

SITE SPECIFICS: TODD
SAUNDERS, HOST, GHOST AND
VISITOR



This is another comment coming in the wake of my recent visit to Fogo Island for *Shore Time* – a gathering to discuss design, art, place [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#)

It's about the wonderful architecture of Todd Saunders [\[Link\]](#). More matters of hospitality, of hosts, visitors, and the ghosts that can haunt their meeting.

At *Shore Time*, Todd described his architecture as **site-specific**. The description needs defending, because his buildings on Fogo Island – the six artists’ studios of 2010–11 and the Inn of 2013 – are white or black geometric forms set on headlands and rock, and a first impression is of objects placed upon a landscape rather than drawn from it. His defence is that site-specific architecture is not meant to blend in. It offers a **frame**: a device for concentrating attention on the experience of a particular place. He also offered, attributing it to a critic, a second figure – architecture as **punctuation**, “an apostrophe in place”.



Tower Studio, Fogo Island. Architect Todd Saunders.

Frame. Jonathan Bell and Ellie Stathaki, in their monograph *Todd Saunders: Architecture in Northern Landscapes* (2012), speak of a “shift from object to frame” in his work. They describe the Aurland Lookout in Norway – a timber walkway that runs out over a fjord and stops at a sheet of glass – as “a corridor in the landscape leading to a window looking onto the sky”. They record Saunders’ own brief for the Fogo studios as “strong geometric shapes, which would create a contrast”. The contrast is deliberate. The buildings do not pretend to belong.

Apostrophe. What of architecture as punctuation, as apostrophe? I like this and want to say why by way of two bodies of work I know well from the inside: Mike Pearson’s writing on site-specific performance, and Nick Kaye’s *Site-Specific Art* (2000), which contains Cliff McLucas’s documentation of Brith Gof’s site specific performance *Tri Bywyd* (part of the Esgair Fraith series of works in which I was involved).



Tri Bywyd (trans. "Three Lives"). The staging – two "Tschumi cubes" of scaffolding – counterpoints to the ruined farm. Photo – MS.

Host, ghost, visitor. Cliff McLucas, Brith Gof's co-director, gave site-specific performance a working vocabulary. The site is the host: a place with its own history and the patina of its uses. The performance is the ghost: something laid over the host for a time, "and like all ghosts it is transparent, and the host can be seen through the ghost". To which Mike and I added the visitor. The audience are visitors – Cliff sometimes said witnesses – who come to a place that is not theirs and attend to what passes between host and ghost. *Tri Bywyd* ("Three Lives", 1995) was a working out of host, ghost, visitor: three deaths told among the ruins of Esgair Fraith, an abandoned upland farm near Lampeter west Wales UK, in steel scaffold built through and around the ruined walls and the trees that had grown up in them. The scaffold was the ghost's architecture, incongruent with the host's, and the meaning of the piece lay in the gap between the two. When the performances ended the scaffold came down and the farm went back to the conifer plantation and grown-out hedge sycamores.

Nick Kaye traces the idea of site-specificity further back, to the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s, in which the work throws the viewer's attention off itself and onto the room, and to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, whose removal from a New York plaza Serra called its destruction: the site-specific work is the one that cannot be moved.

A building cannot be a ghost. Todd's claim that his buildings are frames rather than objects is a claim to ghostliness: look through them, not at them. But Cliff's ghost is defined by its departure. A ghost that stays becomes a new layer of the host – the next stratum, which the next ghost will haunt. The studios are not transparent, and they are not going anywhere. This is why "apostrophe" is the more honest of Todd's two figures. A frame can be removed. An apostrophe stays in the sentence.

Where the studios fall. Mike sorts work by its relation to site into three kinds: site-sympathetic, where an existing piece is staged in a found place; site-generic, where work is made for a type of place; and site-specific, where work is generated from and for one place and cannot be repeated elsewhere. Placed honestly, the Fogo studios are site-generic with site-specific detailing. They were conceived as a

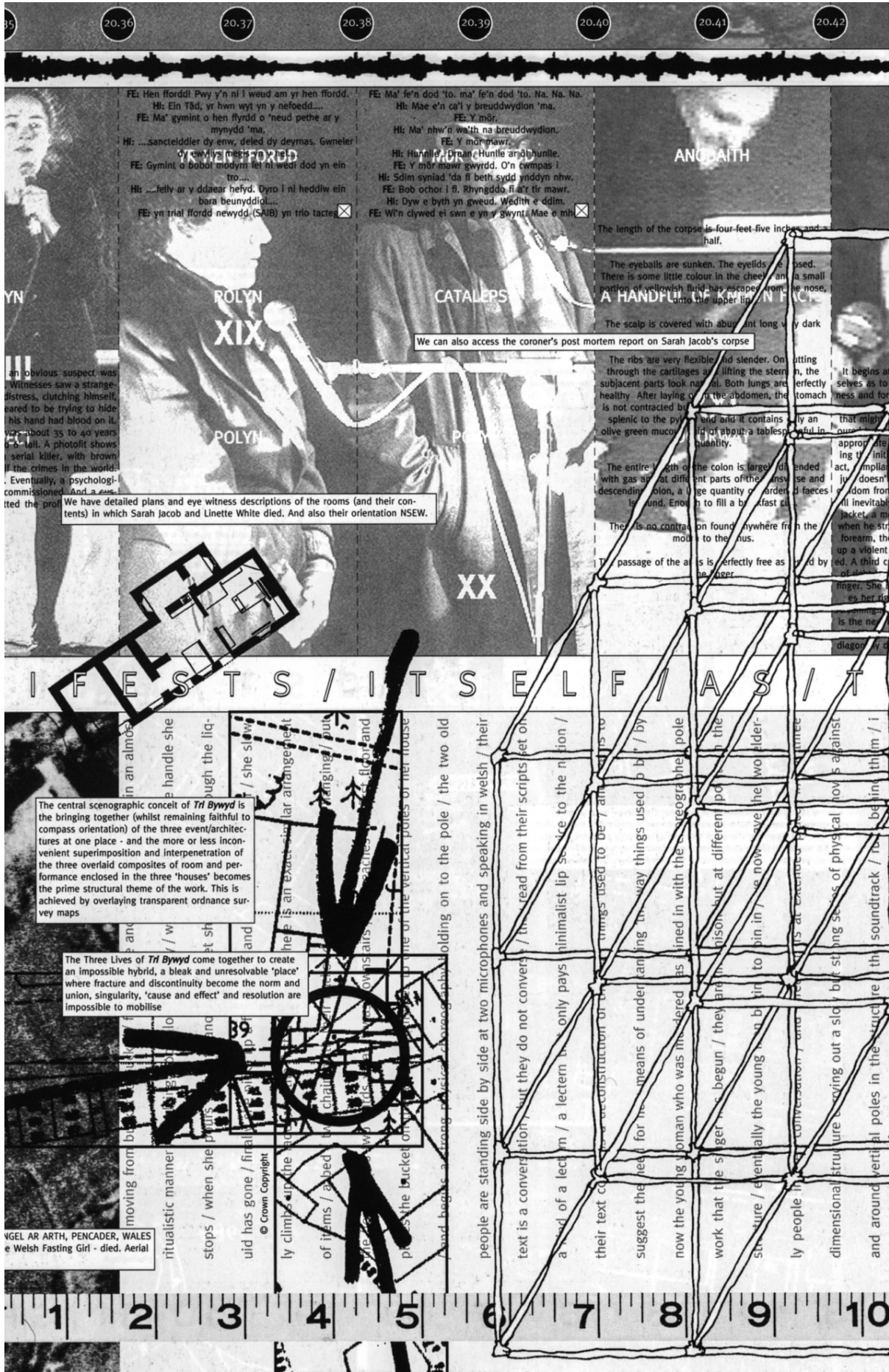
family of prototypes for a “northern landscape” – Todd has built close cousins in Norway – and what ties them to Fogo is the detailing: orientation to particular views, construction by island carpenters, the stilts that quote the fishing stage. This is not a criticism of the buildings. It is a precise description, and it reframes the charge of them seeming to be imposition on the land. The studios are site-generic objects asserting site-specificity, and the assertion is carried by the one part of them made by islanders’ hands.

Two architectures, and what the gap says. Todd’s “contrast” is the move Mike and Cliff built a practice on: two incongruent architectures, the found and the made, with meaning in the gap between them. The difference is content. In *Tri Bywyd* the ghost told three deaths; the incongruence between scaffold and ruin carried narrative frictions, dialectical imaging. What does the gap between a white studio and a Fogo headland say? “The experience of place” – which is form without the details of a story, and nonetheless powerful.

The frame and the deep map. In later work Mike and I approached land as a deep map: a layering of incidents, personal, historical and geological, that no single viewpoint can hold. The deep map is the direct alternative to the frame. A frame selects one view for a positioned viewer. A deep map holds many layers and many voices, including those the frame places in the view rather than behind it. The Aurland Lookout frames a fjord. A deep map of the same spot would include the road, the hydro scheme, the farm that was there, and who is now paid to look.

The visitor. This is where the triad bites. In *Tri Bywyd* the visitors were visitors: they came from outside to a farm that was not theirs, and the piece knew it. Todd’s buildings also frame place for someone arriving – the artist in residence, the guest at the Inn – and in that framing the islander appears in the view, as stage and punt and saltbox, rather than at the window. A frame is never neutral; it decides where one stands and what one is placed to feel. Nick’s subtitle to his book *Site Specific Art* was *Documentation*, and this adds another turn. The site-specific work is unrepeatable, so the document becomes what remains of it; Cliff’s graphic panels comprise, in montage/collage, a deep map of *Tri Bywyd* in its remains. The most visible documents of Todd’s buildings are the fabulous architectural photographs, in which the studio stands alone in weather with no one in it. The building is site-specific chiefly in the photograph, and the photograph is the frame of the frame.

This proposition prompts questions of inhabitation – of the artists who visit the studio to make, and in so doing to document their own apostrophe.



FE: Hen flordd! Pwy y'n ni l' weud am yr hen flordd.
Hi: Ein Tâd, yr hwn wyt yn y nefoedd...
FE: Ma' gymint o hen ffyrdd o 'neud pethe ar y
mynydd 'ma.
Hi: ...sancteidler dy enw, deled dy deymas. Gwneir
dy ewyllys mewn ffordd.
FE: Gymint o bobol modryn iet ni wedi dod yn ein
tro...
Hi: ...felly ar y dddear hefyd. Dyro i ni heddiw ein
bara beunyddiol...
FE: yn triad flordd newydd. (SAB) yn trio tacte. X

FE: Ma' fe'n dod 'to. ma' fe'n dod 'to. Na. Na. Na.
Hi: Mae e'n ca'i y breuddwydion 'ma.
FE: Y môr.
Hi: Ma' nhw'n wa'n na breuddwydion.
FE: Y môr mawr.
Hi: Hunllef, Ddraig Hunllef a'r Hunllef.
FE: Y môr mawr gwyrdd. O'n cwmpas i.
Hi: Sdim syniad 'da fi beth sydd ynddyn nhw.
FE: Bob ochr i fi. Rhyngddo fi a'r tir mawr.
Hi: Dyw e byth yn gweud. Wedith e ddim.
FE: W'n clywed ei swm e yn y gwyni. Mae e m... X

AND DAITH

The length of the corpse is four feet five inches and a half.

The eyeballs are sunken. The eyelids are closed. There is some little colour in the cheeks and a small portion of yellowish fluid has escaped from the nose, into the upper lip.

The scalp is covered with abundant long wavy dark hair.

We can also access the coroner's post mortem report on Sarah Jacob's corpse

The ribs are very flexible and slender. On lifting the sternum, the subjacent parts look natural. Both lungs are healthy. After laying open the abdomen, the stomach is not contracted but is full of food. The spleen is the pylorus and it contains a quantity of olive green mucous matter.

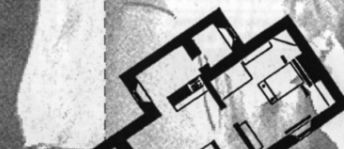
The entire length of the colon is large and distended with gas and different parts of the intestine and descending colon, a large quantity of ordered faeces is found. Enough to fill a bucket.

There is no contraction anywhere from the anus to the stomach.

The passage of the air is perfectly free as in life.

It begins at the stomach and goes on to the rectum and then to the anus. It begins at the stomach and goes on to the rectum and then to the anus. It begins at the stomach and goes on to the rectum and then to the anus.

We have detailed plans and eye witness descriptions of the rooms (and their contents) in which Sarah Jacob and Linette White died. And also their orientation NSEW.



I FESTS / ITSELF / AS / T

The central scenographic conceit of *Tri Bywyd* is the bringing together (whilst remaining faithful to compass orientation) of the three event/architectures at one place - and the more or less inconvenient superimposition and interpenetration of the three overlaid composites of room and performance enclosed in the three 'houses' becomes the prime structural theme of the work. This is achieved by overlaying transparent ordnance survey maps

The Three Lives of *Tri Bywyd* come together to create an impossible hybrid, a bleak and unresolvable 'place' where fracture and discontinuity become the norm and union, singularity, 'cause and effect' and resolution are impossible to mobilise

NGEL AR ARTH, PENCADER, WALES
e Welsh Fasting Girl - died. Aerial

Tri Bywyd, a site specific performance by Brith Gof. Documentation by Cliff McLucas 2000. Photography by MS.

The apostrophe as ghost. So this figuration, the punctuation of apostrophe, can be turned to good use. In rhetoric, apostrophe is the turn aside to address something not present, where a speaker or writer directly addresses an absent person, a dead person, an inanimate object, or an abstract concept as if it were present and capable of responding. That is exactly what the ghost is: a presence that speaks to what is no longer there. If Todd's buildings are apostrophes in that sense, they address the fishery that left, the people who moved, the sea. That would make them site-specific in Mike's strong sense. An apostrophe names its addressee ("O death, where is thy sting?"). At present the studios address a view. The question Brith Gof always put to a site is the one to put to the Shorefast ensemble: to whom does the ghost speak – and what does this make of the host?

Nick Kaye, Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation (Routledge, 2000), with McLucas's host-and-ghost formulation at p. 128; Mike Pearson, Site-Specific Performance (Palgrave, 2010) and In Comes I (Exeter, 2006); Pearson and Shanks, Theatre/Archaeology (Routledge, 2001); Jonathan Bell and Ellie Stathaki, Todd Saunders: Architecture in Northern Landscapes (Birkhäuser, 2012; 2nd edn 2016).



MS framed in the entrance of Shed Studio, Fogo Island.



Shed Studio.



Squish Studio, Tilding, Fogo Island.



Todd Saunders at Shore Time.



Fogo Island Inn. Architect Todd Saunders.