The word critique has attained a bad name in the 1980s. The way in which the word was deployed was only in reference to that which beats its opponent into submission. But if we think about criticality as embracing a more expansive field of reading, I would think of my work as being a critique of site-specificity. The site-specific seems to be grounded in a very particular location and a particular time, and all information is related to this. But when you take any of these coordinates, space and time, and you compound them, the model doesn’t seem to hold up.¹

In recent years, the exploration of site has again become a privileged investigation. The current fascination with the art of the 1960s and early 1970s, a phenomenon of scholarship and practice, has resuscitated the idioms of Pop, scatter work, identity-based activist art and performance, modes of Conceptualism, and Minimalism’s serial syntax: contemporary explorations of site recall the legacies of earth art and institutional critique. In these practices the languages and strategies of now historical activities are hybridized, displaced. The comparative interest of such work lies, in part, in the “success” of these revisitations—whether the adaptation of previous modes to emerging content has resulted in something unexpected, or a project that seems uninformed, awkward, or frankly, dull. The necessity to make such a determination is, I think, a pressing task of the critique of contemporary work.

How then to assess one subset of recent work—the site explorations of Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Tom Burr, Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Ursula Biemann, and Stephen Prina, for example? How have these producers addressed, or (as I will argue here) transformed the notion of site-specificity as it emerged during the early years of institutional critique and earthworks, revising the assumptions implicit to this model to reflect upon the globalized, multicultural ambience of the present day? How do we assess this work within a broader field of activity that explores institutional frameworks and locations? The present discussion will pursue these questions.

The primary distinction I wish to make concerns two notions of site: a literal site and a mobile or functional site. The literal site is, as Joseph Kosuth would say, in situ; it is an actual location, a singular place.² The artist’s intervention conforms to the physical constraints of this situation, even if (or precisely when) it would subject this to critique. The work’s formal outcome is thus determined by a physical place, by an understanding of the place as actual. Reflecting a perception of the site as unique, the work is itself “unique.” It is thus a kind of monument, a public work commissioned for the site. The civic sculptures of Richard Serra exemplify this approach. “The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their location.”³ In the case of Tilted Arc, we have, in place of a traditional monument (a memorial to an event or person) or the decorative monument of late modernism (the Calder or Picasso dominating a corporate plaza), a critical monument with claims to resistance. Inextricable from its location in Federal Plaza, a setting it overwhelmed, Serra’s sculpture imbued the premise of site-specificity with a newfound monumentality and permanence. Serra was “making a permanent work” for “a specific place.”⁴ Reversing the terms of his early splashings and pourings, which thematized their transcendence through a motivation of process,⁵ Tilted Arc was designed to stand in Federal Plaza in perpetuity, much like the Neo-Classical courthouse it faced, countering its symbology of transcendent order with a phenomenology of critique.

In contrast, the mobile site may or may not incorporate a physical place: it certainly does not privilege this place. Instead, it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations, and the bodies that move between them (the artist’s above all). It is as an informational site, a
palimpsest of text, photographs and video recordings, physical places and things: an allegorical site, to recall Craig Owens’ term, aptly coined to describe Smithson’s polymatic enterprise, whose vectored and discursive notion of “place” opposes Serra’s phenomenological model. It is no longer an obdurate steel wall, attached to the plaza for eternity. On the contrary, the functional work refuses the intransigence of literal site-specificity. It is a temporary thing: a movement; a chain of meanings and imbricated histories; a place marked and swiftly abandoned. The mobile site thus courts its destruction; it is willfully temporary; its nature is not to endure but to come down.

To be sure, earlier institutional critique did much to expose the functional or informational character of the gallery and museum. In this sense, artists like Dion, Müller, Green, Fraser, Burr, and Prina have merely developed the inquiry introduced in the work of Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Mel Bochner, and Michael Asher, which displaced the phenomenological site of the Minimal installation into a critical reflection on the gallery itself. However, these activities were, for the most part, site-specific; the force of their critiques were due, in part, to their confinement to a particular place. What were the benefits of this literal orientation? To begin with, site-specificity was understood, in its very constitution, as a mode of refusal of the system of art’s commodification. Locating its critique within the gallery or museum, the site-specific work exposed this space as a material entity, a no-longer neutral place, a backdrop for the merchandising of portable art objects. For, as Douglas Crimp argued, the modern museum developed in concert with the production and consumption of “homeless” works of art, whose aesthetic and commercial value it affirmed. It was claimed that site-specificity would impede this process:

The Idealism of modern art, in which the art object in and of itself was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning, determined the object’s placelessness, its belonging to no particular place, a no-place that was in reality the museum—the actual museum and the museum as a representation of the institutional system of circulation that also comprises the artist’s studio, the commercial gallery, the collector’s home... Site-specificity opposed that idealism—and unveiled the material system it obscured—by its refusal of circulatory mobility, its belongingness to a specific site.

Twenty-five years after the first installations of Buren, Haacke and Asher, we might begin to question the efficacy of such claims (the valorization of site-specificity by its postmodernist supporters has yet to occasion a critical reply)—to what extent site-specificity accomplished the desired disruption of the commodity system through its vaunted “refusal of circulatory mobility,” and moreover whether a practice grounded in a Marxist materialist analysis alone remains practicable or even desirable today. But let us first consider another claim made on behalf of site-specificity, which concerned the viewer. Deferring attention from the portable modernist work to the gallery, the site-specific installation was said to render one conscious of one’s body existing within this ambience. The body of site-specificity was a physicalized body, aware of its surroundings: a body of heightened critical acuity. The viewer of the modernist work, in contrast, was purportedly blind to its ideological nature. Thus the premise of site-specificity to locate the work in a single place, and only there, bespoke the 1960s call for Presence, the demand for the experience of “being there.” An underlying topos of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, of the Happening and performance, Presence became an aesthetic and ethical cri de coeur among the generation of artists and critics who emerged in the 1960s, suggesting an experience of actualness and authenticity that would contravene the depredations of an increasingly mediated, “one dimensional” society. An antidote to McLuhanism, to popular culture’s virtual pleasures and blind consumerism, the aesthetics of Presence imposed rigorous, even Puritanical demands; attendance at a particular site or performance; an extended, often excruciating duration.

Thus the notion of site-specificity allied a New Left critique of consumer culture with a phenomenology of Presence, a spectatorship that unfolded in “real time and space.” Here we see the origins of site-specificity in the aesthetics of Minimalism. Buren’s canvas installations, the wall displacements of Asher and Lawrence Weiner, and Bochner’s Measurements built upon the phenomenological inquiries of artists like Robert Morris and Dan Flavin, who exposed the viewing conditions of the “white cube” through a solicitation of Presence. As Crimp observed, “Minimal sculpture launched an attack on the prestige of the artist and artwork, granting that prestige instead to the situated spectator, whose self-conscious perception of the Minimal object in relation to the site of its installation produced the work’s meaning.” This displacement from work to frame, from the portable modernist sculpture to an environmental practice located in the literal space of the viewer, was characterized by Michael Fried as the distinction between “art” and “theater.”

Site-specificity had a more implicit, and less recognized, theoretical source: the modernist topos of reflexivity. Modernist reflexivity was a reflexivity of medium, a task Greenberg compared to Kant’s call for Reason to reflect upon the conditions of its immanence. Minimalism displaced the object of reflection from the work’s medium to its ambient space. Institutional critique caused a further displacement, from the exposure of the “white cube” as phenomenological space to a critical exposure of the art institution. Yet, for all its radicality, its materialist commitment, this work still operated within the Kantian cognitive model of reflexivity: it still confined its analysis to the “frame.” The criticality of such
work could only occur within the physical confines of, or in close proximity to, the gallery site. The functional work explores an "expanded" site: the "art world," in this activity, becomes a site within a network of sites, an institution among institutions. To be sure, previous institutional critique demonstrated the financial and ideological ties of the gallery to greater economic and political structures. The System Aesthetics of Haacke posited a vectored and constitutive relationship between the museum and its corporate patrons, trustees, etc., while Asher's interventions in American museums, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, revealed the political and nationalist agendas of these institutions. But the final focus of this work was the art system per se. Today, much practice explores an "expanded" site, enlarging its scope of inquiry into contingent spheres of interest, contingent locations. This expanded institutional critique is as much at home in natural history and anthropological collections, in zoos, parks, housing projects, and public bathrooms, as in the art gallery or museum; it may engage several sites, institutions, and collaborators at once. The ostensible subject of Platwechsel, an exhibition organized by the Kunsthalle Zürich in 1995, was the Platzspitz Park, a greenspace located in the city's center. The show itself occurred at a number of locations: the Swiss National Museum, which borders the park (both the turrets on the upper floor and the loggia below), the Kunsthalle, as well as the apartment of a local dealer. Devoid of a unique place, Platwechsel led the viewer on a "tour" from one landmark to the next. Moreover the collaborative nature of Platwechsel, which included work by Dion, Biemann, Müller, and Burr, resulted in a project that reflected four distinct points of view. The "work" was thus not a single entity, the installation of an individual artist in a given place. It was, on the contrary, a function occurring between these locations and points of view, a series of expositions of information and place. As the visitor toured the "show" in its different venues, gleaned information from project to project, s/he accumulated a broadening knowledge of the Platzspitz's past. And in the course of this viewing the history of Zürich itself began to unfold.

For some time now, artists, inspired by feminist, postcolonial and psychoanalytic writings, by the social philosophy of Michel Foucault and cultural studies, have analyzed a spectrum of public institutions and places. However, the exploration of an "expanded" site may produce differing results: projects reflect the specific interests, educations, and formal decisions of the producer. While some artists who work in this vein do so from a functional understanding of site, still others reveal a literal site orientation. For example, Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore (1992–1993) was a striking commentary on this city's racist past. In preparing the show, Wilson used only

the artifacts and galleries of the particular institution. Praised in the popular press, Mining the Museum was attacked by critics who claimed the show reproduced the conventions of ethnographic analysis (the outside researcher, invited by local authorities, briefly visits the place, collects the data, presents the results, then moves on). Wilson's own position—as a "critical artist," or as an African-American invited to "represent" the African-American community of Baltimore—was never analyzed. In recent years, a similar critique has developed in European cities in response to the current wave of site critique. Only a local artist, an artist whose identity is "the same" as that of the constituency being represented, these critics argue, should be invited to produce such work. Now a functional practice, insofar as it traces the artist's movements through and around the institution, invests his or her subjectivity within the work. Foregrounding the discursive nature of identity, it confounds the notion of a stable authorial self. On the contrary, in the most serious work, the artist-traveler or "nomad" is a deeply historicized subject. Fraser and Müller's project for the Austrian Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale considered the nationalist protocols of the international art fair, which traces its origins to nineteenth-century trade shows. In the ad campaign announcing their participation, the artists posed in traditional Austrian costume in a Viennese café, counterfeiting and ironizing the Biennale's premise of national cultural representation (neither Müller nor Fraser is Austrian). Müller, in his own project, further estranged the notion of "Austrianness." Traveling across the Austrian border to each of its neighboring countries without the proper visas, he enacted a series of "illegal" immigrations, marking these crossings with postcards mailed to his Vienna dealer from these frontier stations. Simulating the illegal immigrant's trials, Müller's gesture thematized the blurring of national identity at this historical moment of internationalism and late capitalist organization, when nationalist ideologies have returned with a vengeance.

The mobile site suggests a distinct genealogy: Happenings; situationalism; Richard Long's walks; On Kawara's postcards; Tadashi Kawamata's temporary shanty towns and scaffolding; Andre Cadere's Barres de Bois Rond, which followed the artist through the streets of Paris. More recently, the activism of ACT UP examined the various authorities connected with the AIDS epidemic as a sequence of site-specific critiques. Traveling to the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, Wall Street, etc., AIDS activists developed a critical practice that traversed a spectrum of medical, political, religious, and financial institutions. For ACT UP, "place" had a symbolic as well as literal meaning: one journeyed to each institution not simply to protest its operations, but to expose these to the media's attention. As much as any recent practice, AIDS activism demonstrated the postmodernist premise, associated with the writings of Foucault, the art of
Kruger and Holzer, etc., that information is material. As Simon Watney, Cindy Patton, Paula Treichler, and others have argued, the psychology and treatment of the disease—the facts of AIDS—are inextricable from their representation. And one of the effects of this Foucaultian assumption was that place could not be a purely experienced thing—as the "white cube" of Minimalism or the phenomenological site of Serra suggested—but was itself a social and discursive entity.

The work of Robert Smithson bears particular mention here. In the allegorical practice of Smithson described by Owens, the work exists in the overlap of textual account, photographic and filmic recording, guided tours by the artist, and the literal site. Place, in Smithson, is a series of vectored relations: the physical site is a destination to be seen, or left behind, a "tour" recalled through snapshots and travelogues, fondly (or irreverently) remembered. It is temporarily experienced (the Yucatan quicksand does not allow for dilly-dallying, if it is seen at all, Spiral jetty sank soon after its completion). Site as a unique, demarcated place available to perceptual experience alone—the phenomenological site of Serra or the critical site of institutional critique—becomes a network of sites referring to an elsewhere. In the non-site, the maps and rock containers point to the quarries from which the materials have been drawn: the site refers to the gallery or magazine context of the non-site. Spiral jetty loosened this dialectical model into a multipartite sequence of representations and literal sites. "Like the non-site, the jetty is not a discrete work, but one link in a chain of signifiers which summon and refer to one another in a dizzy spiral," Owens writes. "For where else does Spiral jetty exist except in the film which Smithson made, the narrative he published, the photographs which accompany that narrative, and the various maps, diagrams, drawings, etc. he made about it?"

At Platzwechsel, the installations and texts set up a semantic chain that traversed physical borders; the Kunsthalle itself was transformed into an elaborate non-site, a fabric of allusions. A concrete plinth built by Müller recalled a monument to the Swiss Romantic poet Salomon Gessner located in the park; a wooden "surveillance booth" above referred to the turrets of the Swiss National Museum (once used by the police to monitor the park's notorious drug scene), the medieval Hardturm, Zurich's oldest tower, on which their design was based (just down the street, Hardturmstrasse, from the Kunsthalle itself), an observation station across the river from the Platzspitz, also used to survey the drug trade, and the art dealer's apartment to which the turrets' windows were removed. The lines between private and public life, of observer and observed, of historical and present-day experience were mutually imbricated.

Burr's displacement of flora and earth from the Platzspitz to a container in the Kunsthalle recalled the park as it existed in the 1970s—the seemingly placid interlude before the onslaught of the drug culture during the 1980s, a period when the Platzspitz was known principally as a site of gay male assignation. The oral accounts of the park's visitors of those years, assembled by Burr in the Kunsthalle, reinscribed the park in personal and discursive history. For these individuals the Platzspitz was less a physical place than an object of memory, a symbol of a "quieter" time before liberation and AIDS. For gay men in their twenties, whose accounts were also recorded, it had none of these associations, however; they could only remember the park as a drug market.

The mobile site is an in-between site, a non-place, a ruin. Whereas the critical monument of Serra wishes to dominate a civic plaza, Smithson's "monument" is entropic, a run-down factory, a polluted marsh, a wasteland stretching between city and country, a "sturb." The Platzspitz park is such a "monument." Once at the edge of the Baroque city, it is now Zurich's center. Yet it is an empty center, a not-usable place between industrial, civic, and natural boundaries (the National Museum, the train station, the Limmat and Sihl rivers, the warehouses and factories beyond). It has remained willfully unassimilated to official life: "The Platzspitz became a place of refuge for various fringe groups in the 20th century," we read in a recent account. "The revival attempts of the most varied kinds [including the restoration of 1991] were able to do little to change this" because of its "isolated location." It is the kind of space the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described as nomadic, a shifting or deterritorialized site at odds with sedentary, striated space, the organized ambiance of the polis; a space inhab-
Ited by nomadic peoples or "fringe groups." The nomad "goes from one point to another..." Deleuze and Guattari write. "Every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is only between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own." For all its renovations—the official attempts to evacuate unwanted groups—the park resists territorialization. During the period of its most recent restoration, in the early 1990s, the Platzspitz was closed. Yet the drug culture merely changed its location (Platzwechsel), penetrating to other, less visible zones. The function of the Platzspitz as nomos has continued after the abandonment of the literal site. In other words, the nomos remains at the heart of the polis, a fact the polis politely ignores. "What counts for me is that what you don't see is OK," as one official put it.

Much current work explores a mobile notion of site and a "nomadic" subjectivity. The travel snapshots of Martha Rosler; Gabriel Orozco's floating balls, hammocks, and yellow scooters; Rirkrit Tiravanija's tents and "dinners" (which, performed from one gallery to the next, mark the artist's peregrinations); Nils Norman's Geocruser; Christopher Williams' photographs; and the practices of Burr, Fraser, Mullan, Dion, Green, and Prina have emerged at a time of multinational conglomerates and mergers, of instantaneous satellite transmission and the Internet. The shabby traveling salesman of yesteryear has devolved into the Frequent Flyer, an international flâneur who moves in a kind of perpetual motion. A relative democratization of travel, and dissolution of formerly closed borders, has fostered a more general itinerary. Thus the displacement from the literal site of the 1960s, grounded in the verities of phenomenological experience, to a mobile, mediated placement follows the global expansion of capitalism itself, the triumph of the "free" market predicted by Mandel and Jameson in now classic studies. During the late 1990s, the late capitalist model that developed during the 1960s—the consumer culture site-specificity sought to resist—reached a new apogee.

The most convincing site-related work not only represents, or enacts, this mobility, but critically reflects on these shifting parameters. Secret, a work by Renée Green produced for two different shows, Project Unité curated by Yves Aupertélatot at Firminy, France, in 1993, and a group exhibition in New York, documented the artist's peripatetic existence in a globalized art ambience. Structured as an autobiographical narrative, Green's installation recounted the artist's experience working within the confines of Aupertélatot's site-specific schema, located in a housing project designed by Le Corbusier. Assigned a small apartment, like the other participants, she installed a tent that served as her sleeping quarters for the show's duration. This shelter within a shelter alluded to the "nomadic" artist's plight of never standing still. As Green suggests, to be a working practitioner today is to be constantly on the move. The conditions of
context-based work are hardly optimum. The artist must work within the parameters of often unfocused curatorial concepts, and is often not paid for his or her efforts. The interaction of the local community and art world interlopers can range from hostile to indifferent, and indeed Secret speaks to a lack of contact between the artists at Unité and the building's working-class Algerian inhabitants, as well as Green's identity as an African-American artist working in a diasporic housing project. Her representation of Secret at American Fine Arts in New York a few months later created a vectored relationship between the two venues. A box containing copies of Émile Zola's novel Germinal, which discusses the working class society of nineteenth-century Firmi, reffered both to Unité's blue-collar inhabitants and to Green's own experience of having read Zola's account of Firmi while working there, while allusions to fellow participants Dion and Burr, and to the show's curators, brought the narrative full circle.20

Stephen Prina's Galerie Max Hetzler (1991), in its multiple incarnations, suggests a concept of mobile site activity as indefinite deferral. The first version of the work, at Hetzler's Unger-designed gallery in Cologne, on the Venloerstrasse, appeared to be a sitespecific institutional critique in the manner of Michael Asher's and Daniel Buren's installations at Claire Copley Gallery in the mid-1970s, those classic revelations of the phenomenological and economic congruency of the white cube.21 As literal site installations, the Copley exhibitions depended on

the spectator's presence, the experience of being there in that space, at that time. The Hetzler piece established a vectored spatio-temporalitity that transgressed the phenomenological co-presence of site-specificity. The 9 architectural models and 163 archival shots of all the exhibitions held by Hetzler and presented, in systematic order, on both floors of the Unger's building, recorded the gallery's seventeen-year progress till that point in various spaces in Frankfurt, Cologne, and Los Angeles, and the history of German-American art-world exchange during this period, in which the gallery played a significant role. Rather than being a reflection on the Unger's space as such, the project traced the gallery's reincarnation across multiple past (and future) sites: the installation already pointed to its reinstallation at another Hetzler space in Santa Monica, in an exhibition in Rotterdam, and most recently, at Petzel Gallery in New York. In other words, the work has continued to be shown long after the closing of the Cologne space, after Hetzler's removal of his gallery to the more fashionable Berlin. Whereas Green's Secret is subtly transformed with each reintallment and thus formally registers its mobilization, the Hetzler project is distinctly nonadaptive: it fails to accommodate to new spaces; its form is unchanging. For example, the diagonal sequence of photographs designed to hang along the stairwell at Venloerstrasse, which in the "original" version of the installation was interrupted at the mezzanine where a Günther Förg wall painting was installed, remains stubbornly present in subsequent versions of the work, where the line of images is re-presented, at the same angle as the stairway, on an open wall, a trace of the original exhibition and of the Unger space that no longer exists. The Hetzler project, as it has unfolded, encodes site-specificity as memory or absence; it marks the transience, the shifting-ness, of place itself in a transnational art market that dooms most galleries and artists
to a rapid obsolescence. (It was, of course, this system of production and consumption of the art commodity that site-specificity sought to resist.) Prina’s work not only marks the passing of site-specificity as a premise of advanced work during the early 1990s; it mourns the conceptual purity and anti-commodity dreams of site-specificity itself as it emerged during the 1970s.

Let me conclude with two other projects that have explored the transnational tendency within a context of German-American art-world exchange. Fraser’s *Cologne Presentation Book* (1990) and Müller’s 1994 installation *Interpellations* tell the story of German-American cultural relations in parallel fashion. Produced for her first show in Germany, Fraser’s volume records the history of this exchange since World War II, interspersing accounts of political events (the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the opening of the US Information Agency, anti-Vietnam War protests, the fall of the Berlin Wall) with cultural ones (the importation of MoMA’s *New American Painting* in 1958, the triumph of Pop at Documenta IV, etc.), a narrative that concludes with Fraser’s entrance as a participant in the 1990 Cologne Art Fair. Müller’s installation, presented at American Fine Arts Gallery in New York, was a sequence of vitrines containing German and English guidebooks to SoHo. Produced before the gallery district’s recent decline, Müller’s textual interpellations swiftly guide the tourist to American Fine Arts and other “hot” galleries, as well as boutiques and restaurants, with ironic expediency, quenching the German art lover’s thirst for the new (for what does America represent but rapid innovation?). A related project by Müller, a “bookcase” presented in New York a few years earlier, told this story in reverse. Not an actual bookcase but a wooden solid, it was covered in wallpaper depicting rows of European “classics,” an allusion to the old American fantasy of Europe as High Culture’s guardian. Inserting catalogues of his previous shows in slats between the depicted volumes, Müller offered himself as the latest European import in a longer history of cultural exchange. Though executed for specific shows, all of these projects explore the cross-cultural fantasies of the other, and the transformation of the “art world” itself in a period of rapid globalization. Alluding to other points of departure and return, they posit a model of place that is, like the subject who passes through it, mobile and contingent. In so doing, these works suggest nothing less than a displacement of the 1960s-generated notion of site-specificity.