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YOU WORK WHERE?! TRUE TALES FROM INTERNATIONAL ORANGE

By Susannah Magers (MA Curatorial Practice 2011)

When I tell people I work in a fort underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, their reaction is usually surprise, followed by confusion (“Wait . . . *where?*”). Today’s date is October 25, 2012, and I have spent the past five months, five days a week, on site as the visitor engagement manager at the exhibition *International Orange*. It is the latest and most ambitious project yet produced by the FOR-SITE Foundation, a San Francisco-based nonprofit dedicated to the production of art about place.

The site-specific exhibition takes its title from the rusty, red-orange color of the Golden Gate Bridge. A total of 16 artists from the Bay area and beyond—including CCA faculty **DOUG HALL** (Fine Arts), **ALLISON SMITH** (Sculpture and Fine Arts), and **STEPHANIE SYJUCO** (Sculpture and Fine Arts) and alumna **KATE POCRASS** (MFA 2001)—were commissioned to respond, each through the lens of his or her specific practice, to the ecological, military, geological, social, and imagined histories of the bridge and Fort Point, the fort at the southern foot of the bridge where the exhibition is installed.

Fort Point is a Civil War-era fort that never saw active battle. It was scheduled to be demolished in the 1930s during the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, then saved by chief bridge engineer Joseph Strauss, who deemed it a significant architectural accomplishment. It became a protected National Park Service site in the 1970s and is staffed by NPS park rangers. >>



PRECEDING PAGE: ALLISON SMITH, *Fort Point Bunting*, 2012. ABOVE: STEPHANIE SYJUCO, *International Orange Commemorative Store (A Proposition)*, 2012; KATE POCRASS, *Average (Golden Gate Edition)*, 2012

International Orange is thus an exhibition within a landmark tucked under another landmark. Cheryl Haines, the founder of FOR-SITE and the curator of the exhibition, describes being “spellbound” upon her first visit to the shadowy bastions of this brick fortress. Like many visitors, she was unprepared for how enthralling Fort Point would be. FOR-SITE’s previous endeavors—most notably the commissioned works *Spire* (2008) and *Wood Line* (2010), both by Andy Goldsworthy and both located in the Presidio—had been successes, certainly, but this time around Haines wanted to undertake a project that would be more public.

I heard about the visitor engagement manager position from LEIGH MARKOPOULOS, chair of CCA’s Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice. (I graduated from the program in 2011 and

have kept in touch.) It appealed to me precisely because of its public aspect. I see the management of an exhibition, and the facilitation of people’s engagement with it, as an essential, and often overlooked, responsibility of a curator.

Fort Point has quite the microclimate, with average temperatures hovering around 45 degrees and winds upward of 60 miles per hour. Some might balk at the idea of spending long days and months in this relatively harsh, unpredictable environment. Besides “Where’s the bathroom?”, the most popular visitor query has been “How do you *do* this every day?!” But I’ve found it exhilarating. No two days are quite the same, of course, but a typical one might begin shrouded in fog, then clear up by noon with sunshine briefly gracing the interior courtyard, then slip back into numbing cold. I grew up in New England, and the fort’s weather rivals the coldest winters there—minus the snow, of course.

Around 4 p.m., one hour before closing time, a phenomenon called “the Fort Point crazies” kicks into the mindset of even the steeliest employee. The term was coined by National Park Service ranger Andrew Felton, who is 26 years of age, a Civil War history expert, and an occasional Fort Point overnight guest—a rare breed of person indeed who chooses to spend the night, alone, in the silent darkness of these bricks. One starts to feel disoriented, delirious. I have some insight now into Alfred Hitchcock’s decision to use Fort Point as the location for the infamous *Vertigo* scene in which Kim Novak’s character jumps into the bay in a seeming suicide attempt. Sometimes it’s so quiet in the guardroom where I sit, I can hear my own heartbeat. At other times, the wind carries the cello from Doug Hall’s hypnotic *Chrysopylae* (2012), the metallic clang of the vehicle traffic from Bill Fontana’s live video and audio transmissions in *Acoustical Visions of the Golden Gate Bridge* (2012), or the dramatic, whirling crescendos of Courtney Lain’s orchestral composition *Sea Vision TV*. (2012).

I became a part of *International Orange* at the moment of its realization, *after* all of the curatorial decisions had been made. When the fever of installation and the delirium of the opening have come and gone, the life of any exhibition can seem uncertain. Will it sustain people’s interest? How will it be received? And who will be receiving it?

These questions are far more urgent with art in the public realm. An exhibition in a public space faces the additional challenge of needing to be accessible to an unintentional audience: one that isn’t purposefully seeking art out, and might not ever have encountered art before. Some visitors to *International Orange* quite literally stumble upon it, having lost their way trying to find the pedestrian walkway to the Golden Gate Bridge.

My task has thus been twofold: to interpret the exhibition both on its own terms and within the context of a historical landmark. Depending on the exhibition, a curator doesn’t always need to consider the relationship between the content and the space it inhabits, but here, that relationship is key. Recontextualization can be a risky endeavor, especially at a site with a preexisting context, such as a national park. For some people, an iconic site is a fixed entity. The idea of a



contemporary interpretation, or the insertion of new elements, is foreign, even unwelcome, and provokes a defensive reaction. One visitor was so enraged by *International Orange* that he tore his exhibition guide to pieces, throwing them at me angrily and muttering that we had “ruined history.”

Like Christo and Jeanne-Claude with their sometimes-controversial wrappings of landscapes (one of the most famous being their 2005 installation of *The Gates*, 7,503 fabric structures in New York’s Central Park, complete with staff who provided information to visitors) FOR-SITE made every effort not to actually alter the site, and to leave little to no trace afterward. For instance we worked with preexisting nails and hooks when an artwork required mounting. And when a family of rare marine birds decided to take up residence in a pipe in the bastion of Camille Utterback’s *Span* (2012), they stayed as long as they liked (only three weeks, thankfully, and upon their departure they took their pungent odor with them). Like *The Gates*, *International Orange* aspired to provide new ways of experiencing a familiar landscape.



I have witnessed a multitude of reactions to the show, but the overwhelming majority have been positive. Locals told us over and over again that the exhibition was the catalyst that finally inspired them to visit Fort Point after decades of Bay Area residence. Some had visited the fort numerous times in the past, but the show made them experience it anew. Visitors also (mostly) appreciated having an “engagement” staff—a human addendum to their paper guide—whose express role was to discuss what they were looking at, rather than just to act as guards and make sure they didn’t touch anything.

The show has reached almost 150,000 visitors—attendance numbers that any exhibition organizer would be delighted with. It has also been undeniably rewarding to see the positive impact of the show on Fort Point, which has enjoyed double (and, during the summer, *triple*) its usual visitorship. Whereas a typical museum admission costs \$20 or more per person, *International Orange* is free. Without that financial barrier, repeat visits are more likely, allowing for deeper, richer, more sustained engagement—not to mention boosted visibility. Significantly, our 100,000th guest, a local woman, was on her second visit, this time bringing along her son and a friend visiting from Japan. They stayed for more than two hours.



On one of our final days, one woman remarked with distress that the exhibition couldn’t possibly be closing—that the works should remain in the fort permanently. That has been a frequently voiced sentiment. But one reason the show is so special is its very impermanence, its status as a temporary intervention. The next FOR-SITE project will hopefully do the same for another site.

The FOR-SITE Foundation is invested in the creation of and engagement with art about place, and it has facilitated a number of CCA graduate courses at its Nevada City location. The goal is to enrich the experiences of art, architecture, and design students by providing learning opportunities that extend beyond the parameters of traditional academic curricula.

TOP TO BOTTOM: DOUG HALL, *Chrysopyllae*, 2012; MARK DION AND DANA SHERWOOD, *Encrustations*, 2012; ANANDAMAYI ARNOLD, *Fiesta Queens*, 2012