Ten years have passed since artist Tenzing Rigdol installed over twenty-four tons of transported Tibetan soil onto a platform in Dharamsala, India—site of the Tibetan government in exile and a large diasporic community. In retrospect, the 2011 installation, titled Our Land, Our People (Figure 1), marked a point of divergence for the artist’s work: its conceptual nature deviated from Rigdol’s predominant use of painting and collage in the years prior and since. Rigdol, born in Nepal to parents who escaped Tibet in the late 1960s, is one of a growing number of artists in the Tibetan diaspora exploring issues of identity and cultural connection as they navigate the often rigid expectations of diasporic society—one frequently focused on retaining the memories of “shared narratives and practices” (Appadurai 2019, 561–562).

Many contemporary Tibetan artists, although working outside of the parameters of “traditional” practices, retain certain iconographies in their use of Buddhas, Mandalas, and so forth. As a site-specific installation, Our Land, Our People thus challenged the community’s expectations/requirements for diasporic art and shifted Rigdol’s own practices toward the conceptual.

Further, Our Land, Our People established a need to reconsider the definition of “contemporary Tibetan art,” a phrase often used to discuss artworks created both in Tibet and in exile with little distinction regarding the vastly different creators and audiences—especially problematic considering the political restrictions in place in Tibet. Over the past fifteen years, several international exhibitions (and their accompanying catalogs) grouped Tibetans working in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and in exile together, noting the widespread use of cultural iconographies in their presentations of “contemporary Tibetan art.” As Clare Harris notes, these exhibitions construct a unified narrative, forming “a Tibetan nation … imagined in the art world when it does not exist as a geopolitical entity” (Harris 2012, 155). I propose Rigdol’s Our Land, Our People troubles the conventional label “contemporary Tibetan art” as a work specifically rooted in the Tibetan diasporic experience.

Perhaps the widest-reaching implication of Our Land, Our People concerns its expansion of art historical parameters of site-specific work. The installation’s accomplishment as a site-specific installation resulted not from the physicality of the space in Dharamsala, but the targeted diasporic audience and their relationship to the transported soil; the work’s reference to its previous site in Tibet reflects the would-be permanent home of the community/audience. The installation was not permanent, just as the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala is not meant to be permanent. How can this shift in the relationship between people/audience and site/installation—specifically with regards to the temporality experienced by exile communities—expand the ways in which we discuss site-specific work?
Miwon Kwon notes the practice of artists and curators who travel the world for their site-specific art, the actual (and multiple) sites of the works and various communities preempted by a discursive process: “Since the late 1980s, there have been increasing numbers of traveling site-specific art works, despite the once-adamant claim that to move the work is to destroy the work” (Kwon 2002, 31). Though Kwon was writing about artists in 2002, this trend has continued for the past two decades, the nomadic nature of the artists reflecting a certain glamorization rather than a migration of necessity. She states:

It is perhaps too soon and frightening to acknowledge, but the paradigm of nomadic selves and sites may be a glamorization of the trickster ethos that is in fact a reprise of the ideology of “freedom of choice”—the choice to forget, the choice to reinvent, the choice to fictionalize, the choice to “belong” anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere. This choice, of course, does not belong to everyone equally. The understanding of identity and difference as being culturally constructed should not obscure the fact that the ability to deploy multiple, fluid identities in and of itself is a privilege of mobilization that has a specific relationship to power. What would it mean now to sustain the cultural and historical specificity of a place (and self) that is neither a simulacral pacifier nor a willful invention? (Kwon 2002, 165-166, 1997: 109)

Kwon’s question regarding a space that is neither a simulacral pacifier nor a site of “chosen” identity reflects the type of place/site on which Our Land, Our People was situated—a bit of land, formerly colonized, now home to refugees from another colonized space (read: temporary) who become the intended audience/participants of a site-specific work. Our Land, Our People complies with Kwon’s assertion that the site itself need not be the essential/defining component of the work:

The distinguishing characteristic of today’s site-oriented art is the way in which both the art work’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate. (Kwon 1997, 92)

But while the site as place remains subordinate in Our Land, Our People, its centering of a diasporic audience shifts the dialogue from international art world/market concerns to deliberate engagement with a particular community: Tibetans in Dharamsala. Rigdol’s installation challenges notions of what makes art site-specific as it proposes diasporic communities—communities with implied temporality and often tenuous relationships to their current homes—can serve as the foremost component of the work.

Our Land, Our People

Rigdol’s father, Norbu Wangdu, passed away in 2008. Wangdu had been unable to return to Tibet after he left with wife Dolma Tsering in the late 1960’s. Shortly after his father’s passing, Rigdol began imagining a way for Tibetans in exile to walk on their homeland again as an homage to his father’s unfulfilled wish to return to Tibet. Rigdol’s idea of bringing Tibet to the exiled Tibetan community emerged, and with it, detailed plans for the illegal transport of Tibetan soil. Rigdol coordinated the removal of twenty four and a quarter tons of dirt from Shigatse, Tibet, over the borders of Nepal and India to Dharamsala, the home of over 8,000 Tibetans and the Tibetan government in exile, also known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) (The Department of Home of the Central Tibetan Administration, n.d.; Central Tibetan

Figure 1. Tenzing Rigdol. Our Land, Our People, October 26–28, 2011. Site-specific installation, soil, silk brocade on wooden platform, 43’ x 43’ (13.1 x 13.1 meters) platform area. Dharamsala, India. Image courtesy of Tenzing Rigdol and Rossi & Rossi.
Administration 2020). Over the course of seventeen months, Rigidol arranged for 300 people to achieve the transfer across the two borders and fifty checkpoints (at one point using a secret zip-line to transport 171 bags of soil across the Tibet-Nepal border, paying smugglers and risking safety), all the while telling the participants that should they be caught, they were to point to him as the sole person responsible (Tenzing Rigidol, Zoom interview, 17 June 2020).2

On 26 October 2011, Rigidol and his team unloaded the dirt onto a platform on the basketball court of the Tibetan Children’s Village School in the hilltop village of McLeod Ganj in Dharamsala (Figure 2). The forty-three by forty-three foot platform was surrounded by fabric representing the colors of the Tibetan flag. The green stairs evoked the green tails of the flag’s snow lions; red, blue, and yellow stripes adorned the base, symbolizing the rays of the sun and borders of the flag (Figure 3 shows Rigidol’s preliminary stage design—the final dimensions differ slightly from this plan). The fifty-two foot by wide platform signified the number of years since the 1959 Chinese invasion of Tibet and the establishment of Tibetan refugee communities in India. The Tibetan flag is now illegal in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The TAR boundaries are recent and political; China’s borders for the TAR do not align with historical boundaries of Tibet nor with the cultural reach of Tibet in the region. The flag thus reminds the viewer of a place that no longer exists, even as an occupied space, since the disparities in those borders contradict individual notions of what should constitute “Tibet.”

After the soil was unloaded and spread over the platform, the installation was announced publicly to the community’s great surprise.3 Rigidol titled the work Our Land, Our People, after the autobiography of Dharamsala’s most famous resident, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyetso (Figure 4) titled My Land and My People (1962).4 The immediate response from the Dharamsala audience—largely consisting of the Tibetan exile community—was emotional and positive. The work became participatory—even collaborative—in its dialogue with the community: visitors walked on, held, and occasionally ingested the soil. A microphone allowed visitors the opportunity to share their experiences and memories of Tibet (or, for those who had never been to Tibet, statements regarding a hopeful return). After three days, the dirt level gradually lowered as visitors swept up small portions of land as keepsakes. The work’s immediacy and temporality necessarily reflected the precarity of the diasporic situation. Clearly, no permanent monument would be appropriate in a space predicated as temporary. Although it has now been six decades since Tibetans came to India seeking refuge, the extended stay belies the community’s desire to return to Tibet.5 By providing the community with a glimpse of the homeland, Rigidol reiterated a connection between place and identity (Magnatta 2018).

Contemporary Tibetan art

Prior to Our Land, Our People, there was no term for “site-specific art” in the Tibetan language. In a conversation with the artist, Rigidol mentioned that he had asked around in the Tibetan community for a word to use that might convey the same meaning; after much discussion, the group agreed upon the term proposed by writer Bhuchung D. Sonam: yul nges can gyi sgyu rtsal (“site-specific art”) (Rigidol, e-mail to author, 26 August 2020). Flyers advertising

Figure 2. The artist and his team unloading the soil, Dharamsala, India, 2011. Image courtesy of Tenzing Rigidol and Rossi & Rossi.
Figure 3. Tenzing Rigdol. Installation plans for Our Land, Our People, 2011. Image courtesy of Tenzing Rigdol and Rossi & Rossi.

Figure 4. Tenzing Rigdol presenting a portion of soil to the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, 26 October 2011. Dharamsala, India. Image courtesy of Tenzing Rigdol and Rossi & Rossi.
the event in Dharamsala were written in Tibetan except for the English translation of the newly coined term. This phrase—specifically created for a discussion of Our Land, Our People—highlights the importance of the work, not only in the trajectory of Rigdol’s artistic career, but in the narrative of contemporary Tibetan art.

But what is contemporary Tibetan art? Artists working in Tibet? Artists claiming Tibetan heritage? For the past fifteen years, most of the prominent international exhibitions showcasing “contemporary Tibetan art” (or, sometimes “Tibetan contemporary art”) have featured artists working in the Tibet Autonomous Region as well as those working in various exile communities, usually shown in the same spaces with little differentiation. Exhibitions including the 2010 Traditions Transformed at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City and the 2013–2015 Anonymous iterations shown in several U.S. cities followed in the footsteps of the first major US exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art, Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expressions of Tibetan Art at the CU Art Museum in Boulder, Colorado in 2006. During the proceedings for that exhibition, panelist and Tibetan scholar Tsering Shakya asked “What is the Tibetanness of this? What makes this art Tibetan?” (Becker and Scoggins 2007: 45). Over a decade later, artists and scholars are still asking these questions (Heller 2020; Miller 2014). And yet it seems clear that “Tibetanness”—the importance of identity—features prominently in many artists’ works. The Tibetan identity often manifests through Buddhist imagery—the buddha icon in contemporary Tibetan art has become a cultural rather than religious marker.6

Many of Rigdol’s paintings and collages follow suit, depicting buddhas, bodhisattvas, Buddhist deity figures, and mandalas. His painting/collage Pin drop silence: Eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara (2013) was collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014 after its exhibition in Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations. The work incorporates many themes that appear consistently in Rigdol’s painting: gridlines dominating the canvas, a bodhisattva figure beneath those gridlines, and flames emerging from the body of the figure. Those flames represent the 157 self-immolations by Tibetans in protest of the Chinese occupation (The International Campaign for Tibet, 2021).7 The self-immolations have become especially concerning to the Tibetan communities in the TAR and in exile, as it seems these protests are often ignored by the international community. As a marker of his frustration toward the lack of attention to these protests, Rigdol created My World Is in Your Blind Spot, a series of five collage panels with flames emerging on the bodies of central buddha figures (Figure 5).

Rigdol’s first solo U.S. exhibition—also titled My World Is in Your Blind Spot—further attempted to draw attention to the self-immolations.8 Rigdol’s politically charged work in this and other exhibitions is in line with many other works from exile artists. Artists working in the TAR—restricted from engaging in openly political work—are often shown together with artists in the diaspora. Clare Harris notes:

Even in the pockets of the wider Tibetan Diaspora that are principally concentrated in the United States and Europe, the small numbers of artists, thinly spread across huge distances and disconnected from both their homeland and other Tibetans, present another set of constraints. By labeling their endeavor Tibetan contemporary art—rather than contemporary art from Tibet—those who devised and promoted it enabled a transnational community of artists to be united in the international art world. It is even possible to suggest that by including individuals based in the Tibetan-speaking areas of the People’s Republic of China alongside members of the Tibetan Diaspora, Tibetan contemporary art allowed a Tibetan nation to be imagined in the art world when it does not exist as a geopolitical entity. (Harris 2012, 155)

Perhaps since the figural representation of the buddha (amongst other Tibetan Buddhist iconographies) serves as a direct connection/cultural identifier between artists working inside and outside of Tibet, conceptual art has not been particularly popular in either community.9 The figural works have overwhelmingly been showcased in exhibitions advertising “contemporary Tibetan art” or just “Tibetan art.”
I return to Rigdol’s work in the Met’s collection to further illustrate this claim: when Pin-drop silence is on display, it is shown in the Tibet gallery. The museum itself thus promotes the grouping of art coming from artists in the TAR and in exile under one umbrella—not in the contemporary wing, perhaps with other works of political protest, or highlighting specific concerns of the diaspora—but as “Tibet.” Our Land, Our People challenges this established convention. Certainly, the installation would not “work” in Tibet; the Tibetan soil displayed on a platform directly atop the same ground might inspire reflections of land ownership, sovereignty, and so forth, but the specific reaction to the soil as land unattainable by Tibetans in the exile community of Dharamsala is the defining factor. Homi Bhabha said “The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders” (Bhabha 2004, 240). Bhabha’s message highlights the vast divide between audiences of site-specific work in and out of exile spaces.

So-called site-specific

In Bringing Tibet Home—the documentary detailing related events in the months leading up to the installation—Rigdol states “I am working on a so-called site-specific installation.” (Rigdol quoted in Choklay 2013). His comment repeats the language used in his initial handwritten exhibition proposal, both in the title of the project on the first page and in the proposal itself: “I would like to transport 35,000 kg (35 tons) of soil from three provinces of Tibet and construct a site-specific art at the heart of little Tibet.” (See Figures 6 and 7; italics mine). These brief remarks and notations might seem insignificant, but upon further reflection, definitions of the term site-specific and canonized examples have thus far largely excluded works that center exile communities and their relationship to the site in question. Early site-specific installations of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the established convention of the “white-cube” galleries, long deemed the least intrusive way to view art. By its very nature, site-specificity contextualized the work in such a way that the setting became a part of the work. In his remarks regarding the well-known and now canonized Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, Matt Coolidge, founder and director of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) states:

I consider Spiral Jetty to be one of the great works of art, not because of its sculptural components, but for the ideas it represents....I see the jetty as an important piece of land art, but mostly for what it enabled in terms of expanding the dialogue into an awareness of the potential for the entire landscape of the world to be valued in the same way that a picture on a wall in a museum is. (Coolidge in Scott 2018)

Coolidge’s remarks describe an idyllic site-specificity that embraces the “entire landscape of the world,” a metaphor that seems to omit those spaces of contention and transition that harbor displaced populations. Rigdol’s direct use of the term in his proposal and during the construction of the work makes a case for a shift or rethinking of the term to include works that center a diasporic community as audience/participants. Few site-specific works have done so, even when refugee communities are involved or referenced. Take, for example, the site-specific artwork When Faith Moves Mountains by artist Francis Alÿs.

Commissioned for the 2002 Lima Biennial, Alÿs recruited 500 volunteers to shovel sand on the dunes of Ventanilla near Lima, Peru, working together to move the entire 1600-foot dune four inches. Alÿs referred to the work as “land art for the landless” (Kester 2011, 72). But Grant Kester is critical of the gap between the artist’s intentions and the work in practice: “It’s not clear, however, in what way Faith serves the interest of the shantytown’s inhabitants or is made ‘for’ them” (Kester 2011, 72). The nearby community, notes Kester, was at the time home to 70,000 displaced immigrants and refugees, yet they
Figure 7. Tenzing Rigdol. Artist proposal for Our Land, Our People (page 2 of 5), 2011. Image courtesy of Tenzing Rigdol and Rossi & Rossi.

were not direct participants in When Faith Moves Mountains. Rather, Alyś recruited university students from Lima as the shoveling volunteers. Kester describes the students as “surrogates for the absent landless workers” and that “in refusing to engage the residents of the shantytown, by excluding them from the labor of the performance, they are all the more easily reduced to a generic abstraction (‘the landless workers’), whose mute presence lends the work its aura of political authenticity” (Kester 2011, 73). This type of communal engagement differed from Rigdol’s work; Alyś did not include the refugee community in the work, and the community he did include—recruited from nearby Lima—was tasked with the physical directive to stand in the hot sun and shovel a sand dune. The artist/audience dialogue in Our Land, Our People, rather, engaged the community in more personal ways; the participants choosing their own physical interactions with the soil rather than responding to the directive of the artist. The actions and reactions of participants in both projects were documented in films: these “functional sites” (supplemental to the “literal sites” as defined by James Meyer) are the tangible materials that reinforce the temporality of the work itself, such as documentaries, photographs, and texts (Meyer 2000).

We might, then, compare Rigdol’s project as documented in Tenzin Tsetan Choklay’s Bringing Tibet Home with that of Francis Alyś’s film (created in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega) for When Faith Moves Mountains. The latter was shown in various museums, the film generating a stir in the art world and “help(ing) to consolidate Alyś’s international reputation” (Kester 2011, 67). While Choklay’s Bringing Tibet Home was shown at several film festivals, it was not used as a surrogate for Rigdol’s work in gallery spaces (and, at a run-time of one hour and twenty-two minutes would be ill-suited for the same type of gallery display that houses Alyś’s fifteen-minute film). While the exhibition format of the two films differ, both serve as functional sites by making clear the temporality of the event itself; the “literal sites” retain no remnants of the events that transpired. The movement of soil in When Faith Moves Mountains was imperceptible against the massive-ness of the space; it was an intended metaphor of the futility of labor (Kester 2011, 69). It could have existed anywhere, the social conditions “subordinate to a discursively determined site” (Kwon 1997, 92). Or, perhaps better said by one of the participants in reference to Alyś’s country of residence: “These guys coming down here to waste their time . . . haven’t they got dunes in Mexico?” (Alyś, When Faith Moves Mountains film, 2002).

The journey of the soil in Our Land, Our People, however, echoed the same physical journey of many of the refugees in attendance: from Tibet across two borders into India, and into a presumed temporary space.

Temporary art, temporary audience

In her discussion regarding temporality as applied to public art in the USA, Patricia Phillips argues that ephemeral works can serve as critical social sites by engaging “difficult ideas and current issues in ways that more enduring projects cannot” (Phillips 1989, 335). Our Land, Our People did address a current issue in its relationship to the viewers’ homeland (in this case, Tibet rather than the USA) but the temporary nature of the work also reflected the impermanent status of a refugee community. Tibetans in Dharamsala constantly navigate social and political relationships, as the policies of the borrowed land could change at any time. Thus, Our Land, Our People differs from many site-specific works whose ephemerality is not reflective of the audience’s conditional presence but rather of a broader trend foregrounding temporality. Kwon notes:
The “work” no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewers’ critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of that viewing. In this context, the guarantee of a specific relationship between an art work and its “site” is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship (as demanded by Serra, for example), but rather on the recognition of its unfixed impermanence, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation. (Kwon 1997, 91)

Take, for example, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s two-week installation *The Gates* (2005) in Manhattan. *The Gates*—7503 orange-colored post-and-lintel constructions with nylon fabric flowing from the tops and dotting the grounds of Central Park—brought to the fore issues of public art, community, and perhaps served as a therapeutic aid just a few years after the acute impact of September 11 on New York City (Doss 2017, 203–204). But the work’s temporality was not reflective of the living conditions of the viewers in Central Park, regardless of how varied those experiences may have been. The artists cite the temporality as an aesthetic choice:

The temporary quality of the projects is an aesthetic decision. Our works are temporary in order to endow the works of art with a feeling of urgency to be seen, and the love and tenderness brought by the fact that they will not last … We want to offer this feeling of love and tenderness to our works, as an added value (dimension) and as an additional aesthetic quality. (Christo and Jeanne-Claude as cited in Doss 2017, 204-205)

The temporality of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s work adds a “feeling of urgency to be seen … they will not last.” The urgency of *Our Land, Our People* had little to do with a fear of missing out on viewing the work, but rather reflected the tensions of a community living temporarily and with constant uncertainty in exile. Once the two-week period ended, *The Gates* installation was removed by officials.12 For *Our Land, Our People*, the soil was taken by the community, leaving nothing at the site.14 Jamyang Norbu proposes a connection between the dispersal of soil from the square platform to the ritualistic dismantling of a sand mandala in Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Norbu 2015). While this lends itself to another cultural connection between the audience and their homeland, I argue that the diasporic nature of the audience and their destabilized position centered the temporality of the installation.

As the site of the Central Tibetan Administration and the home of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama for the past six decades, Dharamsala might not seem like a site of impermanence to outside audiences. But many Tibetans in Dharamsala have resisted the assimilation that occurs in more (seemingly) permanent exile spaces: “Tibetan youth are not encouraged to feel increasingly Indian in order to fit into the cultural mores of the adopted nation of India, they rarely self-identify as ‘Tibetan Indians,’ and more often say that they are ‘Tibetans in India’” (Falcone and Wangchuk 2008, 182). Dharamsala, or “Little Lhasa,” as it is sometimes called, holds tightly to Tibetan culture and tradition in a mostly unified manner; the ethos is one of temporality, a communal agreement for a return to Tibet at some future date, however tenuous: “After half a century of living there, India is not a place that Tibetan exiles affectionately embrace. Rather, life in India is tolerated as an unfortunate and—as long hoped for—temporary necessity” (Huber 2008, 352). Furthermore, Tibetans in Dharamsala are seldom citizens of India, whereas Tibetans in exile communities around the globe often do become citizens in those countries. The reasons for this are complicated, but they include both Indian bureaucracy and the refusal of some Tibetans to pursue citizenship as an act of political protest (Falcone and Wangchuk 2008; McGranahan 2018). This lack of citizenship leads to the denial of certain business opportunities and, perhaps most importantly, owning land. This makes the soil in *Our Land, Our People* critically important as a medium; the land/soil marking “Tibet” as a specific entity—a site inherently claimed, and thus referencing ownership—has no parallel reality in Dharamsala.16

Added to these complexities is the “Shangri-Laism” that has followed Tibetans from Tibet into their refugee spaces, both by international/external forces, but also by an internal desire to keep certain memories (either real or imagined) intact as described by Dibyesh Anand:

A particular space–time projection of homeland is another constitutive factor in the fostering of Tibetan identity in the diaspora. Place, real or imagined, has become a central metaphor for the identity construction in exile. The projection of Dharamsala as the “Little Lhasa of India” and the nomenclature of establishments here illustrates the need to create familiarity in a strange environment, and maintain the memory of homeland. This diasporic longing for homeland is reflected in expressive artistic production in the refugee community. (Anand 2000, 277)17

Anand describes the almost static nature of artistic development in Dharamsala. Since its inception, the community has focused on preservation of what was lost in Tibet, though that preservation comes at the expense of other artistic developments, for example, in the work and experiences of artist Gonkar Gyatso.

Gyatso is a key figure in contemporary Tibetan art, developing vast new interpretations of Buddhist imagery, rethinking portraiture, and creating site-specific works around the globe. His *Dissected Buddha* (2011) remains one of two contemporary Tibetan artworks collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gyatso was the first Tibetan artist to exhibit work at the Venice Biennale, doing so in 2009. Yet, his early years in Dharamsala were not successful, at least by the standards set by the Tibetan exile community, as Harris notes: “(In) the conservative atmosphere of Dharamsala (Gyatso) rapidly became caught in the no man’s land of conflicting conceptions of who or what was truly Tibetan” (Harris 2006, 703). Gyatso arrived in Dharamsala in 1992 but left by 1996, recognizing the limitations set by the community:

I felt that to use Tibetan cultural elements to address global issues and to participate in global cultural debates would assist my development. I used Tibetan elements but untraditionally which was difficult for my Tibetan audience to understand. At the same time conservative Tibetans and western intellectuals accused me of revisionism. The isolation and levels of incomprehension among different cultures which ensued was the dilemma I faced. (Gyatso 2003, 149-150)

In his 2003 series My Identity, Gonkar relates the unease of his time in Dharamsala in one of four photographs based on American photographer Charles Suydam Cutting’s 1937 portrait of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama’s official court painter, Tsering Dondrup (Harris 2006, 711). The “Dharamsala” photo, the third in the series, depicts the artist in a monk’s robes with a traditional type of Buddhist painting (thangka) in front of him. The painting depicts the Potala Palace—the former home of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa—and the Dalai Lama himself rising above the Tibetan scene. A photograph of the Dalai Lama at the right of the image accompanies a Tibetan flag patch and katak (white scarf given in offerings)—all elements typical of the faithful Tibetan refugee in Dharamsala. The suitcase in the image is especially revelatory, reminding the viewer of the temporality of the Dharamsala community. The other images in the series point to Gyatso’s ongoing feeling of displacement and identity manipulation/construction (as Harris summarises, “which of these versions of myself best fits your stereotype?”) (Harris 2006, 712). But the Dharamsala scene reflects a phenomenon specific to the exile community’s promotion of traditional arts like thangka at the expense of supporting new and other forms of art. The community’s rigidity is an understandable grasp for the “traditional” in art:

In 2015, four years after the Our Land, Our People installation, the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile (TPIE), the legislative branch of the Central Tibetan Administration, debated the role of contemporary art in Tibetan diasporic communities, the hearing widely viewed on television in Dharamsala. At issue was the ongoing concern that deviating from traditional arts distracted from the cause. Rigdol describes this event:

They have these live on television and everyone watches, one guy asked the cultural minister, saying “I don’t want to name the artist, but there is this guy who brought soil from Tibet and wants to call it art … what is this guy doing? (Before) he cut the scriptures and made noodles and calls it art! The department should say something about what is art and what is not … could he kill his mother and call it art?” (Tenzing Rigdol, Zoom interview, 17 June 2020)21

Rigdol’s role regarding what should be considered the cultural markers of Tibetan art in an exile community can be examined within Arjun Appadurai’s framework regarding material reflections of identity in exile spaces/archives:

Migrants have a complex relationship to the practices of memory and, thus, to the making of archives, for several reasons. First, because memory becomes hyper-valued for many migrants, the practices through which collective memory is constructed are especially subject to cultural contestation and to simplification. Memory, for migrants, is almost always a memory of loss …Migration tends to be accompanied by a confusion about what exactly has been lost, and thus of what needs to be recovered or remembered. This confusion often leads to a deliberate effort to construct a variety of archives, ranging from the most intimate and personal (such as the memory of one’s earlier bodily self) to the most public and collective, which usually take the form of shared narratives and practices. (Appadurai 2019, 561-562)

The shared narratives and practices of the Tibetan exile community are more accessible in art like the traditional thangka paintings, and those traditions continue to mark what has been lost across the border, sometimes at the expense of pushing artistic boundaries. Although Gyatso faced resistance for creating new forms of art in Dharamsala in the 1990s, Rigdol pushed forward with his conceptual installation in 2011. Still, the artist was unsure how the work would be received. Rigdol need not have worried, as Our Land, Our People’s success could be measured by the reactions of the exile community at the site (Figures 8 and 9). In addition to touching, walking on, and occasionally eating the soil, community members brought the soil home with them, some to use in flower pots, others putting tiny granules in lockets—the diaspora of the soil echoing that of the people.22 When asked about the project, some Tibetans remembered their homeland. Phuntsog Namgyal stated, “Walking on genuine Tibetan soil, I felt as if I was returning home to my native land after 51 years. I was born in Tibet. Since my escape in 1959, I have not had the opportunity to go back …
I felt the same emotion in my heart as if I was back in Tibet” (Jolly 2011).

In other cases, Tibetans born in exile pondered the future. Twenty-nine-year-old Tsering Dolma said, "I was born in India, so it’s the first time I have walked on Tibetan soil. I feel so lucky and I’m now sure I’ll be back in Tibet one day. It gives me hope” (Jolly 2011). As Phillips noted in her argument regarding temporal works, “the encounter of public art is ultimately a private experience” (Phillips 1989, 335). But why was this particular work of public art, one that did not adhere to the traditional techniques and iconographies often promoted in the Tibetan exile community, so successful? I argue that the conceptual installation—a divergence from previously and since deemed “acceptable” artworks—aligned with the Dharamsala Tibetan community’s refusal to assimilate. As a “marker of temporality” for the site in India and a literal reclamation of land from Tibet, Our Land, Our People highlighted the community’s expectation of and desire for a return to their homeland.23

**New lenses for site-specific work**

In the ten years since this project was completed, Rigdol has continued to produce paintings and collages for exhibitions around the globe. His 2019 Hong Kong exhibition titled Dialogue specifically addressed the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement (and the exhibition itself opened just one week before the summer protests of 2019 began). He is no stranger to the varied and often political readings of his works; he is also familiar with the international art world, its audiences, and the demands of the market. Yet, Our Land, Our People was a different venture, not only for the artist, but also for the trajectory of
“contemporary Tibetan art” and the definition of site-specificity itself.

Site-specificity conjures certain images in the mind of the art historian: long-term earthworks like Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, massive temporary works like Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates, and controversial works like Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc have all been canonized and included in textbooks. But emerging artworks in diasporic communities suggest the limitations of pre-existing parameters. How might revisiting Our Land, Our People challenge our understanding of art as it is created/received in diasporic communities, or even issues of diaspora studies more broadly? What does it mean to have an artist create a work of impermanence for an impermanent audience? How might art historians look to specific restrictions, cultural practices, and so forth in diasporic communities as starting points in discussions of contemporary art? And, more specifically related to the Tibetan diasporic community, the questions posed by Christiana Klieger: “To what extent is the acute, reflexive self-consciousness of Tibetan refugees expressed in contemporary material culture? Can one document assimilative or adaptational cultural change through the products of changing artistic expression in refugee culture?” (Klieger 1997, 59).

Rigdol’s Our Land, Our People engages with each of these questions. It asks us to consider diasporic audiences as a central component of site-specific work. And site-specificity is a concept that Rigdol continues to explore. The artist’s future project (tentatively titled Tibetan Road Builders) will use site-specificity to navigate the darker histories of Tibetan exile life in India (Rigdol, personal communication, 2016). Years ago, Rigdol learned from his grandfather that thousands of Tibetans spent their lives in India as roadbuilders. Rigdol’s proposal for his project notes that no significant research has ever been conducted regarding these Tibetans, despite their enormous importance and impact on the landscape of India, both literally and as new members of a transitioning society. Like Our Land, Our People, Rigdol’s future work will take place in India at those sites impacted by Tibetan refugee communities. By turning to these types of spaces, particularly those that are in direct dialogue with diasporic communities who embody the temporalities of the installations, we might find new lenses through which to view site-specific art.

Notes

1. The Department of Home of the Central Tibetan Administration (the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala) lists the current population (June 2020) of Tibetans in Dharamsala at 8,256 and the current population of Tibetans in India at 94,203.

2. During this interview, Rigdol mentioned that he had a USA Permanent Resident Card (a "green card") during the soil project. A lawyer informed him at the time that he should be arrested for illegally transporting soil across borders, the USA could not help him. Rigdol did not employ any Tibetans living in Tibet for fear of their safety. He did often rely on his project manager, Nepal-based Topten Tsering.

3. To conceal his controversial (and illegal) project, Rigdol maintained for months that the soil he was collecting would be used to construct a Buddhist stupa for world peace.

4. At one point during the three days of display for Our Land, Our People, Rigdol brought a selection of soil to the Dalai Lama who signed it with the word bod, the Tibetan word for Tibet.

5. Not all Tibetans in Dharamsala want to return to Tibet. For a more nuanced discussion, see Dibyesh Anand, "(Re)imagining Nationalism: Identity and Representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia," Contemporary South Asia 9, no. 3 (2000): 271–287.

6. Clare Harris describes this occurrence: “The silhouette of the Buddha body could be described as the logo of Tibetan contemporary art because it has featured in works made by virtually every Tibetan artist currently active. This form confirms one of the dominant tropes of ‘Shangri-Laism’ in the West, in which the practice of Tibetan Buddhism is seen as Tibet’s principal cultural marker and asset” (Harris 2012, 162).

7. The International Campaign for Tibet lists the current number of self-immolations as 157 (September 2021), though the actual number may be higher and unknown due to the difficult nature of obtaining information from Chinese authorities.

8. The exhibition My World Is in Your Blind Spot and the five panels of the same name were shown at the Emmanuel Art Gallery in Denver, Colorado, and the Tibet House U.S. in New York City in 2019.

9. Kabir Mansingh Heimsath observed the general lack of interest in conceptual art in 2006 in the TAR, saying “Indeed, several friends from Beijing have said that the new Tibetan art is too simple, or too traditional, to really be considered avant-garde or even original. The ‘Memory’ artist Tsering Namgyal, who had just returned from an exhibition in Beijing, laughed when asked about this and promptly moved his ashtray, cigarette and tea-cup into a mildly aesthetic arrangement and stated—‘There, I say this has meaning and so it is installation art!’” (Heimsath 2005).

10. The event was live-streamed internationally during the first day by the English-language Tibetan news site Phayul.com. Rigdol heard from Tibetans in China who were able to bypass the firewall and view the live-stream. See response from author Woeser (2012).

11. The use of the word “home” in the English title of the documentary—Bringing Tibet Home—seems contradictory to the sentiments of the Tibetan community in Dharamsala (consider, for example, the title of Jessica Falcone and Tsering Wangchuk’s related essay “We’re Not Home” – Tibetian Refugees
in India in the Twenty-First Century.”) The Tibetan title of the documentary, pha sa bu thug, or “Son Meets Fatherland,” echoes the artist’s personal relationship with his father and the impetus behind the project; it also implies that the younger members of Dharamsala’s Tibetan audience born in exile could meet the fatherland through the form of soil (literal Tibet) for the first time, and thus seems a more apt title.

12. With his other temporary works, Rigdol recorded the events to be used as later proxies. For example, both Mandala Deconstructed (dancers performing atop a sand mandala at the Rubin Museum of Art in 2007) and Scripture Noodle (a performance wherein Rigdol cooked and ate manuscript pages in the setting of a Chinese restaurant in Vermont in 2009) were filmed, later to be shown in various exhibitions. The transitory nature of the performances was thus mitigated in a sense by the permanent video works (the functional sites) to be used as surrogates in art world spaces.

13. On one visit during the run of the installation, I was given a small piece of orange fabric—apparently the same fabric used in The Gates but not the artwork fabric itself—by one of several attendants posted throughout the park.

14. Even the platform and fabric used to surround the soil were given away to participants (Rigdol, Zoom interview, 17 June 2020). The temporality due to audience participation relates to the work of Felix Gonzales-Torres. Several of Gonzales-Torres’ installations invite viewers to take a piece home with them—for example candy, or fortune cookies—gradually depleting the pile. Unlike Our Land, Our People, however, collectors of Gonzales-Torres’ work purchase certificates of authenticity that give the rights and responsibilities of replicating the work in appropriate venues. So, the artwork never really ceases to exist, since the owners (the holders of the certificates) can re-create the work under various circumstances (Wharton 2005, 171).

15. For more on Tibetan refugee/Indian government relations, see Falcone and Wangchuk (2008). Falcone and Wangchuk note “Many Tibetans in exile have sought Indian citizenship, but irrespective of the laws on the books, in practice Tibetans in exile, including the second and third generation, are routinely refused Indian citizenship. According to the High Commission of India in Ottawa, there is no established right to citizenship for Tibetan refugees in India, even if they were born on Indian soil. First, Tibetans in exile are systematically dissuaded from applying for Indian citizenship by CTA officials. Second, there is social pressure from certain other Tibetan Refugees to remain a refugee, and not seek citizenship. Third, citizenship seekers are bureaucratically impeded by Indian ministries: if paperwork for citizenship is filed with the Home Ministry in India it is routinely rejected if the applicant is proved to be a Tibetan refugee” (168–169). Also see McGranahan (2018).

16. Rigdol’s personal history in Dharamsala and with its Tibetan community further solidified his choice of site for Our Land, Our People. In addition to spending several years as a child there, Rigdol began an artist residency program in Dharamsala in 2015 titled the Dialogue Artists Residency (DAR): “The Dialogue Artists Residency (DAR) is the first Tibetan artist in residency program committed to nurturing globally displaced contemporary Tibetan artists. The objective is to provide a dynamic environment in which Tibetan artists in exile can exchange and collaborate with each other to produce lasting works of the imagination” (Flyer for the DAR program, personal correspondence with Tenzing Rigdol, 2020). The Dialogue Artists Residency in Dharamsala closed in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic.

17. Anand further states: “Images of places from Tibet, such as Potala, are a favorite motif in cultural artefacts. While tourism and commodification are important factors behind the inclusion of the theme of place within the artistic production of the diaspora, one cannot deny the symbolic significance of Tibet as a homeland” (Anand 2000, 277).

18. Dissected Buddha is listed as a promised gift on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website (Behrendt 2014).

19. For more on artist Gonkar Gyatso and his impact on contemporary Tibetan art (both in Lhasa and abroad), see Harris (2006).

20. Gyatso later added a fifth photograph to the series in 2015. See Kelényi (2016: 95).

21. Rigdol paraphrased the comments made by Geshe Monlam at the hearing (Tibet 2021).

22. Although Rigdol’s initial proposal included plans to keep a portion of the soil to use in an editioned set of twelve smaller works, he ultimately decided against it and all of the soil was taken by the community participants (Rigdol, personal communication, 23 July 2020).

23. Timing may also play a role in the success of Our Land, Our People. In her discussion of participatory artworks, Claire Bishop notes: “The appearance of participatory art...tends to occur at moments of political transition and upheaval: in the years leading to Italian Fascism, in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, in the widespread social dissent that led to 1968, and in its aftermath in the 1970s. At each historical moment participatory art takes a different form, because it seeks to negate different artistic and socio-political objects” (Bishop 2012, 276). Just three years prior to Rigdol’s installation, the 2008 Chinese Olympics in Beijing brought a renewed sense of injustice both in the TAR where Tibetans began to self-immolate (and would continue doing so for the next decade), and in Tibetan exile communities around the world. Although this essay focuses on the intersections of site-specificity, temporality, and diaspora in Our Land, Our People, the work’s participatory nature in relation to socio-political events is equally deserving of investigation. I am currently working on an expanded manuscript that addresses this and other important aspects of the work.

Notes on contributor
Sarah Magnatta is an assistant professor of art history at the University of Denver specializing in global contemporary art and museum studies. She previously worked at the Denver Art Museum and has independently curated several
exhibitions, including Tenzing Rigidol’s first solo U.S. exhibition, My World Is in Your Blind Spot. She is currently on the College Art Association Museum Committee.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the University of Denver for funding portions of this project. She especially thanks Tenzing Rigidol for graciously agreeing to several interviews and providing images for publication. Her gratitude also goes to reviewers of this essay for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Sarah Magnatta  
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1385-377X

References

Alys, F., C. Medina, and R. Ortega. 2002. “When Faith Moves Mountains (Film).” https://francisalys.com/when-faith-moves-mountains
Anand, D. 2000. “(Re)imagining Nationalism: Identity and Representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia.” Contemporary South Asia 9 (3): 271–287. doi:10.1080/713658756.
Appadurai, A. 2019. “Traumatic Exit, Identity Narratives, and the Ethics of Hospitality.” Television & New Media 20 (6): 558–565. doi:10.1177/1527476419857678.
Becker, T. L., and T. Victoria Scoogg. 2007. Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expressions of Tibetan Art: An Exhibition and Symposium. Boulder: CU Art Museum. .
Behrendt, K. 2014. “Tibetan Buddhist Art in the Twenty-First Century.” Accessed July 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/tibetan-buddhist-art
Bhabha, H. 2004. “Double Visions.” In Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum, edited by D. Preziosi and C. Farago. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 236–241 .
Bishop, C. 2012. Artifical Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London: Verso.
Central Tibetan Administration. “Tibet in Exile.” Accessed 14 June 2020. https://tibet.net/about-cta/tibet-in-exile
Choklay, T. T. 2013. Bringing Tibet Home [DVD]. London: Day for Night Films.
The Department of Home of the Central Tibetan Administration Accessed 14 June 2020 https://centraltibetanreliefcommittee.net/settlements/tibetan-settlements-in-india/north-india/dharamsala-kangra-dist
Doss, E. 2017. “Public Art, Public Feeling: Contrasting Site-Specific Projects of Christo and Ai Weiwei.” Public Art Dialogue 7 (2): 196–229. doi:10.1080/21502552.2017.1343612.
Falcone, J., and T. Wangchuk. 2008. “We’re Not Home: Tibetan Refugees in India in the Twenty-First Century.” India Review: Tibet, India, and China 7 (3): 164–199. doi:10.1080/14736490802261499.
Gyatso, T. 1997 (1962). My Land and My People: The Original Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet. New York: McGraw-Hill.
Gyatso, G. 2003. “No Man’s Land: Real and Imaginary Tibet.” Tibet Journal 28 (1/2): 147–160.
Harris, C. 2006. “The Buddha Goes Global: Some Thoughts Towards a Transnational Art History.” Art History 29 (4): 698–720. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8365.2006.00520.x.
Harris, C. 2012. “In and Out of Place: Tibetan Artists’ Travels in the Contemporary Art World.” Visual Anthropology Review 28 (2): 52–63. doi:10.1111/j.1548-7458.2012.01121.x.
Heimsath, K. M. 2005. “Untitled Identities: Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet” Accessed July 2020. https://www.asianart.com/articles/identity/index.html
Heller, A. 2020. “Tibetan Artists and Tibetan Identity: Who’s Who and since When?” . Accessed July 2020. https://asianart.com/articles/identity/index.html
Huber, T. 2008. The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
The International Campaign for Tibet. “Self-immolation Fact Sheet.” Accessed 26 September 2021. https://savetibet.org/tibetan-self-immolations
Jolly, J. 28 October 2011. “India: Tibetan Exiles Walk on ‘Home Soil’ in Dharamsala.” BBC News. . Accessed July 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-15490160
Kelenyi, B. 2016. “From the Michelangelo of Lhasa to the Problem of Tibetan Identity.” Ethnologia Polona 37: 83–100.
Kester, G. H. 2011. The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press.
Kleger, P. C. 1997. “Shangri-la and Hyperreality: A Collision in Tibetan Refugee Experience.” In Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995, edited by F. Korom. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 59–68.
Kwon, M. 1997. “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity.” October 80: 85–110. doi:10.2307/778809.
Kwon, M. 2002. One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Magnatta, S. 2018. “Common Ground: Place and Identity in Contemporary Tibetan Art.” South Asian Studies 34 (2): 186–196. doi:10.1080/02666030.2018.1514955.
McGranahan, C. 2018. “Refusal as Political Practice: Citizenship, Sovereignty, and Tibetan Refugee Status.” American Ethnologist 45 (3): 367–379. doi:10.1111/ame.12671.
Meyer, J. 2000. “The Functional Site; Or, the Transformation of Site Specificity.” In Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art, edited by E. Suderburg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 23–37.
Miller, L. 2014. “Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet.” PhD Thesis, Emory University, USA.
Norbu, J. 2015. “Resurrecting a Lost Homeland.” Shadow Tibet, Accessed July 2020. https://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2015/01/17/resurrecting-a-lost-homeland
Phillips, P. C. 1989. “Temporality and Public Art.” Art Journal: Critical Issues in Public Art 48 (4): 331–335. doi:10.1002/j.1934-4117.1989.tb00780.x.
Scott, E. E. 2018. “Decentering Land Art from the Borderlands: A Review of through the Repellent Fence.” Art Journal Open, Accessed July 2020. https://artjournal.open.collegeart.org/?p=9819#fn-9819-15
Tibet, T. V. “Day 6 Part 4: 9th Session of the 15th TPiE Proceeding from 16–28 March 2015 [Video].” Accessed 18 March 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=FHKKj7bJzyw&feature=emb_logo

Wharton, G. 2005. “Challenges of Conserving Art.” In Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art, edited by B. Altshuler, 163–178. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Woeser, T. 2012. “‘Tibet’ Is a Mark Deeply Impressed on Our Foreheads and in Our Hearts.” High Peaks Pure Earth, Accessed July 2020. https://highpeakspureearth.com/tibet-is-a-mark-deeply-impressed-on-our-foreheads-and-in-our-hearts-by-woeser