

Heterotopia – a placeless place, a reservoir of imagination ...

Talk given at the collective symposium on ‘heterotopias and finding “other spaces”: another art world is possible’ held at *no.w.where*, Bethnal Green, London on 19 November 2015. The event was collaboration between *no.w.here* art collective and ‘The Weight of Mountains’ art residency that had just returned from a four week stay in the Sahara desert.

In an early email I received from Melody she wrote that ‘The Weight of Mountains’ residency is a ‘portable heterotopia - fluid and malleable through its roaming nature and interchangeable curators and locations’.

This morning I’m going to take up Melody’s suggestive remarks and explain when and how Foucault came up with the idea of heterotopia, how it’s been used and perhaps abused, its potential relationship to art, and how it might relate to the experience of the residency and the wider question of this symposium: Is another art world possible?

To start at the beginning, Foucault first used the term heterotopia in a now famous preface to his book ‘The Order of Things’ published in 1966. He explains that the idea for the book came after reading a passage in one of Borges’, essays concerning the discovery of a certain Chinese Encyclopaedia entitled ‘Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge’. Foucault was baffled and delighted by a certain classification of animals:

- (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied (j) innumerable (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

This to us and to Foucault is an absolutely wonderful, crazy classification of animals. It made Foucault cry out with laughter as it seemed ‘to break all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought’ and all the customary ways of dividing up the world in order to understand it.

For Foucault, this is more than ambiguous juxtapositions, even more than the surrealist Lautréamont’s amalgam of the sewing machine and umbrella on an operating table, Borges invents an impossible world where there is no common ground at all, no space or site to hold them together. In his words:

‘it is a worse kind of order than that of the incongruousthe disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry’

So heterotopia starts as a textual space, but I think you can see that it may also relate to the spaces of visual art. I was pleased to find that the French art historian, Didi-Huberman has made this link recently:

The artist is an inventor of places. He shapes and incarnates spaces which had been hitherto impossible, unthinkable.....

(artists) bring together things outside of normal classifications, and glean from these affinities a new kind of knowledge which opens our eyes to certain unperceived aspects of our world and to the unconscious of our vision...

Soon after this initial brief discussion of heterotopia Foucault gave another account in a radio broadcast. In it he talks about counter-sites. Here is an extract:

“These counter-spaces are well recognised by children. Certainly, it’s the bottom of the garden; it’s the Indian tent erected in the middle of the attic; or still, it’s ... on their parent’s bed where they discover the ocean, as they can swim between the covers, and the bed is also the sky, or they can bounce on the springs; it’s the forest as they can hide there; or still, it’s night as they can become ghosts between the sheets and, finally, it’s the fear and delight of their parents coming home.....

In some respects these spaces of childhood imagination are a stepping stone from the impossible worlds that Borges conjures to the actual heterotopia that Foucault goes on to say are embedded in different ways in all cultures in his final and most well-known reflection on heterotopia, in a talk to a group of architects in 1967.

Here he lists various socio-cultural sites and rather formally structures them through 6 key principles of operation concerned with rites of passage, the relationship with time, their transformation through history, their spatial ambiguities, the rituals of entering the places and how they are sites of illusion or compensation.

Baffling examples:

cemeteries, ships, prisons, magic carpets, Turkish Baths, cinemas, libraries, museums, fairs, brothels, utopian colonies, festivals, Persian Gardens, the vacation Polynesian village

There is a structuralist and functionalist dimension to Foucault's reflections on heterotopia (which he has been criticised for). The talk involves quite a traditional notion of space, a thoroughly non-Deleuzian space in many ways. There is also a certain lightness of touch in the style of delivery, certainly not an academic treatise. An eminent professor in America has recently suggested to me that it was all a joke! I think there certainly is an element of mischievousness about it. The notion has also been critiqued – most strongly by the geographer David Harvey - for being such a random bunch of spaces that it is impossible to know where to draw the line and say what is and what is not a heterotopia. There is also an absence of any political thrust. Where do questions of power arise? I don't want to get bogged down here in these critical questions but we can return to discuss them later if you wish.

Some have been baffled by the inclusion of what he calls spaces of deviation or later, disciplinary institutions. But this is to see these spaces perhaps from one perspective. Yes, they can be wretched, oppressive, dangerous places of surveillance, but here I always recall a passage from Marge Piercy's novel *The Woman on the Edge of Time*, when describing her main character Connie's experience of staying in a psychiatric hospital:

At odd moments, the better days, the mental hospital reminded her of being in college those almost two years she had before she got knocked up. The similarity lay in the serious conversations, the leisure to argue about God and Sex and the State and the Good....Outside, whole days of her life would leak by and she wouldn't have one good thoughtful conversation.

So these in a nutshell are worlds within worlds. They are not impossible sites conjured up by Borges text; they are real sites for refuge, containment, isolation, pleasure, escape, travel. But on the other hand, I think there is a connection with the baffling account of animals that shatters the taken-for granted. Although Foucault attempts to draw out similarities between

the spaces, they also dance playfully, setting up new connections, resemblances and differences. What is crucial here is that there is no sense of binary thinking. Otherness is not something that can be easily divided up; otherness is all around us in the spaces we invent and inhabit.

Foucault calls heterotopias actually realised utopias. Like utopias they are at variance with ordinary space, but unlike utopias they actually exist. He also says they have the quality of a mirror in that when you look at a mirror you are there and not there at the same time, you are connected with the rest of space but at the same time you are utterly unreal. The mirror encapsulates disruption of space.

But heterotopias are also about the disruption of time. Interestingly he uses the word *emplacement* in his talk more than *espace* (space) or *lieu* (place). *Emplacement* in French refers to a position on an archaeological site or say a plot on a camp site for pitching your tent. There is a relational quality to the term but also a temporal dimension. All heterotopias in one way or another encapsulate spatio-temporal discontinuities or intensities.

A good example here is the cemetery. Worpole in his study of cemetery landscapes, wonders whether we have the 'vocabulary for describing what these unsettling landscapes mean'. Are they religious or secular, places of despair or places of hope and reconciliation? Does the reminder of mortality help to moderate the fear of death or highlight it? There's a tension between stasis and change, preservation and decay; between the recognisable and the radically unfamiliar. They're a space for emplacing the placeless.

Cemeteries can also be said to incorporate wider features of heterotopias discussed by Foucault. They manifest an idealised plan; they mark a rite of passage; they form a microcosm; they enclose a rupture; they contain multiple meanings; and they are both utterly mundane and utterly extraordinary. As Faubion argues such spaces enclose something that is complex, both bright and dark. When we enter a cemetery, we step into a world that mirrors, condenses and transforms the space outside. And of course their function changes over time - in this country they can now be ecological sites, nature reserves, historical sites for school visits, places to walk the dog and cruising sites at night - as well as places for mourners to visit.

Interestingly, the geographer Matthew Gandy recently researched an urban cemetery in North London exploring its multiple uses but also using 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. This use of heterotopia as a method of making difference is how I tend to see it.

Over the years this idea of heterotopia can be found underpinning academic research across and between numerous academic disciplines in the Humanities, Human Sciences and the Arts. –It is difficult to keep up with the heterotopian cottage industry; with journal articles published every couple of weeks, using the concept in one way or another. Just to give a flavour, almost at random:

Arab-Islamic architecture

The Palais Royal,

Masonic lodges

Women’s colleges at the turn of the nineteenth century

Sites in Fascist Italy

Underground band rooms in Hong Kong

Pornographic sites on the Internet

Patterns of disclosure among heterosexuals living with HIV

The group dynamics of a climate camp

Off-shore pirate radio station

However, I find it particularly interesting that a number of essays on heterotopia, including an important one by Daniel Defert, Foucault’s long-term partner, clinch their argument, or finally try to capture the enigmatic quality of heterotopia, by referring to a work of art. In Defert’s case a street installation by Felix Gonzalas Torres. The term heterotopia can also be found in the titles of a variety of art projects and art exhibitions over the years and a few

artists have used heterotopia as a kind of tool box for inspiration – as here today! A recent discovery for me in this respect is an exhibition that was presented initially in Delhi and then came to the Bristol in the UK, with an accompanying book, entitled ‘Black Sun: Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia’. Many of you will know Shezad Dawood better than me but in this book and elsewhere he seems to capture some essential elements of heterotopia: the ability to generate new connections, break with linear time, offer multiple narratives, break fixations and classifications and hold together opposites, both this and that, simultaneously.

Dan Graham is perhaps the most well-known artist to refer to the concept in explaining his work. Often through the use of mirrors Graham deliberately seeks to turn certain everyday and corporate spaces into more complex and ambiguous forms of ‘heterotopia’. As the philosopher Andrew Benjamin argues, the mirror depicted in art introduces disruption, splinters any mastery over the work and its interpretation. The mirror, as always elsewhere and disruptive, is taken up by Graham’s free-standing, sculptural ‘pavilions’ which explore and disrupt modes of perception and customary expectations of art. Graham’s articulations 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, dislodging and challenging our perceptions. His spaces make the observer part of the art process itself, a subject and, at the same time, an object of hybridisation and otherness. – Otherness is found in unexpected places.

Knut Åsdam, a filmmaker, installation artist, sculptor and photographer whose work has been shown quite widely has been influenced by Dan Graham and is perhaps the artist that has been most inspired by Foucault’s thought generally and heterotopia specifically. [My web-site has links to much of his work and others who have been inspired by the concept.](#)

Probably Åsdam’s most self-consciously heterotopian work can be found in a series of installations called *The Care of the Self*, which was initially made as the Norwegian contribution to the Venice Biennale in 1999. An enclosure made of filtered glass walls encompasses a night-time park created by incorporating tons of soil and planting of trees, plants and grass. 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. Entry is 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, referring to heterotopia, suggests that the park can be understood as both ‘complementing and subverting, and both enchanting and challenging the city’. It is the ‘other’ space of the city and involves different uses and experiences in day light and the semi-shelter of night-time. Aragon, the champion of surrealism also comes to mind as someone fascinated by parks – and someone who Foucault refers to in his radio broadcast. . He says that ‘night gives these absurd places a sense of not knowing their own identity’ – an idea that reverberates with Matthew Gandy’s exploration of the heterogeneous urban cemetery (and of course such public spaces, vital heterotopias, are under threat of control – further governing of our conduct - by authorities and privatisation – in this country with such legislation as the Public Space Protection Orders – something that may surface in later discussion).

To return to Knut Åsdam’s work. Art here, as so often today, is not something to look at; it is to interact with, explore, experience as a different space and his latest project takes this idea a step further. A huge touring lorry, housing a cinema, is travelling through Norway, stopping at towns and villages, and encouraging people to explore and discuss his film *Egress*, which investigates amongst many things the politics of employment, social class, the oil business and displacement in contemporary Norway. The touring cinema takes the work outside academic contexts and institutional placements, following the tradition of the traveling *cinemas and “art-tents”* – a portable heterotopia.

So to step back, overall, heterotopia is about exploring alternative ways of thinking about the world but it is also about revealing how the world is already full of changing, magical, disturbing, transient, bright and dark places that punctuate or intrude upon the everyday. I don’t know if you had a chance to go to a hamman when out there on the residency, but I came across this description recently in a wonderful book by the Turkish writer Özdamar with a great title *Life is a Caravanserai: Has Two Doors: I Came In One: I Went Out The Other*. The book is about her childhood growing up in Turkey in the 50s and describes going to the public baths on a number of occasions. She says:

In the hamman..... my mother stood with her back towards this opening from which the hot water flowed. She stood there in the water, her eyes closed, and said, almost murmured to me, “see, my daughter, see, this is the world. Imagine that the world is an open square, and all the people are standing around there, washing, and talking to each other.” Emine Sevgi Özdamar

I think this sums up heterotopia very simply – a fleeting microcosm, a world within the world, a rupture, or perhaps just a pause for reflection.

So what about the Weight of Mountains Residency? Is this too a place without a place, a portable heterotopia? We can take this up in discussion but some heterotopian aspects come to mind immediately: the residency, closed and isolated and yet open to the desert environment and different cultures and ways of life, a concentrated set time, a holiday, or interval, disruption, a dislocation from the everyday, or a new way of experiencing the everyday

So I think the two axes of heterotopia are apparent in the residency

First as a spatial object that breaks from the ordinary, a marginal space that you enter for a short period of time, where you deviate from the ordinary, where you are immersed in something other - camped out in the desert and then travelling here to the east end of London before setting off in all directions of the world. Boundaries are broken and rebuilt....

But also, inspired by the passage from Borges: a space of disruption for generating difference, thinking outside amongst the desert spaces, in another space. The residency perhaps to use Foucault's words ‘opens up a world of tangled paths, strange places, secret passages and unexpected communications’

And finally thinking about the wider question of this symposium: Is another art world possible?

Here I imagine a space that combines the heterotopian qualities of the magic carpet, (challenging time and space) the ship (crossing borders and cultures) a space with the fun and excitement of the travelling fair, the daring and delight of children's escape houses – enclosures that invite openings, joyful and dangerous...

Is it possible to create a new heterotopia, nether inside or outside the traditional art world, neither this or that, utopian and real, breaking classifications and finding new connections, whilst avoiding the binary of them and us? Do we need to find an alternative magic carpet, a travelling a reservoir of imagination.....?

Peter Johnson

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