engage with an increasingly pluralistic environment. Teaching, curating and understanding of art and visual culture are likewise no longer grounded in traditional aesthetics but centred on significant ideas, topics and themes ranging from the everyday to the uncanny, the psychoanalytical to the political.

The Documents of Contemporary Art series emerges from this context. Each volume focuses on a specific subject or body of writing that has been of key influence in contemporary art internationally. Edited and introduced by a scholar, artist, critic or curator, each of these source books provides access to a plurality of voices and perspectives defining a significant theme or tendency.

For over a century the Whitechapel Gallery has offered a public platform for art and ideas. In the same spirit, each guest editor represents a distinct yet diverse approach – rather than one institutional position or school of thought – and has conceived each volume to address not only a professional audience but all interested readers.

Series Editor: Iwona Blazwick; Commissioning Editor: Ian Farr; Project Editor: Hannah Vaughan;
Executive Director: Tom Wilcox; Editorial Advisory Board: Roger Conover, Neil Cummings, Mark Francis, David Jenkins, Gilane Tawadros

defining situation and defining it, it re-translates it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present. There is a kind of complexity which comes from taking an otherwise completely normal, conventional, albeit anonymous

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A museum is a 'public place', but only for those who choose to be a museum public. A museum is a 'simulated' public space: it's auto-directional and uni-functional, whereas a 'real' public space is multi-directional and omni-functional. When you go to a railroad station, you go to catch a train; but, in the meantime, you might be browsing through a shop, or having a drink in a bar, or sitting in a lounge. When you go to a museum, on the other hand, all you are doing is going to the museum. In order to go to the museum, you have to be a museum-goer; you go to the museum in order to continue to be a museum-goer.

What do museum-goers want?

What are you doing here anyway?

The built environment is built because it's been allowed to be built; it's been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or a dominant culture. The budget for architecture is a hundred times the budget for public art, because a building provides jobs and products and services that augment the finances of a city. Public art comes in through the back door, like a second-class citizen. Instead of bemoaning this, public art can use this marginal position to present itself as the voice of marginal cultures as the minority report, as the opposition party. Public art exists to thicken the plot.

Public space is made and not born. What's called 'public space' in a city is produced by a government agency (in the form of a park) or by a private corporation (in the form of a plaza in front of an office building, or an atrium inside the building). What's produced is a 'product': it's bartered, by the corporation, in exchange for air rights, for the rights to build their building higher – it's granted, by the government agency, to people as a public benefit, as part of a welfare system. What's produced is a 'production': a spectacle that glorifies the corporation or the state, or the two working together. The space, then, is *loaned* to the public, bestowed on the public – the people considered as an organized community, members of the state, potential consumers. Public space is a contract: between big and small, parent and child, institution and individual. The agreement is that public space belongs to them, and they in turn belong to the state.

The building of spaces in the city has already been assigned to established disciplines: the vertical is allotted to architecture, the horizontal to landscape

architecture, and the network of lines between and through them to engineering. The city has all the design it needs for another category – 'public art' – to have a function in the design of city spaces, 'art' has to be brought back to one of its root meanings: 'cunning'. Public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city. Its mode of behaviour is to perform operations – what appear to be unnecessary operations – upon the built environment: it adds to the vertical, subtracts from the horizontal, multiplies and divides the network on in-between lines. These operations are superfluous, they replicate what's already there and make it proliferate like a disease. The function of public art is to de-design. [...]

Time is fast, and space is slow. Space is an attempt to place time and understand time; space is a need to have something to see and solid ground to stand on; space is a desire to follow the course of events, and to believe in cause and effect. The electronic age obliterates space and overlaps places. You travel by airplane: you're in one place, then it's all white outside the window, and then – zap! – you're in another place, with nothing in between. You're switching channels on a TV set, rewinding and fast-forwarding a videotape, instead of watching a movie from beginning to end. The electronic age establishes the primacy of time. The video game versus the pinball machine. The push button phone versus the rotary phone. The digital watch versus a clock whose hands travel around a field in which each individual second has a place. In a fast time, public space – in the form of an actual place with boundaries – is a slowing-down process, an attempt to stop time and go back in history and revert to an earlier age. The plaza, bounded by buildings and owned by a corporation, is a nostalgia for nineteenth-century nationalism.

On the one hand, our projects *perform* a site: it's as if we're trying to coax the project out of the site, as if it's been there all the time – the site provides not only the place for the project but also the matter of the project – the project is built *with* the site, *by means* of the site – the architecture grows out of the space around it. On the other hand, it's as if our projects build a scaffolding over the site: it's this scaffolding that can support another site, either on top of or within the old one – a future city, a city in the air, precisely because it *wasn't* there all the time.

Vito Acconci, excerpted statements from 'Leaving Home: Notes on Insertions into the Public', lecture for the International Congress on 'Public Art' at the Academy of Fine Arts (Munich, February 2000); in Florian Matzner, ed., *Public Art: A Reader* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004) 29–30; 31.