**Site-integrity: An embedded and embodied approach to practice-based research**

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Dr Julie Marsh

**Introduction**

Practice-based research in the arts typically uses artistic processes and creative artefacts as part of its methods and approach. While this approach shares some core features with all forms of research, three aspects distinguish it: 'the centrality of practice to the research, the role of artworks in research and the forms of knowledge that arise from it' (Vear et al. 2021: 27). The focus is often on exploring and understanding through the creative process rather than producing a final product or outcome. Moreover, practice within research may act not only as a tool for understanding but may also drive the enquiry itself. The theoretical innovation can evolve through the praxical (action of practice), where the researcher and methodology are involved in a continuous and iterative process where actions taken during the research (practical activities, data collection, experimentation) inform and influence subsequent decisions regarding the refinement of research questions, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks. In artistic practice, knowledge takes on a hybrid form: 'It is both intellectual and material and cannot be easily separated from the physical aspects of the art-making process in which thinking and things are interwoven' (Borgdorff 2012: 191). Art provides avenues for understanding the world through a more experiential lens, in contrast to the intellectual and verbal methods that have conventionally prevailed in Western discussions of knowledge. In practice-based research in the arts, audiences can engage with representations in a sensory, emotional, psychological and intellectual manner, leading to an expanded understanding of 'what it means to know' (Eisner 1998:17).

This paper examines these features of practice-based research through an analysis of 'Site-integrity', a site-specific and collaborative research practice that questions the traditional comprehension of space and presents it as dualistically experienced and represented (Marsh 2018 a: 15). Site-integrity 'performs' place by presenting recorded material back in the site where it was filmed, using motorised recording/playback devices. This enables an exact transfer of space and time, as it matches the world with its representations or brings the two into critical conjunction. In this methodology, the camera/playback technology, the artist, and the audience become engaged in the process of creation. In Site-integrity, the artistic device directly responds to and reveals specific discourses present in the site, be it architectural, social, religious, political, or institutional. Site-integrity differentiates from other modes of site-specific practice through a dynamic material exchange between site, artist, machine, and audience. By implicitly performing involvements *in*, as opposed to observations *on* site, the research activity becomes an embedded engagement in the world of which it is part. This 'embedded' practice relates to Borgdorff's view of how knowledge is constituted in and through practice in the context of artistic discovery, as 'epistemic things are […] hybrid forms in which thinking and things are interwoven' (Borgdorff 2012: 191). This research builds upon the idea of place as 'emergent, relational and beyond representational regimes' (Massey 2005: 11). Positioning the viewer within a dynamic live setting creates an opportunity for audiences to experience their relationship and reading of the site. This avoids the controversial 'framing' of place and instead offers an experience in the 'here and now', in spatial extension and temporal duration. This focus on the present repositions the act of representation from its retrospective or projective dimensions towards that which is physically encountered and is *experiential* (Marsh 2018), highlighting the significance of situated, enacted, and embodied forms of knowledge.

This paper presents three specific projects, *Lokomotywownia*, *Siting Cinema* and *Assembly* as examples of artistic practices that contribute (not exclusively) to the Site-integrity methodology. The paper is structured into three sections central to the methodology, firstly analysing how each artwork maps the real with its representation through three distinct practical methods. The second section examines the role of the artistic device, operating as object, time machine, mediator, investigator or social operator in the production and performance of the site installations. The concluding section examines the forms of knowledge that emerge from each of these artworks in a sensory, emotional, psychological and intellectual manner and emphasises the importance of establishing appropriate frameworks for the type of knowledge that arises *through* the creative process.

**Mapping the representation and the real**

Site-integrity is situated 'in the field' in a real-world context with real-world outcomes. Site-integrity maps real space with its representation using bespoke motorised filming/playback devices. This approach acknowledges the interplay between the research and the evolving site wherein both influence each other and together shape the outcomes. In practical terms, the integrity of the work is contingent upon the ability to navigate and engage with the complexities and uncertainties inherent in these live contexts. In all the sites, the recording/playback devices are not seen as distinct from the site but as extensions of it.

*Lokomotywownia* (2017) takes the form of a site-specific installation in an abandoned train repair depot in Krakow, Poland. Motorised tracks are built inside one of the abandoned carriages, allowing the site's materiality to define the recording device's structure. The recorded daytime footage is then played back on eight iPads in the evening, traversing the space, meticulously mapping the carriage's interior, and retracing the camera's exact spatial and temporal path. The former vitality of the train is artfully mirrored in the reciprocal movement of automated iPads, which appear alive in contrast to the train's stationary nature. As the iPads drift across the surfaces of the abandoned railway carriage, viewers witness an accurate, scaled representation on the screens, accentuating the site's architectural significance below. By reframing the site back on itself, an interesting wavering of consciousness between the moving image and the architectural site occurs.

*Siting Cinema* (2018-21) explores independent art cinemas across the UK, asking the audience to engage with and experience the cinema as 'site'. The process begins with recording the empty architectural site using a bespoke automated recording device that moves a camera 360 degrees horizontally and vertically concurrently, capturing every detail with house lights on and closed curtains. The resulting footage is then projected onto the cinema screen (fig.1) while the same camera rig is repurposed to repeat the movement of a recording device, using a laser in place of the camera. With stepper motors, the precise automation of the device allows the audience to 'map' the projection with the laser in the physical cinema space. A complex relationship occurs between the artwork, the audience, and the site with the device acting as a mediator. *Siting Cinema* blurs the lines between the filmic and physical realms, encouraging viewers to explore and interact with the cinema space in a unique and immersive way, challenging traditional notions of cinema and how audiences perceive and engage with the cinematic space.

Fig. 1 Installation view of *Siting Cinema* (2021) at Regents Street Cinema, London. (Photos courtesy of Fuller-Rowell, J)

*Assembly* (2018-20) comprises a series of site-specific installations made and displayed at Brick Lane Mosque, Old Kent Road Mosque, and Harrow Central Mosque. These installations were developed in collaboration with the respective mosque communities, following filming guidelines to ensure an ethical, discreet approach that respects the sanctity of worship. As a result, silent automated motorised camera rigs were installed on the ceiling of each mosque to capture the Friday *Jumu'ah* (congregational) prayer from an aerial perspective. The resulting films were then projected to a 1:1 scale onto the same carpet where the prayers occurred. In each prayer site, the projection appears multi-layered, as the image of the carpet maps with the actual carpet, while the praying bodies appear ghostly. As artist William Raban describes, 'There is something beguiling and uncanny to these artworks where the digital moving image hovers improbably above its 'real' counterpart. (Raban 2018: 2). With the projection travelling through the physical space, the controlled motorisation of the device cancels out the movement of the recorded image, allowing only the frame to move, constantly revealing and concealing the prayer carpet below.

The methodology of creating custom machines to perform representations in both space and time was established through these types of real-world interventions. In *Lokomotywownia,* the screen acts as a portal that conceals the site below through its materiality. On the other hand, in *Assembly*, the transparency of the projected image merges with the real, making the people appear as ghostly illusions while the material site appears hyperreal. *Siting Cinema* offers a third relationship as the device mediates between the cinema screen and the auditorium.

**Dynamic material exchange between the site, artist, machine, and audience.**

Site-integrity performs site through a dynamic exchange between the machine, site, artist and audience. This does not mean a relinquished responsibility for or rejection of agency in affecting change in the results as they emerge, just that these artworks are not made with the artist as the central subject. In Site-integrity, the recording device adapts to the discourses inherent in each specific site, enhancing the creativity and specificity of the process. There is a sense in which the research travels *with* the evolving works that occur in-site – with no fixed parameters. A symbiotic relationship develops between the researcher and the site through the design of bespoke recording devices. The design responds to the material, social, political, and institutional discourses present; the site itself

directs the construction of the filming device. The key innovation of Site-integrity is that that device is then re-used as a playback device, which 'performs' the representations back into the site, activating the discourses present for others to experience. Site-integrity proposes that it is possible to witness the process and film simultaneously without being reduced to either the material or the metaphysical. In this context, the site-specific performances are not just processes, even though processes are integral to their creation, and they do not serve as static objects in the sense of being finished artworks, repositories for information or sites of communication. Instead, they are agents of action, dynamically bringing together a spectrum of ideas, narratives, and dynamic ways of experiencing a particular site.

In *Lokomotywownia,* moving images are presented in dialogue with sculptural form – the viewer experiences the site's materiality from the inside out, as the reading of detail builds the comprehension of architectural space. The screen's physical movement heightens the spectator's bodily relationship to the architecture in which they are located. The iPad rig tracks back and forth, scanning the site like a forensic instrument. Traditional theories of the 'filmic gaze' fail to address the effect of spatiality; the act of crossing or inhabiting space is not explored or explained. This movement from optic to haptic reflects this research's position within the spatial arts, sitting more comfortably next to architecture and performance than the visual arts. The movement of the iPad around the architectural site reveals the details of the architecture directly below, while the track of the motorised rig is obscured by the pre-recorded image on the iPad. The de-materialisation of the filming apparatus is particularly effective when the iPad glides over a hole in the train carriage wall; as the film is pre-recorded, the image on the iPad reveals an empty space, and the motorised track appears to vanish (fig. 2). Between the perceived real space and screen space, a duality exists on the moving screen, creating a third space for the mind to enter and the body to position itself. Edward Soja developed a theory of 'Thirdspace as another way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, consisting of spaces that are both real and imagined' (Soja 1996: 11); 'Everything comes together; subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined…consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (Soja1996: 57). In *Lokomotywownia*, the viewer relies upon the moving iPad screens to reveal elements of the architecture, construct their awareness of the site and locate themselves within the physical space. As the iPads move across the carriage floor, the missing wooden planks reveal the ground below. Suddenly, the floor no longer feels stable; the audience's habitual reading of the carriage surface is questioned, and their safety on the site is doubted.



Fig. 2 Installation views of *Lokomotywownia* (2017) in an abandoned railway carriage in Krakow. (Photos courtesy of Fuller-Rowell, J)

In *Siting Cinema*, the audience actively participates in the artwork as they 'map' the projected film with the moving laser around the space. The audience becomes aware of their position within the room and the filmic space depicted in the projection through a machine that records the space in the past and acts in the present. The mechanical device explores how we see the physical architectural space as an extension of the body. This has a considerable effect on the spectator as the installation deconstructs the familiar frame of reference and the 360-degree movement of the field of vision, affecting the spectator's relationship with the physical space. The audience becomes aware of their position within the room and the film space depicted in the projection. Thus, physical space, typically a motionless entity that one can passively inhabit, is transformed into 'activated' live space. The primary experience of watching and the secondary experience of representing are merged, and the viewer must continually attempt to determine what they are looking at in terms of function and bodily relation to the site. The audience constantly tries to locate themselves spatially: to negotiate the limits between the illusion of film and reality. Forced into a state of consciousness that demanded continual analysis and reflection, the viewer was simultaneously lost and found in the work. As one viewer stated, 'I was at first trying to negotiate my position within the film. I was caught in the experience of the video and feeling my body moving with the "camera eye", leading me to wonder if I was experiencing the site from a human or a machine point of view' (Audience Feedback 2018). *Siting Cinema* asks the viewer to actively look, engage and experience the site, providing 'respite from an entire system of seeing and space bound up with mastery and identity. To see differently, albeit for a moment, allows us to see anew' (Adams 1998: 97). The installation attempts to interrogate the physical and perceptual relationship to the cinema as a site, where the cinema screen, the artistic device and, by extension, the viewer's position are all part of that equation. Unlike many practices where the mechanics are hidden from sight, *Siting Cinema* is reflexive, giving the device a presence within the artwork. As such, the audience is reflexively engaged in the production of meaning, directly challenging the convention of traditional cinema where 'everything possible is done to reduce awareness of the actuality of the screening time and space…the seats are soft, the sound surrounds, the screen fills the visual fields, all reducing awareness of our actual physical presence to the minimum' (Le Grice 2001: 67). The cinema audience becomes lost in narrative time, which traditionally favours represented time over the passage of actual time.

In *Assembly*, the artworks seek to place each faith community at the centre of the work and, crucially, the *site* as integral to the experience. Made *with* and *for* the mosque congregations, rather than allowing the site's architecture to determine how the mechanical rig was constructed, this time, social and religious guidelines dictated how the film should be made and received. As a result, a silent, automated motorised rig was constructed to film congregational prayer from above from the entrance to the Mihrab in each prayer space. The captured footage is specific to each mosque congregation, allowing us to witness the 'fluidity of the congregation and appreciate the uniqueness of the people who make up the group' (Congregation Feedback 2018). In her 1995 book *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, bell hooks introduces a conceptual framework that explores two key roles of art with respect to representation: recognition of the familiar and the process of defamiliarisation. When depicted in art, the familiar can reinforce cultural values and maintain a sense of continuity. On the other hand, defamiliarisation in art can render the familiar unfamiliar, prompting viewers to challenge their preconceived assumptions and societal norms 'to make us look in a new way'. (hooks, 1995: 4). In *Assembly,* the congregation see themselves and their experiences reflected in art, fostering a sense of identity, belonging, and validation. As one congregation member describes, 'The film projection makes you think of unison; everyone in the whole world at this time is praying towards one direction who is a Muslim' (2018). At the same time, however, 'the bird's eye view used to create the footage – fittingly called the "God-shot" in the film industry - shows us ourselves in a unique and unfamiliar way that's worth experiencing' (Zaynab Shannahan, Co-Founder of the Inclusive Mosque Initiative, 2018a: 45). *Assembly* also allows the congregation to consider and reflect upon the spatial practices and social structures present in the mosque. In *Assembly*, the site performance provides an opportunity for members of the congregation to engage, collaborate and share their views and opinions of the artwork and, by default, their own religious/social practices, serving as the point of departure for dialogue to 'unlock' or dislodge knowledge (Holm 2008: 53). Hooks suggests that 'aesthetic interventions' of this nature are methodological strategies to make people see something differently. In this context, Site-integrity creates a mechanism that delicately questions its existence and raises some critical questions about the materiality of the place. In previous works in non-sacred spaces, the tension between the dominant ideas about what should happen in a space and artistic engagement is not so strongly felt.

Although the three projects follow the same methodology, the varied discourses present in each site mean the filming apparatus operates in markedly distinct ways, yielding different results. The mechanical device in *Siting Cinema* is an object of fascination, front and centre stage. The artwork deconstructs the traditional relationship of the cinema space by repositioning the viewer's gaze from the screen space to the physical site itself. In *Lokomotywownia*, the device destabilises rather than disorientates, mediating between the past and present. There are no institutional or social discourses, just the visceral materiality of decaying architectural form. Conversely, the device's function in *Assembly* is far more subtle; it is hidden, unfixed, silent, and designed to not distract from the sacred nature of the space / the act of prayer. While the device was initially created as a vehicle for entry into a space generally out of bounds for a female non-Muslim, it also dissolved the social constructions present in site for the congregation themselves, with men and women entering traditionally segregated spaces.

**Embodied, situated, and enacted forms of knowledge**

In Site-integrity, artistic knowledge is dynamic, context-dependent and continually evolving through ongoing, practical engagement. New insights are generated during the creation of these artworks, not solely through the interpretation of their outcomes. The dynamic nature of the exchange between the site, device and audience illustrates Barbara Bolt's notion of 'materialising practices', which implies an ongoing performative engagement and productivity both at moments of production and consumption (Bolt 2004: 7). Arts-based research enables multidisciplinary forms of knowledge that are 'personally situated, interdisciplinary and diverse and emergent' (Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 2). Bolt also emphasises the importance of practical experience and action in knowledge development in her analysis of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1996). 'Heidegger argues that we do not come to 'know' the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling.' (Bolt 2006: 6) This implies that ideas and theories are derived from real-world practice rather than vice versa. In his 1979 book *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology*, Don Ihde extends this idea with his concept of 'technics', which involves human actions and interactions with objects to produce environmental effects. Since the evolving logic of practice influences these processes over time, they cannot be predetermined. Therefore, Heidegger's and Ihde's ideas support the use of emergent approaches in research, recognising that knowledge is closely linked to practical experience and material processes. Site-integrity introduces many elements to the research, such as mechanised recording and playback devices, projected content and the sites themselves (loaded with their wealth of cultural and historical associations). The works also invite viewers to relate to these stimuli to become more aware of themselves physically – in a sensory, phenomenological capacity. In navigating these diverse stimuli, the work suspends the viewer in infinite possible readings and speculations of both the site and artistic intentions.

*Lokomotywownia* highlights the potential of art as a tool for phenomenological research, recognising that describing and understanding human experiences involves considering how individuals interact with and interpret their lived worlds, as Alva Noe insists, 'to describe experience is to describe the experienced world' (Noe 2000: 125). In *Lokomotywownia,* reality and its representation take on equal status or become equally material. This spatial multiplication engenders an active stance in the audience and encourages a questioning of the experience of the site. As one audience member describes, 'This moving screen appears more real than the real site itself' (Audience feedback, 2017). The simulation—the screen—is more than reality. Robert Morris explains this in his essay, 'The Present Tense of Space' (1978), which discusses the phenomenological aspects of site-specific installation work as the 'intimate inseparability of the experience of physical space and that of an ongoing immediate present', adding that 'real space is not experienced except in real-time' (Morris 1993: 177–8). The disjunction between the interpretation of space and the viewer's experience of it blurs the line between the virtual space created by the work and the actual space in which the viewer interacts. In *The Architectural Paradox* (1975), Bernard Tschumi discusses this disjunction. Tschumi defines architecture as the most intractable of 'internal contradictions', that, by 'its very nature', architecture is 'about two mutually exclusive terms – space and the experience of space'. Tschumi argues that the experience of architecture is constituted in the very gap 'between ideal space (the product of mental processes) and real space (the product of social practice)' (Tschumi 1975: 219).

In *Siting Cinema*, the dual-motorised rig investigates new explorations in space and time to produce an experience that leads to a shift in awareness and a physical and mental re-positioning of the architectural site. While a site is typically encountered in a grounded state, where one is consciously aware of one's surroundings and connected to the physical space, a moving image projection often elicits feelings of awe and wonder. By blending the site and its digital representation, one's consciousness becomes fluid, causing one's attention and perception to fluctuate between the moving image and the architectural site. In this state, the viewer neither completely detaches from the architecture nor fixates solely on the moving image. Instead, they exist in a delicate balance between these two elements. As one viewer stated, 'I was at first trying to negotiate my position within the film. I was caught in the experience of the video and feeling my body moving with the "camera eye", leading me to wonder if I was experiencing the site from a human or a machine point of view' (Audience Feedback 2018). While wavering between the moving image and the architectural site, an individual's sense of self within the space becomes decentralised. "It is possible to say that installation art's insistence on the viewer's experience aims to thrust into question our sense of stability in and mastery over the world and to reveal the 'true' nature of our subjectivity as fragmented and decentred." (Bishop 2005: 133). Consequently, previously unnoticed or disregarded aspects of the environment come into focus, and familiar movements within the space take on an oddly unfamiliar quality (Vidler 2000:130). The temporal and spatial exteriority elements become unreliable, intensifying the tension between the individual and their surroundings.

During a site performance of *Assembly,* the mosque community patiently anticipate the moment they will witness themselves engaged in prayer. The installation offers each congregation a new and unconventional perspective on their spiritual practice as the film projection moves through the physical site. A noteworthy observation occurred when a female worshipper started to interact with the moving projection and adjusted their orientation towards their image of self in prayer (fig. 3): 'Experiencing the image of my own body move over me was a strange feeling; I was removed, yet at the same time, I was made more aware of my physicality and movement' (Congregation Feedback). This intuitive process enables a deep understanding of oneself within a site-specific context. In *Assembly,* the congregation is both 'here' (embodied subjects in the material prayer space) and 'there' (observers looking at a projected image). As one congregation member describes, 'the effect summoned thoughts about the vertical space / vertical energy / vertical light / vertical bowing (up and down) action during prayer and how these synced or became extended in the projected image' (Congregation feedback). *Assembly* brings forth exact relationships between body and space, helped by the fact that the people it addresses are all coming to worship and, therefore, invested in the place. *Assembly* enables a mind-body experience of the mosque informed by what the congregation haptically and habitually knows about the site. However, it is also unrestrained by the physical body and the physical world. Worshippers can imagine touching the carpet, informed by what they know about the real carpet's physical texture, colour and material - simultaneously heightened and challenged through the projected image. This prompts a questioning of the real, in time and space existing between the imagery and the space of encounter. Although there is no ontological split between representation and reality, we still perceive a distinction between the 'realness of the real' and the 'image-ness of the image'. The moving projections stand as a product of the social/religious practices performed in the mosque and act as a reflective tool to recall and analyse the lived experience.

Fig. 3 *Assembly* (2018), congregation member interacting with moving projection at Brick Lane Mosque (Photos courtesy of Fuller-Rowell, J).

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones (2002) notes that the art-research connection is vital because art is interpretive; therefore, different perceivers will have various interpretations. In this context, Site-integrity represents different cultural and social experiences and engages in a dialogue about the power of representation and its impact on individuals and society. It encourages viewers to confront and question their preconceived notions, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the world and the diversity of human experiences. The knowledge experienced through the body, situated in context, and actively enacted becomes more 'important to our understanding than world-mind representations and detached modes of rationality and objectivity' (Borgdorff 2011: 113). In this context, 'Art has the potential to be both immediate and lasting… it can grab hold of our attention, provoke us, or help to transport us. Our response may be visceral, emotional, and psychological before it is intellectual' (Leavy 2018: 3).

**Conclusion:**

The practice foregrounded in this paper illustrates that Site-integrity does not represent an idea or image of what a site is or can be. Instead, it creates an opportunity for audiences to experience their relationship and reading of it. In this context, place becomes an apparatus that varies depending on the operational elements and should be assessed in terms of affective experience. The resulting artworks are as open-ended and varied as the different sites they are made in. Through its various forms, Site-integrity can provide a unique and rich platform for exploring and describing human experiences of the world they inhabit. Rather than simply recording and replaying the films to a gallery audience, the site-integral artworks activate the viewer within them. This allows for a more holistic understanding of consciousness and the role of perception in shaping our experiences. Whilst the significance and context of the claims to new knowledge are described in words, a complete understanding can only be obtained with direct reference and experience of the outcomes. The work's architectural, social, and institutional context embraces a triangular relationship between the artwork, site and audience. This 'relationship' opens multiple readings with no single viewpoint. Performance and place are invested in one another, allowing each viewer a different reading of the artwork and site, constructing fluid relationships that remain subject to the event and its realisation. Positioning the

viewer at the heart of an ever-evolving live space avoids reductive fixed representation and actively engages the viewer in constructing meaning. This relates to the earlier discussion of practice *as* research and how new knowledge unfolds throughout the creative process. Practice-based research in the arts introduces innovative avenues for constructing meaning, acquiring knowledge, and fostering social engagement. However, it still encounters limited recognition within the broader academic research landscape. Instead of attempting to contort its aims, objectives and outcomes into conventional research models, this paper underscores the necessity of developing suitable frameworks for the kind of knowledge stemming from creative discourses. The 'new' knowledge in creative arts research can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice: 'In this formulation, a praxical engagement with tools, materials and ideas becomes primary over the assumed theoretical-cognitive engagement' (Ihde 1979: 117). Through such interactions, we gain knowledge beyond perception and reason. Instead, these types of interactions or actions demonstrate a kind of unspoken, tacit knowledge. The creative capacity of the process can reveal new insights, which can inform and take shape in artworks, as well as be expressed in words. Here, the exegesis plays a critical and complementary role in revealing the new knowledge embedded in the work rather than just offering an explanation or contextualisation of the practice.

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