Title
Site Insecurities: Thomas Hirschhorn's *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* (1997 and on)

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Site Insecurities: Thomas Hirschhorn’s
Skulptur-Sortier-Station (1997 and on)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Art History

by

Nicholas Kenji Machida

2012
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Site Insecurities: Thomas Hirschhorn’s
Skulptur-Sortier-Station (1997 and on)

by

Nicholas Kenji Machida

Master of Arts in Art History
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Miwon Kwon, Chair

This paper is a study of Skulptur-Sortier-Station (1997), a sculpture by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn (1957-), which was first realized for the third “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster,” an international exhibition that takes place every ten years in Germany. Attending closely to the work’s unique material qualities, the circumstances of its original realization, and the implications of its subsequent reiterations in other European cities, this paper argues that Skulptur-Sortier-Station proposes a new sculptural syntax by destabilizing received notions of the relation between object and site.

The work’s site condition is such that it engages (in order to ultimately reject) the modernist model of sculpture as autonomous and nomadic, as well as the postmodernist model of sculpture as site-
specific and context-bound. Repeatedly dismantled and reconstructed in a potentially ongoing series of locations, *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* is a precarious physical structure that inhabits and produces a precarious spatial condition. I argue that this precariousness is in itself a contemporary sculptural value for Hirschhorn and is related to theories of “non-place,” a new paradigm of contemporary space as decentered and transient.
The thesis of Nicholas Kenji Machida is approved.

George Thomas Baker
Donald F. McCallum
Miwon Kwon, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2012
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I. INTRODUCTION

It is an unidentifiable object, the size of a small building, situated on an unremarkable European urban plaza. It blocks footpaths and invites confused stares. Not quite monumental, its construction is more self-effacing than imposing; not quite architectural, it seems everywhere provisional and structurally unstable. Its utilitarian and roughly-treated materials -- plywood, cardboard, transparent plastic foil, adhesive tape -- make it appear not only temporary, but seemingly born out of rushed necessity. Indeed it will soon disappear.

Commissioned as part of the exhibition "Skulptur. Projekte in Münster," this squat rectangular structure of approximately 8 x 26 x 16 feet situated adjacent to Münster’s Rosenplatz existed for a mere three months, from June to September in 1997. During this time, it presented itself as an alien body in the city’s midst. Brightly lit from within, both day and night, by fluorescent lights, its interior was organized into a set of ten equally-proportioned rooms. Walking around the construction, unable to enter it, one looked into the uninhabitable rooms through transparent foil sheets set into cardboard frames. Akin to shop windows, they framed a series of displays. One room contained objects based in signs and symbols of the everyday: A grouping of oversized foil logos recognizable as those of Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz, a series of flat cardboard and foil cut-outs imitative of the Attic outlines and high gloss of sports trophies, and a miniature arena of stepped shelves crowded with postcards and posters of famous sculptures. Other rooms contained amorphous protuberances that resembled tears or stalactites and stalagmites,
constituting a grotesque mimicry of organic forms made out of aluminum foil. Some rooms contained videos on small monitors. In one of these, a man attempted to construct a sculpture out of empty Marlboro cigarette cartons, his efforts frustrated as the component parts repeatedly failed to add up to sturdiness. Another video showed an unidentified modernist sculpture in a park. More sculptural content was on display through yet another window, in the form of an abstract assemblage of cardboard and plywood displayed against a stark yellow background. As such, the construction displayed a vast array of things: Natural and cultural forms, trophies and posters, videos and little sculptures. But overall these component parts defied any attempts at cohering or stabilizing analysis. Their collective meaning, like the structural character of the structure itself, appeared to be precarious.¹

At first we might attempt a name for this structure by calling it a parodic store, a derelict museum, an informational kiosk gone schizophrenically awry, a makeshift shelter mysteriously repurposed, a pathetic full-scale mock-up of some future, permanent architecture. Its sense of being at once unclassifiable as a structural type and

¹ Hal Foster has taken up some implications of the concept of precariousness in Hirschhorn’s work, particularly in regard to the artist’s Monuments (see appendix 1). Though the word precarious will play a significant role in my own analysis of Hirschhorn’s sculpture, the terms of my engagement with this concept are distinct from those of Foster, who focuses on the precarious socioeconomic condition of certain populations engaged through Hirschhorn’s participatory works (of which the Monuments serve as the most prominent example). Foster offers as evidence Hirschhorn’s decision to place his Spinoza Monument (1999) in the red-light district of Amsterdam, the Deleuze Monument (2000) in a mostly North African quarter of Avignon, and the Bataille Monument (2002) in a largely Turkish neighborhood of Kassel -- all urban areas marked by a degree of social or political precariousness. See Hal Foster, “Toward a Grammar of Emergency,” in Thomas Hirschhorn, Establishing a Critical Corpus (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2011), 164-165.
impermanent in its material qualities leads us to believe it could be any of these things. Yet categorically it is a sculpture by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, and its title -- Skulptur-Sortier-Station (Sculpture Sorting Station) -- signals an interest in the sculptural medium itself.

The occasion for the work’s initial appearance adjacent to Münster’s Rosenplatz, in the central district of the city and beside a paper and glass recycling depot, was the third iteration of the exhibition “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster” (Sculpture Projects in Münster). Initiated in 1977, “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster” is a group exhibition of contemporary sculpture that occurs every ten years. Organized by Klaus Bußman and Kasper König, each iteration of the exhibition sees several international artists invited to create temporary sculptural projects in this “urbanized, central European [German] small-big city with a historical infrastructure.”² Over the course of its history the exhibition has sought, according to its organizers, to “explore the possibilities of art in public space”³ -- an aim tied to the larger art historical context of its inception in the mid-1970s. The redefinition of sculpture underway at that historical moment consisted not only in debunking the modernist notion of the sculpture as an autonomous object in space, but also insisting on sculpture’s engagement of a specific site as newly fundamental to its meaning. One year after the first “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster,”

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² Klaus Bußman, Kasper König, and Florian Matzner, preface to Contemporary Sculpture. Projects in Münster (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 3-5.
³ Ibid., 3. Some of these projects become permanent, acquired by the city or by the local Landesmuseum; others, such as Hirschhorn’s Skulptur-Sortier-Station, are deinstalled after the exhibition has run its course.
the historian and critic Rosalind Krauss would name this condition “sculpture in the expanded field” in a highly influential essay of the same name.\(^4\) Initially conceived in response to this larger paradigm shift, the Münster exhibition has continued to serve as a prominent forum for the simultaneous questioning of sculpture’s continued viability as a unique artistic medium and communal public space’s viability as a unique type of site for sculpture.

Given the context of the post-WWII period’s revisions of the status of sculpture, especially in terms of a work’s relationship to its public setting, Hirschhorn’s *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* must be understood as a complex and ambivalent confrontation with that problematic at the end of the 20\(^{th}\) century. In fact, Hirschhorn’s work attained recognition in the late 1990s as a significant contribution to the field of contemporary sculpture through *Skulptur-Sortier-Station*, with emphasis placed on the experiential aspect of its peculiar material contents.\(^5\) The critical reception of the artist’s

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\(^4\) Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44; reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 276-90. Krauss articulates sculpture’s expanded field by tracing the proliferation of sculptural practices that structurally account for the architecture or landscape of their public setting, conditions conventionally understood as part of the neutral backdrop of a sculptural object.


An interest in Hirschhorn’s work as experience or event continues beyond 1997 and the project in Munster in the writings of Claire Bishop and Hal Foster. Bishop puts forth Hirschhorn’s *Bataille Monument* (2002) as a model of what she calls “relational antagonism,” a mode of participatory art that insists simultaneously on the maintenance of a certain degree of autonomy in artistic practice and the presupposition of the viewer as “a subject of independent thought.” See Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and
work attempted to account for the sculpture’s basis in an unfathomably complex, chaotic accumulation of readymade and sculpted objects, all with a strong throwaway aesthetic. At the same time, critics appeared equally compelled by the work’s status as a sensational, fleeting event, a temporal point on the global art world circuit defined by temporary exhibitions such as the one in Münster. This emphasis over the last decades on Hirchhorn’s work as an experience or event, however, has been at the expense of addressing how his work also takes seriously, and complicates, the terms specific to the relation between sculpture and the place of its realization.

My argument will be that Hirchhorn’s work proposes a new sculptural syntax by destabilizing received notions of the relation between object and site. I will argue that Hirchhorn’s work incorporates key elements from both a modernist model of sculpture as an autonomous entity in space and a postmodernist model of sculpture as bound to its spatial context. By extension, his work comes to encompass these two historically circumscribed understandings of space itself: The modernist idea of space as abstract and continuous, as well as the postmodernist idea of spatial context as specific and

Relational Aesthetics,” in October 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79. Hal Foster argues that Hirchhorn’s accumulations of mass cultural material and information “often suggests a grotesquerie of our immersive commodity-media-entertainment environment.” Yet Foster sees these grotesqueries as sites where the viewer might be activated as a historical or political subject, as long as she understands the work as the expression of a libidinal economy linking Hirchhorn to the historical figures the artist admires, and (by extension) the unfinished utopian political projects embodied by those figures. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse” in October 110 (Fall 2004): 3-22.

6 See, for example, David Joselit, “Truth or Dare: The Art of Witnessing,” in Artforum 50.1 (2011); 312-317; and Claire Bishop, “’And That is What Happened Here’” in Thomas Hirshhorn, Establishing a Critical Corpus (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2011), 6-51.
differential. Yet the work instantiates a sense of space that is neither continuous with the latter nor a return to the former.

Rather, Hirschhorn’s work finds its conceptual coordinates in, and responds to, newer conditions of space as defined by experiences of transience and circulation rather than a stable constellation of unique places -- a condition which anthropologist Marc Augé has termed “non-places,” a category of space that is not “relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.”

Neither universal and homogenous nor localized and specific, non-places are a product of the late 20th century whose divestment of uniqueness or locational value (Augé identifies transit centers or large retail outlets as examples) has come to characterize the contemporary global landscape to a significant degree. Places that one passes through, rather than stably inhabits, non-places are also marked by a sense of instability and impermanence, the very qualities that appear to define Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s site beside an unremarkable recycling depot on a nondescript urban corner.

Indeed, Hirschhorn’s work suggests how sculpture, as a sited object, might or should behave within the context of these broader spatial vicissitudes. He proposes that the material composition of sculpture still matters (a reversal of the postmodernist tendency towards the dematerialization of the art object evidenced in the 1960s

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8 Such recycling depots are commonly found in European cities, and so this particular type of facility is not unique to Münster.
emergence of categories such as art as action or art as idea9), yet
that the sculptural material itself must be marked by transience and
impermanence. He proposes that site still matters (his sculpture is
constructed and reconstructed in situ, a rejection of modernist
universality and sitelessness), but that a sculptural site is no
longer a stable node in space and time.

My case study for the exploration of the object-site relation in
the era of non-places is Hirschhorn’s Skulptur-Sortier-Station, which
we have already preliminarily toured. Among Hirschhorn’s major
constructions (see appendix 1), this work arguably presents the most
complex set of challenges to our understanding of sculpture as an art
historical category, especially as it engages concerns of materiality
and site. In what follows, Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s unique object-
site relation will be analyzed at the level of the thematics of its
material contents, its exhibition context (as part of “Skulptur.
Projekte in Münster” 1997), and its history as a sculptural object.10

9 See, for example, critic Lucy Lippard’s 1968 essay “The Dematerialization of Art,” in which Lippard argues for the real possibility of the “object’s becoming wholly obsolete.” The critic argues that the art object was understood by the moment of the late 1960s as merely the product of a conceptual process (if indeed an object persisted at all as part of an artist’s work), and furthermore insisted that the process itself was of primary value to the artist. She listed numerous forerunners and examples, such as Yves Klein’s 1958 “empty gallery” show at Iris Clert Gallery; Claes Oldenburg’s 1967 Placid City Monument, a 3 by 6 foot trench dug and filled in again by union gravediggers behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Joseph Kosuth’s 1968 Lannis Gallery Book Show, consisting of favorite books chosen by a group of artists. See Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” in Art International XII.2 (February 1968): 31-36; reprinted in Changing: Essays in Art Criticism (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971), 255, 261-2.

10 Still it is important to emphasize that Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s condition of instability is also typical of Hirschhorn’s mature practice. For instance, in the late 1990s the artist constructed four “altars” to historical writers and artists made up of loose accumulations of testimonial objects that seemed to erupt spontaneously on street corners or under bridges
II. Sorting Sculpture

The content of Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s rooms, as we have already seen, makes clear Hirschhorn’s interest in taking account of his work’s position within a medium-specific history. Such a coordination of Hirschhorn’s work with key moments in 20th century artistic production has been extensively pursued by the artist’s most rigorous interlocutor, the historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh.\(^\text{11}\) In his most

(see appendix 1); left exposed to the perils of street life, these altars existed only briefly, and were often reconstructed in subsequent versions. As in the case of Skulptur-Sortier-Station, Hirschhorn emphasizes the element of arbitrariness in siting his altars. He explains that all the altars are “situated in locations where [the altar’s subject] could have died by accident, by chance: on a sidewalk, in the street, in a corner.” In locating his work in these characterless places, “very local sites of memory become universal sites of memory.” See Thomas Hirschhorn, “Interview with Okwui Enwezor,” in eds. James Rondeau and Suzanne Ghez, Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 30.

These examples of impermanent structures from Hirschhorn’s oeuvre focus attention on one historical figure, about whom they convey information or to whom they declare charged intellectual and emotive devotion, so that their sittings and re-sittings make a certain amount of sense: They exist in public to assemble a series of audiences around a discrete subject. In contrast, Skulptur-Sortier-Station seems primarily concerned with addressing its own structural state as a precarious object, as if its very logical basis is, paradoxically, this ambivalence about its relationship to a spatial context. \(^\text{11}\) In several essays on Hirschhorn, Buchloh has situated the artist’s work in relation to two art historical binaries: one between Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, the other between Kurt Schwitters and Aleksandr Rodchenko. He particularly emphasizes in this regard Beuys’ “acts of expressive immediacy and demands for socially transparent communication” in opposition to Warhol’s lucidity about the “inextricable intertwining of claims for autonomy and immediate commercial recuperation.” Here he is referring, on the one hand, to Hirschhorn’s insistence on his constructions, particularly those whose subject is a particular writer, philosopher or artist, as activations of the viewer’s political and historical consciousness (akin to Beuys), and, on the other, the artist’s interest in messages conveyed through the mass cultural language of postcard images, car logos, sports trophies, etc. (akin to Warhol). In explicating Hirschhorn’s predilection for the accumulation of found objects at an architectural scale, as well as his interest in informational structures such as kiosks, Buchloh refers his reader to the precedents of Schwitters’ Merzbau (1933) in the former sense and the “communicative actionism” of Rodchenko’s advertising and design work” in the latter sense. Buchloh, “Thomas Hirschhorn: Lay Out Sculpture and Display Diagrams,” in Alison Gingeras et al, Thomas Hirschhorn (London: Phaidon, 2004), 42-43.
comprehensive analysis of Hirschhorn’s work, the essay “Lay Out sculpture and Display Diagrams,” Buchloh focuses on two aspects of Hirschhorn’s mature work: The status of the objects and materials accumulated in the constructions, and the effect that these objects, in their accumulated state, have on the viewer’s experience.

In other words, Buchloh has taken up the task of constructing a syntax to organize the seemingly un-sortable array of objects that make up the artist’s work -- a quality of material excess that immediately strikes one as the defining aesthetic feature of this practice. The critic posits that Hirschhorn’s utilization of materials that have a minimum or absence of symbolic or exchange value -- again, things like cardboard, aluminum foil, plastic sheeting -- should be understood as a statement of opposition against the historical definition of sculptural form as analyzable in terms of volume and mass. Whereas these traditional sculptural values imply a state of permanence and monolithic presence in space, in Hirschhorn’s “system of objects from which all remnants of bodily fullness and spatial situatedness have been removed,” the materials themselves signify debasement and provisional status.

Furthermore, the proliferation of these objects within the spatial framework of a Hirschhorn construction, such that the work has no clear center of meaning or value, has destabilizing implications for the participatory experience of the viewer. Confronted with an overload of information, historical and political references, mass cultural symbols, she is inscribed into a series of fragmentary

\[12\] Ibid., 59.
suggestions of subjective experience that do not add up to a coherent statement of the artist’s subjectivity or an (implied) model of subjectivity for the viewer. Buchloh describes this experience of diffraction within a Hirschhorn work as akin to being locked in the “dialectical potential of anomie and agency.”\[13\] Despite the abundance of objects in Hirschhorn’s constructions, the experience of the viewer, according to Buchloh, ultimately turns upon an absence of stable bearings.

Both of Buchloh’s major claims for Hirschhorn’s work rehearse some of the primary criteria by which sculpture has been historically analyzed. On the one hand, the critic’s argument for the significance of throwaway materials in this practice counterpoints modernist attentiveness to the unique qualities of materials such as bronze or steel. On the other hand, his discussion of the role played by participation in Hirschhorn’s work continues an art historical engagement with the relationship between sculpture and the viewer as embodied, culturally-determined subject (a concept important in different ways to both modernist and postmodernist models of sculpture). Yet the example of Skulptur-Sortier-Station provokes exploration of the ways in which Hirschhorn understands his work as a material object operating within a certain model of space, a categorically distinct concern from the issues of viewer engagement, aesthetic vocabulary, and mass cultural referentiality most pronounced in Buchloh’s interpretations. We have already seen that the work, as a “sculpture sorting station,” takes up sculpture at the thematic level.

\[13\] Ibid., 88.
But even more specifically, its contents appear to further thematize an unstable or ambivalent relationship between the sculptural object and its site.

One of the videos playing in a room of *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* provides a most telling example. The literal subject here is a sculpture by the modernist German artist Otto Freundlich, but the art historical and geographical conditions around that particular sculpture bring up a series of site-based problematics. Hirschhorn’s reference to the Freundlich work encompasses a complex network of geographical, discursive, and historical sites, all in some way related to Münster. We are presented with video footage of two bronze sculptures by Freundlich in Pontoise, a suburb of Paris. The video presentation of the Pontoise works is motivated both by the analogous existence in Münster’s Maria-Euthymia-Platz of another Freundlich sculpture, *Aufstieg* (1929), on permanent display, and by Hirschhorn’s own long-term and passionate engagement with Freundlich as a historical figure. Including this video among the contents of *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* simultaneously establishes a number of analogies and interconnections: 1) within the art historical

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14 Otto Freundlich (1878–1943) was a painter of abstraction associated with the Cologne Progressivists Group and later the Paris-based group Abstraction/Création. He was deported by Nazi Occupation forces in Vichy France and perished in the Maidanek concentration camp. Freundlich’s place in art history is defined by the most fraught of socio-historical circumstances, not only because he was a Jewish artist who perished under the Nazi regime, but also because his abstract work was held up by the Nazis as archetypal of “degenerate” modernism and included on the cover of the catalogue for the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition of 1937.

15 See Benjamin Buchloh’s interview with Hirschhorn, in which the artist discusses his “love” for Freundlich, among several other historical figures. Buchloh, “An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn” in *October* 113 (Summer 2005), 82–4. In evidence of this engagement, Hirschhorn has also dedicated a kiosk and an altar to Freundlich (see appendix 1).
trajectory defined by Hirschhorn’s sculpture and Freundlich’s historical practice; 2) within the geographical feedback between the remote suburb of Pontoise, Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s Münster site, and the nearby Münster park containing a Freundlich sculpture; and finally, 3) within the representational complex outlined by the electronic video image and the material sculptures themselves.

Yet the video’s references to Münster, to the sculpture’s actual urban setting, are both parallactic and indirect. In its subject matter, this video establishes less a distinct claim on the significance of Münster than a set of art historical and geographical references that surround or abut Münster, that make the city into an unstable center of meaning. Which is to say, the content of this video is an allegory of Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s precarious relationship to the site of its realization, as well as the precarious definition of site operative in the work. As we attempt to map this tenuous relationship between Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s Rosenplatz site, the remote suburban setting of the Freundlich works in France, and the Münster park containing Freundlich’s Aufstieg, we see that the video’s true subject is a loose constellation of places, representing a sketchy itinerary of sites. This is the unstable spatial condition that Skulptur-Sortier-Station, as a sculptural object, likewise embodies.

III. A Non-Place in Münster

At this point it seems necessary to pinpoint the extent to which Skulptur-Sortier-Station is a site-specific sculpture, before
endeavoring to describe how it departs from this dominant postmodernist sculptural paradigm. As we have seen, the work’s location beside the Rosenplatz recycling depot is the motivation for its title and its thematic content. It thus appears referential to this particular site in the city. Yet the work that appeared as Hirschhorn’s official contribution to “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster” was in fact a second proposition in response to the Münster curators’ invitation. Indeed, the artist’s emphasis on the affinities between the work’s form and the procedural model offered by the recycling depot (i.e., sorting) obscures the site insecurities that underlie Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s history.

Originally, Hirschhorn had planned to build a sculpture beside the most historically and culturally significant building in the city, its symbolic center: the St.-Paulus-Dom (St. Paul Cathedral), after which Münster is named. The contents and basic structure of this initial concept were almost identical to the work in its final form, with the key exception that the conceptual reference point cited by the artist was not the procedures of sorting detritus modeled by the contemporary recycling depot, but rather the historical existence on the Dom-adjacent site of Dombauhütten (cathedral construction huts),

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16 The German word “Münster” itself translates into English as “cathedral” or “minster.” It derives from the Latin “monasterium.” The city of Münster was named after the monastery that originally stood at the site of today’s Dom.

the provisional working quarters and storage houses used by laborers building the Dom in the Middle Ages. Which is to say, in its initial conceptualization the work was sited in relation to a very different urban space, resonant with a particular meaning. It would stake an interest in the specific cultural, religious, and political history of Münster by laying claim to the most symbolically important space in the city, and so take its site seriously as a unique place in which history and meaning inhere. But it would occupy this site in a very particular way, provisionally, as an appendage, mimicking structures that enabled the historical infrastructure of Münster but were themselves impermanent. The connection drawn to the Dombauhütten was meant to emphasize a type of space-building defined by elements of transience and instability.

That sense of an insecure or tenuous site-specificity -- referential to a specific urban place but invested in that place’s very associations with spatial uncertainty -- seems to be the conceptual basis that persists in the second, final scheme for Skulptur-Sortier-Station. Hirschhorn claims that this second site was the result of a quest for an urban context completely lacking in unique cultural, historical, or political meaning. In his statement for the Münster exhibition catalogue, he writes of his designs on a site that had “nothing to do with history or geography of the place” (a stunning about-face relative to the Dom scheme) and that could “just as well be in another city, another country.” Such a site would fall within an ideological insistence on rejecting “context,
background, origin, circumstances."\(^{18}\) The artist describes a process of considering many other sites without clear locational stakes aside from the nondescript plaza beside the Rosenplatz. He lists sites adjacent to bank machines, telephone booths, cigarette machines. It could have been any of these places, Hirschhorn seems to imply, but it was not.

The recycling depot seems to have presented itself as the ideal site not only because of its categorical anonymity (such depots are standardized and appear throughout European cities), but also because the depot’s very functional purpose denotes the provisionality and impermanence of materials. This site thus represented a double instability aligned with the nature of Hirschhorn’s work: It was not a unique place, in keeping with the artist’s stated disinterest in symbolic context; and it was not a place premised on material enduringness, in keeping with the throwaway and degraded status of his sculptural materials. “I chose the garbage collection site because materials with which I work are brought to it: cardboard, old magazines, plastic, aluminum,” Hirschhorn has written, as if to connect sculptural object and site precisely at the point of their mutual investment in material obsolescence.\(^{19}\)

Despite the artist’s claim of indifference to the site of his work, the site-referentiality of both the initial and final schemes for *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* resonates with the postmodern concept of sculpture as contextual and bound to the place of its realization. In

\(^{18}\) Thomas Hirschhorn, untitled statement in *Contemporary Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 216.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
her authoritative work on the 20\textsuperscript{th} century history of the sculptural medium, Rosalind Krauss locates the transition from modernist to postmodernist sculpture in 1960s minimal sculpture’s foregrounding of its relationship to cultural space as context. Whereas modernist sculpture attempted to model a coherent and total connection between its own structural interior and external appearance, minimal sculpture drew its structural sense from “public, conventional” reference points such as arithmetic logic or mass production -- as in Carl Andre’s fire bricks set methodically in a line on a gallery floor.\textsuperscript{20} Minimal sculpture’s logic, in other words, came from references outside itself, from structures of meaning embedded in everyday cultural space. In the 1970s sculptural practices that emerged in response to minimalism, this sense of an artwork’s relational condition of being as fundamentally dependent on context was both exacerbated and made more concrete. And in certain cases, as famously theorized by Krauss, sculpture increasingly came to define itself as a negative condition of its surroundings -- not-architecture or not-landscape.\textsuperscript{21}

One key example of the dialogic relationship between site and object in this period would be the work of Richard Serra. His contribution to the second “Skulptur. Projekte in Münster,” in 1987, in its articulation of the object-site relation, is an instructive comparison to Hirshhorn’s ten years later. Serra’s \textit{Trunk}, J. Conrad Schlaun Recomposed is a pair of curved, inwardly tilting, monumentally-scaled Corten steel plates installed in the forecourt of


Münster’s 18th-century Erbdrostenthal Palace. The scale and orientation of the two plates is exactly calibrated to the proportions of the palace’s façade, so that as one approaches Serra’s work the two steel plates read as a passage towards the palace doors. At the same time, their streamlined forms throw the baroque ornamentation of the architecture into stark relief. With this work, the artist seemed to suggest that one possibility of art in public spaces is to reframe the viewer’s experience of the city’s historical architecture.

In developing the structural possibilities of monumental steel-plate construction over the last three decades, Serra has proposed a type of sculpture whose sheer clarity of tectonic force is matched by its ability to act upon the space of its context with singular incisiveness. By producing spaces constituted in a profound decentering of the viewer’s body, and in an equally forceful reorientation of the axial experience of site, Serra’s monumental sculpture reshapes space and viewing experience simultaneously, as evidenced by his 1987 work in Münster.

Despite its clear attentiveness to the cultural space of its location, postmodern sculpture such as Serra’s should not be understood as a return to the monument as defined by Krauss. There are key differences between contemporary sculpture such as Serra’s and the pre-modernist monument, most notably in the fact that while the monument related to the history and meaning of its site symbolically, and often through the invocation of a narrative element, monumental sculpture in the postmodern moment relates to the more architectonic concerns of scale and orientation in the landscape (among many other factors). These postmodernist sculptural concerns are axiomatic, rather than symbolic or narrative.

For a discussion of the relationship between these two elements of Serra’s practice, see Hal Foster, “The Un/making of Sculpture,” in Richard Serra (October Files), eds. Hal Foster and Gordon Hughes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 174-200. In an echo of my own argument for Hirschhorn’s Skulptur-Sortier-Station, Foster claims for Serra’s mature work a “paradigm that is neither siteless (in the modernist sense) nor site-specific (in the postmodernist sense) but both autonomous and grounded in other ways.” Yet here Foster is specifically referring to the abstract, monumental forms with
in fact, the most prominent model of sculptural engagement with site operative in art practice today.\textsuperscript{25} It is thus instructive to identify the ways in which Hirschhorn’s work stands in contradistinction to this model. Considering Serra’s response to the larger project of the Münster exhibition alongside Hirschhorn’s from a decade later is telling for precisely the ways in which Hirschhorn subverts the sculptural categories that have made Serra’s work such a potent model of postmodernist sculpture.

Though architectural in scale and conditioned by its original site (in the sense of having been constructed in situ besides the Rosenplatz recycling depot), \textit{Skulptur-Sortier-Station} has a far more unstable relationship to its context than the one modeled in Serra’s site-specific sculpture. Rather than appearing to engage the architecture and landscape around it at an axiomatic level, Hirschhorn’s work flatly imposes on the streetscape, a temporary presence in the manner of a squatter. Its makeshift structure and its clear architectonic weakness amplify this ineffectiveness in reframing or reactivating surrounding space.

Whereas Serra’s site-specific work, standing before the Erbdrostenhof Palace with a kind of prideful austerity, registers its claim on the city of Münster by actively redirecting our experience of a historically-significant work of civic architecture, Hirschhorn’s

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work reveals a skepticism that sculpture could play such a role in the urban context. In place of a symbolically resonant site-specificity, Hirschhorn offers the model of a provisional construction situated beside (as opposed to sited upon) a place without clear symbolic weight. In the artist’s words, his chosen location is a “non-place,” a site lacking a distinct sense of place.  

One clear effect of Hirschhorn’s insistence on the “non-place” is that his work cannot stake a permanent critical relationship on its site by somehow subverting our experience of its topography. If a key claim of the postmodernist, contextual model of sculpture embodied by Serra’s work is that its site-specificity is fundamental and enduring, so that “to remove the work is to destroy the work,” then Hirschhorn’s sculpture would have to be understood as marking a profound distance from this postmodernist paradigm. At the level of materiality and relation to site, Skulptur-Sortier-Station anticipates its own disappearance, its destruction, its obsolescence. The repetition of that very process of appearance and disappearance, as we will see, constitutes the life of the work.

27 Thomas Hirschhorn, untitled statement in Contemporary Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997, 215-6

28 See Ibid., 183-4.

IV. Arrivals and Departures

I have been arguing that Skulptur-Sortier-Station understands its site as an arbitrary spatial context, divested of uniqueness and only partially differentiable from any other site. The full extent of the work’s distinction from traditional concepts of site-specificity only becomes clear, however, once we examine its history of presentation post-Münster. Skulptur-Sortier-Station first appeared in Münster, as noted, but we have already seen that it did not belong to that city in any durable way; it did not account for the cultural, historical or political context offered by the Rosenplatz site. So there was no resistance to the work being deinstalled after the conclusion of the Münster exhibition in September 1997. Subsequently, the work reappeared in two other exhibitions: first in Paris in 2001 beside the Stalingrad Métro Station, then in Warsaw in 2004, in the Praga district amidst local business establishments. In each case, the artist presented the object to its urban context as a new iteration of the same work -- Skulptur-Sortier-Station -- so that the concept of the work persisted, even though its actual material condition was reconstituted in both iterations (new cardboard, new tape, new transparent foil, etc.).

Which is to say, even though Hirschhorn insists on excess of material as central to the meaning of his sculpture, the objects themselves do not persist in time as uniquely constitutive of the work. As Buchloh has noted, the imminence of obsolescence and

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30 In 1999, Skulptur-Sortier-Station entered the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris. As the work reappeared in its 2001 and 2004 versions, it did so under the determination of the Pompidou, as a work in its collection and an off-site exhibition.
deterioration is always already marked by the precarious quality of Hirschhorn’s materials, which seem, even when new, to be in a state of forsaken decrepitude. In this way, the temporalities of the artist’s objects, “their cycles of usage, disposal, and of exhibition” are “collapsed into a single, simultaneous stage” in Hirschhorn’s displays. What Buchloh is describing is a new category of temporally-bound object in this work. Hirschhorn’s work is neither an object that persists in time, and so accumulates the patina of age, nor an object that rapidly obsolesces in order to be quickly replaced. Instead it is a type of object that posits decrepitude as a value, as an inherent condition. It remains for us to understand why this strange compression of an object’s life-cycle would be of interest to Hirschhorn, especially as it is compounded in relation to Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s seemingly arbitrary and temporary occupation of space.

In discussing the site-object relation mapped by the initial Rosenplatz site, we have seen one way in which this concern with throwaway structures inflects the very logic of the work: Hirschhorn’s discourse on the recycling depot’s conceptual significance to his work evinces a clear interest in decay, obsolescence, and reuse as interrelated processes of consumption and exchange. Yet, I would argue

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31 Buchloh describes the compression of the commodity’s life-cycle modeled in Hirschhorn’s work as a spatial compression as well: “To rush from its production in a distant third-world country and its distribution in the first, and from the production of exchange-value to a brief performance of use-value, and its imminent dismissal as detritus in ever decreasing temporal cycles seems to have become the universal condition of the commodity that Hirschhorn’s artistic practice mimetically follows.” Benjamin Buchloh, “Detritus and Decrepitude: The Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn,” in Oxford Art Journal 24.2 (2001): 54-5.
that there is an even more fundamental analogy to be drawn between the compressed life cycles of the materials in Hirschhorn’s work and the object status of the sculpture itself, as a perpetually provisional structure. *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* repeatedly performs a brief exhibition value as sculpture before its component parts are subjected to disposal, so that its life cycle as an object is, if not compressed, at least un-enduring. Its disappearance from one site is simultaneous with the dissolution of its structure; its reappearance in another is an act of rebuilding.

That peculiar rhythm of disintegration and reconstruction, or disappearance and reappearance, distinguishes *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* from the modernist paradigm of sculpture as nomadic. Which is to say, even though the work does not belong fully to one place, and so is not fully site-specific in the postmodernist sense, neither is it truly autonomous. At first there might seem to be a key point of intersection in the ungrounded nature of both Hirschhorn’s *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* and earlier 20th century precedents. Indeed, one defining characteristic of modernist sculpture is that it aspired to a state of total autonomy from the cultural, historical, and geographical specificities of its site. Whether by foregrounding its architectonic structure as a coherent volume, as in the case of Russian Constructivist sculpture such as Naum Gabo’s *Constructed Head No. 2* (1916),[32] or, as in the case of Anthony Caro’s work in the 1960s, by making apparent the relationship between a sculpture’s component

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parts through a moment of absolute structural legibility, modernist sculpture aimed for the appearance of immanent formal logic. Krauss has demonstrated that this foregrounding of structural coherence results in “sculpture that depicts its own autonomy.” Attending specifically to the paradigmatic shift of Constantin Brancusi’s work from the 1920s, in which the base of the sculpture is integrated into the work in order to foreground its nomadic potential, Krauss has argued that a key innovation of modernist sculpture is its “sitelessness, or homelessness.”

But as the example of Skulptur-Sortier-Station makes apparent, Hirschhorn only seems to share with these modernist precedents a refusal to attribute inherent or unique value to a sculpture’s spatial context, as if a given set of spatial coordinates should have no bearing on the fundamental meaning of a sculptural work. Furthermore, in discussing his decision to install constantly-illuminated fluorescent lights in Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s interior, so that its rooms become immune to the rhythm of a day’s passage, Hirschhorn has emphasized his interest in giving his work “autonomy” and making it “a space without time.” These are modernist terms to be sure. But Hirschhorn’s model of site as non-place in Skulptur-Sortier-Station diverges from the modernist model in a fundamental way. Whereas the

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33 See Ibid., 187-192.
35 Ibid. This fact sets the terms for modernist sculpture’s divergence from the history of the monument, a history to which sculpture was intimately tied during the 19th century through its obligation to speak “in a symbolical tongue about the meaning and use” of the site in which it was emplaced.” Ibid., 279.
37 Hirschhorn, untitled statement in Contemporary Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997, 211.
modernist model assumes an intact sculptural body that moves through continuous space from one site to another, “siteless and homeless,” according to Krauss, Hirschhorn’s precarious structure emerges anew again and again, discontinuously, in one site after another. Which is to say, it does not move through space as an autonomous form following an exhibition itinerary, but rather is repeatedly re-actualized in situ.

So the more significant conceptual framework for understanding Skulptur-Sortier-Station is its general state of uncertainty as a material entity in space rather than the procedural model of “sorting sculpture” as related to sorting recyclable waste. The work’s unstable relationship to its site and its material impermanence define it from the point of inception, whereas the term “sculpture sorting station” resonates with only one of the work’s past sites. In fact, the history of the work’s conception reflects the more essential nature of this former set of concerns.

Upon being invited to participate in the Münster exhibition, Hirschhorn created a sketch of his proposal on which he wrote, “Prekäre Konstruktion” (precarious construction), no doubt in a nod to the provisional nature of the Dombauhütten that once stood on the site of the artist’s initial scheme. Even as the work finally assumed

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38 The work’s title erroneously appears as Prekäre Konstruktion in the Münster exhibition catalogue. According to Hirschhorn’s studio, someone took the words on the initial sketch as the title of the actual work, when in fact the title of the work has always been Skulptur-Sortier-Station. This misunderstanding is telling, however, despite the dissemination of misinformation it has produced. I foreground the term here for the complex and evocative ways in which it describes the work’s object condition and its proposition for the sculptural medium. E-mail correspondence between the author, Hirschhorn’s studio, and Gladstone Gallery, April 11, 2012.
the title *Skulptur-Sortier-Station*, the name also attached to it in
the subsequent Paris and Warsaw versions, this originary sense of
precariousness as a structural condition persisted as a coda for the
work’s life, as well as for its position in art history.

Returning to the medium-specific agenda of “Skulptur. Projekte in
Münster” and its exploration of “the possibilities of art in public
space,” we might read the concept of “Perekäre Konstruktion” as
Hirschhorn’s ultimate response to the exhibition’s problematic. It is
a response that takes under consideration both sculpture’s materiality
and its object-site relation, offering a sense of uncertainty as key
to the contemporary condition of both. We have already described these
two modes of instability operative in *Skulptur-Sortier-Station*: As a
provisional construction, its component parts fragile and disposable,
the work is materially precarious; as an object without clear
relational stakes on its urban setting, it is precarious in relation
to its site. As an extension of these factors, it is finally
precarious in relation to recent sculptural history, moored to neither
modernist nor postmodernist sculptural paradigms.

V. Non-Place as Site Condition
As the concepts of modernist sitelessness and postmodernist site-
specificity both fail to describe the spatial conditions of *Skulptur-
Sortier-Station*, it is inadequate to simply say that Hirschhorn
collapses the two models in his work. For even if we follow the
artist’s theory of site as a non-place, we are nonetheless faced with
having to account for a type of place. A non-place is not exactly
homelessness, the absence of site. Nor is it the articulation of a singular place, a stabilization of space and time into which art might critically enter. Rather, it suspends these two paradigms in a state of undecidability. Thus we should not understand Hirschhorn’s decision to site his *Skulptur-Sortier-Station* beside a non-place as an attempt to distance his work from the historical problematic of sculpture’s site. Rather, we might begin to understand the non-place as a site-in-transience, that is, a site in itself always precarious.

A notion of “belonging-in-transience,” as a means of sustaining a productive tension between the poles of nomadism and locational specificity, has been suggested by the historian and critic Miwon Kwon as one potential iteration of the art-site dynamic in the present. Kwon offers the concept as a way of establishing meaningful proximities between places in the absence of stable sites of locational identity. To see one place always in terms of another, according to the historian, is to critically engage and resist the spatial insecurities of the present. This is a model that seems to describe in part the unique spatial condition embodied by *Skulptur-Sortier-Station*’s simultaneous groundedness (but only temporary) and ostensible indifference (perpetual) to site -- a condition that cannot be described by either of the terms nomadism or belongingness. The work’s sites are furthermore not relationally bound together through its history of presentation, and so the course of its life does not equate with the accumulation of site-relational meaning. The work’s

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39 Kwon’s phrase comes by way of a “speculative and heuristic concept” at the end of the introduction to her critical history of site-specific art. See Kwon, 8.
commitments are not to a sequence of sites but to a perpetuation of its own condition of precariousness. Hirschhorn’s work seems to propose its unique claim on this precarious condition as a kind of artistic intelligence.

In his work on emergent models of space in the late 20th century, Marc Augé has sketched a historical framework for non-places in the condition he terms “supermodernity,” to be distinguished from postmodernity. If postmodern theory posits dissolution -- the leveling forces of globalization, the breakdown of historical progress, the normalization of the simulacral image41 -- as the dominant mode of experience today, supermodernity finds its definition in excesses of experience -- excess of events, of spatial scale, and of the “individualization of references.”42 According to Augé, conventional notions of place as a sited location in space and time cannot sustain these excesses, cannot provide a platform for understanding their full impact and significance. A more productive and relevant spatial model

41 A representation without a necessary correlate in the world of objects, the simulacrum has been used in 20th century art and art history to subvert the Platonic order of representation that evaluates copies according to their extent of likeness to an assumed original. The simulacrum is distinct among categories of representation for having no original. In postmodernist theory, the simulacrum has been proposed as the basis of new regimes of representation in which the free play of images has increasingly little to do with the material reality of objects. See, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in Jean Baudrillard, Collected Writings, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 166-84.

42 In explaining this third category of “supermodernist” excess, Augé refers to the increasing need to establish the singularity of objects, groups and places against the dominant “procedures of interrelation, acceleration, and de-localization” that define postmodern culture. Augé suggests that “never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever.” See Augé, 31.
presents itself in the form of non-places. These are spaces of circulation, consumption, and communication that are not so much a type of geographical site but connective points within the global itineraries according to which information and capital move.\(^{43}\) The term non-place, thus, is an instrument for measuring the degree of “ephemerality and transience” within a space. Its most obvious exemplars are airports and railway stations, or even the routes of transport themselves: airways and motorways. Its most fitting user is the figure of the traveller. One prominent effect of the non-place is the sense of decentering it exerts on its inhabitants, the sense that it is a type of place always encountered in a state of coming or going.

To the extent that the experience of a non-place is more akin to anticipating one’s next departure than dwelling in a secure sense of space, a non-place is also a condition in which the successful or meaningful recall of history cannot occur. Whereas in the modernist conception of space, Augé argues, we discern “the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it,”\(^{44}\) so that a present place can integrate earlier places, in supermodernity

\(^{43}\) Augé explains that “the word ‘non-place’ designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces...non places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality.” See Ibid., 76.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 61. Augé’s case study for the modernist spatial model of history is Charles Baudelaire’s poetry. He quotes the following lines from Baudelaire: “...the workshop with its song and chatter; / Chimneys and spires, those masts of the city, / And the great skies making us dream of eternity.” The anthropologist gleans from these lines a “definition of modernity as the willed coexistence of two different worlds,” explaining that “[i]n the modernity of the Baudelairean landscape...everything is combined, everything holds together: the spires and chimneys are the ‘masts of the city.’ What is seen by the spectator of modernity is the interweaving of old and new.” See Ibid., 62, 74, 89.
historical places are “listed, classified, promoted to the status of ‘places of memory,’ and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position.”\textsuperscript{45} Relegated to the status of spectacle (in the manner of a snapshot of historically-significant architecture appearing in a tourist brochure), history has no agency within the present of a non-place.

Such a non-place is Skulptur-Sortier-Station’s site condition. More than merely being situated beside a non-place as Hirschhorn would define it (as a type of anonymous or arbitrary space), his work engages non-place as Augé understands it, as a structural and fundamental insecurity of space in general in our time. Just as Augé’s theoretical model of non-place is an attempt to account for the mutations of space that have arisen from the experiential decenterings of the present, Hirschhorn’s artwork is an attempt to model how sculpture might function within a definition of site that is fundamentally in flux. Skulptur-Sortier-Station designs and anticipates the certainty of its precariousness. It turns this planned uncertainty into a contemporary sculptural value.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 63.
APPENDIX 1: A CLASSIFICATION OF THOMAS HIRSCHHORN’S SCULPTURE

Hirschhorn’s mature work falls into four primary categories:

1. **Kiosks**: Cardboard structures, placed in interior space, which contain information on a historical figure. Hirschhorn has built kiosks for Robert Walser, Emmanuel Bove, Fernand Léger, Ingeborg Bachmann, Meret Oppenheim, Otto Freundlich, Emil Nolde, and Liubov Popova. Commissioned by the University of Zurich, each kiosk existed for 6 months and has never been reconstructed.

2. **Altars**: Informal collections of commemorative objects built in public space, and indefinitely repeatable at an indefinite number of sites (though each altar takes a new form with each manifestation). The artist has created altars for Bachmann, Raymond Carver, Freundlich, and Piet Mondrian.

3. **Monuments**: Multi-component works featuring libraries, performances, bars, etc. Hirschhorn realizes these works in collaboration with residents of the neighborhood around his chosen site. He has dedicated monuments to the philosophers Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and Georges Bataille. He intends to dedicate a fourth altar to Antonio Gramsci.
4. **Pavilions**: Freestanding structures typically constructed from cardboard, duct tape and plastic wrapping material. Pavilions display various objects in their interiors, are always located in public space, and are temporary.


---. “An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn.” October 113 (2005): 77-100.


---. “This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse.” In Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes), 123-143. London: Verso, 2002.


Koolhaas, Rem. “Junkspace.” In October 100 (Spring 2002): 175-190.


