Comment

This essay was commissioned by Griffith University Art Museum for the exhibition *Round About or Inside.*

Griffith University Art Museum presented *Round About or Inside*, a joint project with Ghent University, from 30 September – 20 November 2021.

Featuring eminent Australian and international artists, *Round About or Inside* explored how artists from different geographic and cultural contexts approach the spaces and sites that mark our lives. The show examines how art and artists define, shape and understand the spatialities of worldmaking.

The exhibition was inspired by the work of French novelist and philosopher Georges Perec, and his 1974 text Species of Spaces (Especes d'espaces) which explores the void and what exists around or inside it. The show was co-curated by Professor Wouter Davidts, Ghent University, and Griffith University Art Museum Director, Angela Goddard. The exhibition will tour to the VANDENHOVE Centre for Architecture and Art at Ghent University in 2022/2023.

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SOMEWHERE AND NOWHERE

Paul Bai

… the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exist by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that from port to port, tack to tack …The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. [1]

Australia, an island continent, surrounded by the sea, is often regarded as the 'bottom' of the world. Distanced from the majority of countries, the geographical isolation and the country's vast open space give rise to my mature awareness of spatiality and the meaning it represents. As a Chinese migrant, the physical and psychological distances between 'old home' and 'new country' were the primary factors in my adjustment to Australia, and this re-adjustment has been an ongoing process that keeps me from committing to the dichotomised concepts of 'here' or 'there', or 'us' and 'them'.

For some years I have found myself in a position that is between China and Australia, relating to both places, but also not belonging to either. To this extent, national boundary and spatial identity are secondary to my interpretation of space and its meaning. The personal adaptation of a spatial independence has assisted in my maintaining certain non-conformist and critical attitudes towards general and conventional spatial interpretations

and representations. I view my spatial position as a constant process of defining and redefining, and the result of my migrant experience has affected the notions such as in-between and 'otherness' in my conscious self-positioning. This aspect of my 'position' has developed into the investigation of the third position in spatial recognition and representation, I use the term 'third', because I identify with a spatial position that is entirely alternative to the conventional dichotomised spatial terms such as: here /there, inside/outside, central/marginal, physical/conceptual, etc. The character of this third position can be described as: open, tentative, situational and indeterminate.

I would like to add that while the concept of a third spatial position in my research demonstrates a basic formalist concern, it is the philosophical and social implications of this position that interests me. This short essay introduces several spatial concepts that helped me to consolidate my investigation into the third position. Each of these spatial notions demonstrate an alternative understanding of space, beyond the conventional spatial binaries.

In his seminal book, *The Production of Space* (1991), French theorist Henri Lefebvre proposes the space we perceive is the product of social development, designed to meet the needs of political dominance, institutional requirement, economic demand and religious belief. To Lefebvre, space is not a natural entity, but a concept that is realised through the artificial constructions in the nature. These constructions (i.e. building, city, map, or painting) allow spatiality to manifest through lines, boundaries and perspectives. While we are viewing and perceiving the dimensionalities of the constructs, we are also sensing the existence of space.

Though Lefebvre does not satisfy with such a conclusion, the conceptual and physical aspects of space together form a binary relationship, such dichotomy is not sufficient to explain the spatial construction to its full extent. Rather, it confines spatiality into the abstract representations, on both conceptual and physical levels. Lefebvre criticises such binary logic as the 'double illusion' in spatial recognition.

If it is true space is a product, how is this fact concealed? The answer is: by a double illusion, each side of which refers back to the other, reinforce the other, and hides behind the other. These two aspects are the illusion of transparency on the one hand and the illusion of opacity, or 'realistic' illusion, on the other.[2]

The 'illusion of transparency' according to Lefebvre's critique:

The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose rein everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates … an encrypted reality becomes readily decipherable thanks to the intervention first of speech and then of writing.[3]

To this extent, a spatial reality is supported through visibility, language and writing, thus the mental overwrites the actual. On the other hand, the 'realistic illusion' is 'the illusion of natural simplicity … the mistaken belief that 'things' have more of an existence than the

'subject', his thought and his desires."[4] American political geographer Edward Soja also sees the 'realistic illusion' as one that " … Reduces spatial reality to empirically definable spatial practices, material or natural objects, to the geometry of things in themselves."[5]

This powerful critique on spatial 'double illusion' has demonstrated the deceiving nature of both conceptual space and physical space in spatial interpretation, and initiates the introduction of a third option into the study of spatiality that would steer spatial interpretation away from the pitfall of double illusion. To break out the deadlock of double illusion, Lefebvre introduces the spatial triad that encompasses, both physical and conceptual spaces, and also include a third element – 'Lived space'. The space that is actually experienced by the inhabitants, "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' … It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects."[6]

The 'user's' lived experience enables them to perceive space both, physically (through direct relations to the physical construct) and conceptually (by making symbolic use according to the signs and codes). The lived space has equal importance to the other two spatial dimensions, as it delivers the meaning of space to the participant, and, without this experience, the spatial construction has no significance.

As I stated previously, my migrant experience has helped me to gain the consciousness of a spatial position that belongs to neither homeland nor the new hosting country; such experience-based spatial understanding is similar to the concept of 'Lived space'.

The 'Lived space' is not an actual space, but is the actual experience of the space, where participants can make decisions about their interactions in the space and how they perceive the spatial construct. Consequentially, 'Lived space' is a situational, tentative and indeterminate spatial moment, largely depending on the actual involvement of spatial participants. These situational, experiential and participant dependent characters of Lived space can also be found in the writing of "Space of Flow" by Spanish Sociologist Manuel Castells. In his book *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000), where he writes,

The Information Age is ushering in a new urban form, the informational city … I shall argue that, because of the nature of new society, based upon knowledge, organised around networks, and partly made up of flows, the informational city is not a form but a process, a process characterised by the structural domination of the space of flows. [7]

Castells does not identify space in the traditional sense of being territorial, localised, or geographically defined, but as informational and transposable, due to the development of information technology and global capitalism. Similar to the idea of Lived space, to Castells, a former student of Lefebvre, space also does not operate as a stable form, but as a process that is constantly evolving and transforming through informational networks. For him, information and meaning define spatial existence, with elements easily transferred to other locations through informational networks. Space is transferable, space is immaterial, space is on the move.

Like Lefebvre, Castells accentuates the crucial role of space participants, through their recognition and participation of the site.

Spatial forms and processes are formed by the dynamics of the overall social structure. This includes contradictory trends derived from conflicts and strategies between social actors playing out their opposing interests and values.[8]

Although it sounds a bit strange (at least to me) that Castells labelled the social participants as 'actors', however he also sees the participant's experience and actual activity will contribute to spatial meaning and its subsequent identification. Both Castells's dependence on spatial participants and Lefebvre's contextualisation with spatial inhabitants demonstrate the essential role of human participation in spatial identification. The transitional, situational and temporal characteristics of Castells's definition of space can be found in the notion of heterotopia, a term coined by Michel Foucault.

In his essay "Of Other Spaces" (1986), Foucault identifies utopia as the site that has no real place. About heterotopias he writes,

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilisation, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.[9]

What Foucault identifies is an in-between space; a spatial instance that relates to and reflects on other places, yet also maintains its own independent existence in reality. Foucault's heterotopia opens up the possibilities of a third spatial instance to exist between oppositional places.

Foucault's heterotopias are often associated with physical sites and locations. Through the examples of cinema, hospital, motel, and holiday resorts etc., he demonstrates a spatial mode that can be temporally used and experienced but exist between other spatial realities. The temporal nature of a heterotopia also recalls a liminal spatial instance, like Lefebvre's 'Lived space' or Castells' 'Space of Flow', heterotopia can be described as a tentative and experiential spatial instance but maintains its own position outside/among other spatial realities.

At the start of this essay, I used a quote from Foucault to describe a transitional spatial position that I am constantly experiencing as a migrant. Importantly, the boat is a finite space, but also opens to other spatial imaginations as it floats in the spatial infinity of ocean. The space represented by the boat is temporal and indeterminate, and it constantly searches and moves in between places. As Foucault states, the space of boat is 'a place without a place'; it is a transiting space, which can only exist through the movement between places, indeterminate in character and often resulting in the 'nowhere' in spatial definition, yet still is 'somewhere'.

The idea of "nowhere but somewhere" is also close to the discussion of non-place. In his book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1992), French anthropologist Marc Augé uses the term 'non-place' to describe the places that have no specific historic identities or meanings, but are a construct of supermodernity, explaining:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined accordingly will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places … do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position.[10]

Here Augé sees the emergence of a new space that is outside the traditional structures of space with no historical references, labels it 'non-place', and reduces its connotation to the places that are bound by physical locations. "Examples of these [non-places] would be airport terminals, service stations, supermarkets, malls, hotel chains …", he writes.[11] Augé's interpretation of non-place is mainly represented by the physical and textual identification of a place, just like any other conventional places that are entangled in the spatial 'double illusion'. Other researchers, such as British philosopher Peter Osborne, see Augé's non-place as being limited:

For Augé, traveller's space is the 'archetype' of non-place—Augé fails to press the concept of non-place beyond its abstractly negative determination, towards the idea of a new spatial logic. He leaves the concept of place in place.[12]

Osborne observes that while Augé sees the transiting places as a new type of spatial instance—namely, the non-place—he fails to acknowledge the conceptuality and potential significance of non-place in spatial understanding. Instead, Osborne argues, Augé limits the interpretation of non-place to the physically defined transitional places that, in his view, have no particular meaning, is opposite from Foucault's definition of heterotopia.

The conceptual significance of non-place also appears in Robert J. C. Young's attempt to emphasis the temporal and transitional quality of third space. From his description, the third space can be seen as the in-between space, although he reduces the physical existence of the proposed third space to a temporal site or spatial moment. However, he indirectly implies it is also a non-place that only can be experienced momentarily between events, saying,

The third space is not a space, nor is it a place. If anything, it is a site, but even then it is not a site in the sense of a building site, somewhere bounded and fixed that can be located with the right coordinates with your Stanav/GPS on a map … the movement from one location to other, the place where you find yourself momentarily in situ, a literal lieutenant, standing in, holding the place while something else happens—which is why, therefore, it is in a sense no more place than space.[13]

In contrast to Augé's idea of non-place, which is a place without significance, Young proposes the third space is more of a spatial moment than an actual site in between places, and a conceptual position that is situational and liminal. Young's focus on the transitional

status and conceptuality of third space coincides with my identification of a third spatial position that is both experiential and philosophical.

Reflecting on my own experience in Australia, I could say that every day and every moment I am living in is the realm of Non-place, Lived space, Heterotopia, or a third spatial position. Although this recognition might be raised from my own migrant experience, I think most people would have similar feelings in this global time. While space often is used to demarcate territories, city planning, and in architectural design, space can also apply to the relationship between humans. Without committing to any obvious spatial identity, I prefer to live in the constant adjustment of spatial position and identification.

Notes:
1. Foucault , Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." In Diacritics 16 (1), 27.
2. Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 27.
3.Ibid., 28.
4.Ibid., 29.
5. Edward Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 157.
6. Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 39.
7. Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 429.
8. Ibid., 441.
9. Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces", in Diacritics 16 (1986), 24.
10. Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (London: Verso, 1992), 77-78.
11. Ibid., 79.
12. Peter Osborne, "Non-places and the Spaces of Art", in The Journal of Architecture 6 (2001), 188.
13. Robert J. C. Young, "The Void of Misgiving", in Communicating in the Third Space, edited by Karin Ikas and Gerhard Wagner (New York: Routledge, 2009), 82.