

Making heterotopia: some explorations through contemporary art.

..... Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly.....

John Ashbery, from Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror

Abstract

Foucault's substantial work on disciplinary power, sexuality and the aesthetics of existence has frequently engaged contemporary art criticism. Often on the margins of this critical discourse, the trope 'heterotopia' emerges, as well as popping up here and there in titles of exhibitions and art school shows. At the same time, a few artists have incorporated Foucault's notion of heterotopia within an exploration of Foucault's wider work, as a sort of tool box of ideas and inspiration, exploring the possibility of *making* heterotopia, an interpretation through practice. In this paper, I will briefly discuss 'heterotopian' installations by Dan Graham, before concentrating on the Norwegian artist and filmmaker Knut Åsdam, who has explicitly explored heterotopia as one key strand in his work. The paper ends by highlighting two emerging artists who have also taken up this tantalising concept.

I will not attempt to introduce, summarise or interpret the multivalent and inchoate notion of heterotopia here. My own work and many others can be found readily via the website *Heterotopian Studies*. However, it is worth noting that Foucault's long-term partner, Daniel Defert (1997) concludes his historical review of the concept of heterotopia by evoking the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who produced an 'experimental heterotopian environment', showing an unmade, body imprinted bed on Manhattan billboards. Similarly, Genocchio's (1995) seminal essay on heterotopia clinches his analysis by reference to an environmental installation by Australian artist Denis del Favero. Other contemporary art has been interpreted as heterotopian, perhaps most notably Birringer's (1998) reflections on *Makrolab*, a communications, research and living space started by Marko Peljhan and first realised during Documenta X in Kassel in 1997. *Makrolab* was equipped to accommodate artists, scientists, 'tactical media workers' for joint 'progressive' work primarily in the fields of telecommunications, weather systems and migrations. *Makrolab* became a mobile space station, an incongruous site in which, echoing Foucault, 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. The subversive lab 'orbits around the spectrum of public and private data networks and telematic nervous systems, fishing and analysing signals, mapping voices, intercepting transmissions'.

Dan Graham is probably the most famous artist to make work that relates directly to Foucault's spatio-temporal concept. Although his use of two-way mirrors in various geometric forms is perhaps more directly influenced by his reading of Lacan's analysis of the child's mirror stage, Graham also deliberately seeks to turn certain everyday and corporate spaces into more complex and ambiguous forms of 'heterotopia'. The mirror, as always elsewhere and disruptive, is taken up by Graham's free-standing, architectural and sculptural 'pavilions' which, with different degrees of functionality, explore and disrupt modes of perception and customary expectations of art. Spectators are not allowed to remain passive and 'lose' themselves when contemplating this art but, on the contrary, they are made aware of both themselves and other spectators (Graham, 1999: 164). In Graham's pavilions, the viewer becomes on display, as both subject and object. The space becomes a place of self-encounter, an 'optical instrument' or a 'machine to see', reflecting in part Graham's interest in the history of symbolic gardens which functioned as exhibition spaces for instruction, learning and moral guidance.

Foucault suggests that gardens are perhaps one of the 'oldest' examples of heterotopia and possess a rich spatial incompatibility, highlighting the sacred Persian gardens which mirror 'the smallest parcel of the world and the whole world at the same time'. In an essay 'Garden as Theater as Museum', Graham (2009) explains how the Italian Renaissance gardens were art forms but also models of the world that could be used for study. Each symbolic or theatrical space in the garden was designed to trigger a memory. In a sense, developing Foucault's brief remarks about gardens of antiquity, Graham (2009: 239) says that 'memory was given the coherence and micro-macrocosmic meaning denied to ordinary life', providing an 'encyclopaedic memory machine'. In the essay, he traces the development of memorial gardens, museums, winter gardens, garden cities, corporate atriums, amusement parks, theme parks, disneyland and the recent use of parks and gardens to exhibit contemporary art, including his own pavilions.

What links all these spaces? They are living spaces that inform and communicate and through which we interact. Graham's articulations or *emplacements* play with spatial dichotomies of public/private, urban/rural, interior/exterior, viewer/viewed and involve political implications - for example, undermining the use of glass and mirrors as tools of surveillance, or the idealised showcasing of desirable consumer items -but they can also be spaces to relax and have fun, with pavilions for children, for skateboarding or to just socialise. The structures are not outright anti-corporate culture; they tease and play with spaces, diverting, disrupting and challenging our perceptions. All the spaces however draw together and disrupt overlapping traditions, producing hybrid 'other' spaces that make the observer part of the art process itself, a subject and, at the same time, an object of hybridisation and otherness. With Graham's work, we have moved from questioning the identity of the spectator position to involving the spectator in the art work itself.

Knut Åsdam (1995) has acknowledged Graham's engagement with heterotopia and has taken up the concept himself in film, video, photography and architecture that explore the various boundaries of subjectivity and the politics of space. He has a particular interest in the margins of place, with a recent focus on migration and change, varying identities of places, layers of history and the experience of living in and through these margins. His engagement with the work of Foucault is acknowledged through the titles of some of his work (*Heterotopia, The Care of Self*) and through Åsdam's writing and published conversations, although he also acknowledges influence from many other theorists of space. The most apparent specific

influence is Roger Caillois' essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia'. In this teasing and provocative essay, Caillois (1987) argues that the sciences and other disciplines have tended to organise the world, ordered things, through many 'pertinent classifications' but this 'does not exhaust the diverse combinations that are possible'. These habitual ways of perceiving and categorising the world leave to the side the 'transversal progresses' and 'cuts' of nature. Anticipating Deleuzian thought perhaps, Caillois proposes what seems at first a baffling radical interdisciplinary procedure. In exploring the process of natural 'mimicry', he offers an alternative to the traditional evolutionary explanation regarding the instinct for self-preservation. For example, insects resemble or mimic their surroundings (twigs, leaves) and produce camouflage, but Caillois teases out other stimuli related to an instinct to become like their surroundings, to merge and assimilate. Not only that, Caillois wants to suggest that such a process has parallels in the traditional associations of magic and in the workings of the human unconscious. He identifies the 'psychology of psychasthenia' (a term coined by the psychologist Pierre Janet), a tendency to lose oneself in one's surroundings or milieu, a 'temptation of space' and a 'generalization of space at the expense of the individual'.

The concept of psychasthenia, which Caillois interests Åsdam in its disruption of borders between self and the environment, particularly contemporary experiences that loosen borders of subjectivity as for instance in the use of recreational drugs and the shifting group identity in dance culture and protest movements. But this is perceived as a two-way process and, as well as exploring the play and loosening of subjectivities, his work also warns of the perils of new forms of subjectivication. In an essay (1995), Åsdam argues that space is never something neutral, but a 'linguistic and historic dimension, which simultaneously privileges and impedes various subject-formations'. His work questions established, stable forms of subjectivity, a queering of space, concentrating particularly on narrations of heterotopian 'crisis' and 'deviation'. He concentrates on how spaces are saturated with specific 'histories, narratives, subjectivities, myths, imaginations' but also how these spaces are transitory and reveal cracks and margins and opportunities for interruption and disruption. Following Foucault's precepts, Åsdam's work presents no reservoir of freedom; he presents struggles of power without any sense of an 'outside' of power structures and relations.

Åsdam's early work, at least, conceives a close link between heterotopia and his dominant concerns: 'it is possible to draw on the notion of heterotopia in relation to contemporary art, contemporary culture and the migratory society' (1995). He has no naïve sense of the

liberatory value of heterotopias, noting that they can be both constraining and suppressive as well spaces of pleasure and fantasy:

‘Throughout history, heterotopias lie there like fine networks and folds, revealing the structures of every-day politics in the societies from which they arose. Often, but not always, their main purpose was to exclude and make sure that society was safeguarded from symbolically threatening quantities like puberty, menstruation or senility. But precisely from having different investments in terms of identity and politics, these places also came to acquire an intensely subversive potential’ (1995)

One could think here of Genet’s queering the space of prison life or the conclusion of Lindsay Anderson’s subversive film *If*, in which a traditional English boarding school is depicted as space of authority, pain, pleasure, fantasy and eventually utter subversion. Åsdam provides his own examples of art works that embrace the dynamics of heterotopia, offering Alessandro Codagnone’s installation, *Mean-Room (1994)* as a ‘heterotopia *par excellence*’, but in the late 1990s, Åsdam created his own installations that explicitly evoked a type of heterotopian site, spaces of both ‘deviation’ and ‘illusion’ (see Eng, 2004). *Heterotopia (1996)* is an enclosure underneath a platform with milked-glass walls on two sides and a back wall on the third side, with one side open for people to enter and black vinyl cushions for viewing the film *Untitled Pissing (1995)* – see Baker, 2001. The steps down and the low ceiling, as well as the low level seating, demands a certain physical engagement to enter the space in order to watch the film. This need for a commitment by the viewer is taken much further in *Psychasthenia 5 (1998)*, a construction including twelve videos placed inside a dark cavernous area similar to a sex club. You enter this enticing assembly through a dimly lit 17m long octagonal corridor at the end of which you have the chance to explore various small rooms which are interconnected by darkened windows. A couple of the intimate rooms have monitors showing videos and participants are able to observe other people watching videos. The main space is a full screening area with black vinyl seating. The dark lighting, the long entrance, the small connecting booths and the inner screening room create an ambiguous space that is both intimate and public. The *dispositif* mimics what Aragon might call a ‘laboratory of pleasures’, a controlled invention that, as with Graham’s pavilions, plays with notions of inner and outer, observer and observed, private and public, virtual and real. It is a space about space.

Probably Åsdam's most self-consciously heterotopian work can be found in a series of installations *The Care of the Self* (1999-2007) which was initially made for the Venice Biennale in 1999 (see Leung, 2004). An enclosure made of filtered glass walls encompasses a night-time park created by trees, plants and grass actually growing in soil. The filtered glass produces the effect of night-time within the enclosure. Outside observers see themselves and each other as well as the park as reflections in the muted glass. Inside the installation, viewers can see through the glass and observe what is going on outside without being seen themselves. The entry is again emphasised by a long octagonal, darkening corridor. The artificial park has paths that lead to different layers and areas, some intimate and sheltered and others more open. The installation explores the place of the park within an urban setting. The social historian, Patrick Joyce (2003:223), suggests that the park can be understood as 'complementing and subverting, and enchanting and challenging the city'. It is the 'other' space of the city and involves different uses and experiences in the light of day and the semi-shelter of night-time. Louis Aragon (1994), who was fascinated by parks, says that 'night gives these absurd places a sense of not knowing their own identity'. The social geographer, Matthew Gandy (2012) describes how Abney Park in London, originally a nineteenth century cemetery, serves many functions and has a diverse variety of visitors including dog walkers, ecologists, teenage drinkers, sexual cruisers and mourners. Combining the notion of heterotopia with queer theory, he uses the notion of heterotopia as a starting point in a process of contestation, a queering of approaches to space that 'challenges categorizations and "mappings" in their broadest sense so that we encounter a challenge to "neatness" in relation to human subjectivities and material landscapes alike'. As you move through Åsdam's installation, the viewer becomes part of this ambiguous nature of a night-time park, sharing at least the narratives of the potentially thrilling and dangerous encounter with different bodies. Indeed, the viewer becomes a participant in the narrative, engaging, and becoming part of the space with its hidden transgressions and intimate surveillances (more widely see essays in Sheikh *et al*, 2004).

Åsdam's more recent work has increasingly concentrated on experimentation in film narrative in relation to the insecurity and instability produced by contemporary society (see Åsdam *et al*, 2011). Often characters are followed about as they travel through urban landscapes- on foot and in trains and cars, for example – negotiating their relationships with each other and their surroundings. There is often in the fragments of discourse a sense of alienation, disconnection and struggle. For example, the film *Finally* (2006) is set in the

historic city of Saltsburg. The history of the place is highlighted as three young characters try to make sense of what the city might offer and what their place is within it. The three characters are shown fighting at various points without any particular cause. They struggle viciously, mirroring somewhat the baroque statues in Saltsburg which are dotted around the historic squares. But there are also moments of calm transactions and reflection. Shown in fragments, the three of them do not seem to know how to occupy or react to the space. A telling moment occurs in a café where the three young people are busily scribbling down notes and symbols. One of the characters shows another his drawings that symbolise himself and other people, a form of reflective *mise en abyme*. He tries to make sense of it all and says of the drawings:

“We are not anywhere particular here, but in any of these spaces – all the same to us - particular only to themselves, but the entry ticket is too much and the only thing to do is to find ways to loot it, use it, or enjoy it...”

It is as if in the midst of all the passages of migration and layers of culture that are stamped upon the city, they are not sure which codes to follow, what to do with it all; the whole environment has become a placeless place.

In contrast, the film *Tripoli* (2010) is set in an unfinished, derelict site of a massive conference, exhibition and fairground centre designed by the famous Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer and situate on the outskirts of Tripoli in Northern Lebanon. Niemeyer is mainly known as architect for Brasilia and his inventive, organic and curvy forms that reinterpret the severity of European Modernism. A symbol of Lebanon's stability and prosperity of the 1960s, the site is now a stranded, abandoned concrete monument. The film is partly an architectural documentary, depicting wide empty stadia, majestic arches and monumental sculptures against a backdrop of the city's dense modern apartment blocks, interspersed with minarets. But the film is also an exploration of a deeply ambiguous space, both a derelict utopia and a heterotopian shell. As one of the two main characters states, the site is 'caught between the meaningful and meaningless, half-empty and half-full kind of place'. As with *Finally*, there is the quality of a cemetery here: monuments of permanence that symbolise the transitory.

As with *Finally*, the film is shot through with moments of viciousness and menace. The dark enclosures of the site are full of debris with exposed twisting metal wires and, underneath a giant flyover, a corpse swaddled in cellophane lies in the undergrowth. All of this, together

with the finding of a loaded gun in the final scene, recalls the intervening violence of the Civil War and contrasts with original vision and deterioration of Niemeyer's design and Lebanon's hopes. Dialogue in the film is as fragmentary and ambiguous as the moribund site as the characters explore the psychology of the space and again their sense of placelessness. Overall, the film posits a political question of how to negotiate the contradictions of such a heterotopian place, a concrete local utopia that embraces economic growth and monstrous collapse.

Knut Åsdam has become an internationally recognised artist, using heterotopia as one productive tool among many others to interrogate and explore disruptive spaces through his work (see *Åsdam et al*, 2011). Other emerging artists are also engaging with Foucault's spatio-temporal notion. Two striking examples must suffice here. In the series 'Heterotopia: the tragic downfall', the French photographer Vincent Stoker depicts the inside of buildings that are abandoned and at different stages of neglect and decay, including ice rinks, ballrooms, cinemas, theatres, churches, panopticon institutions and factories. The images capture the grandeur and ambition of utopian designs that have been constructed, utilised and then left desolate and idle, resembling in some ways Åsdam's film *Tripoli*. Stoker reveals 'really existing utopias' that are now moribund and fading to non-existence. The original meanings and functions of these 'special' places, whether for pleasure, control, punishment, production, exploitation, are therefore exposed but at the same time negated. From a position of deterioration, they emphasise features of 'heterochronia' as Foucault describes in his accounts of such places as fairs, museums and cemeteries, a play of permanence, accretion and transience. We usually think of ruins and monuments in historical terms but these structures are ruins of the present, our ruins.

One striking photograph (*heterotopia # IEGDII*) portrays the dilapidated interior of a storage building in a mining complex in the Ruhr. The huge cavernous space contains an intricate system that allowed the miners' possessions to be stored economically through an elevated storage mechanism of wire baskets that hung from the ceiling. Miners could hang their clothes and store their shoes and other items before descending into the mines. The space typifies nineteenth century industrial rationalism as, unlike the miners below the ground, here the suspended compartments were individualised, clean, safe, visible and easily identified. As with the other images in the series, Stoker exposes and amplifies a rational ideal space that is now in splendid decay.

Whereas Graham and Åsdam *make* heterotopian spaces and Stoker explores decaying heterotopias, the British artist Rachel Wilberforce reveals the other side of seemingly quotidian spaces, or makes heterotopia in the most unexpected places. In photographs, film, collages and installations, Wilberforce discovers places with uncertain borders, sites on the edge, cut off and precarious, hovering between different histories, uses and meanings. For example, in *The Resort* series (2013/2014), Wilberforce explores an East Anglian coastal village, an isolated but exposed community, with a mix of residential and holiday homes that have sprung up on the site of a medieval village. The site bears traces of a 1930s utopian holiday development as well as appropriation as barracks during the Second World War – intertwining layers of history and significance. The location is hard to place, fleeting, impermanent, vulnerable, with overlapping narratives and functions. The work seems to demonstrate the everyday as other, how everyday spaces can intimate, secrete, or enfold heterotopian features. Distinctions of time and place are blurred, offering communities for refuge, retreat or heterotopian remnants. In *The Resort Installation View* (2014), the photographic material is incorporated into three-dimensional emplacements, playfully and intimately breaking and disrupting the spaces, deconstructing and then reconstructing imaginative collages, sculptures and installations. Found objects – doors, panels, window frames – are juxtaposed with close-up interior patterned images - curtains, bed covers, carpets – forming a process of abstraction, but at the same time evoking intimate histories and narratives. Such techniques are explored further in current projects including *Pathways* (2014) and *Ivory Lace* (2014), both drawing from heterotopian emplacements of the garden and hospital, and reimagining passages and thresholds between private and public, interior and exterior, the everyday and other.

This brief survey hopefully opens up further possibilities for heterotopian-inspired art. The artists' websites (see below) offer many more avenues of exploration. And despite, or perhaps because of, the puzzling undeveloped ideas that Foucault briefly sketched, each year attracts new artists to the notion as a spring-board for the imagination. One indicative example of the somewhat casual, pervasive and yet global association between contemporary art and heterotopia must suffice here. After a fifty years absence, the Philippines have been invited to participate in the Venice Biennial in 2015. The Pavilion will revolve around the concept of the Philippines as a 'tropical heterotopia' (Ardia, 2014).

Websites for images, essays, resources:

Heterotopian Studies <http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/>

Knut Åsdam <http://www.knutasdam.net/>

Vincent J. Stoker <http://www.vincent-j-stoker.com/>

Rachel Wilberforce <http://www.rachelwilberforce.com/>

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