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Drag Spaces

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Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

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Hong Kong is the quintessential site of spatial appropriation. The interstices of the city are colonised and re-colonised with an extraordinary intensity. Rapid turnover. Stalls appear over night, squatting in the leftover spaces of the urban fabric. And then disappear the next morning. Soup cafes, kiosks, massage parlours and fortune tellers. Walkways, underpasses, thoroughfares are all appropriated. Interior spaces – homes - are created even in the external zones of the public realm.

Sunday morning. Filipina domestic workers congregate all over Hong Kong - around the covered walkways of Central, under the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank building, in Victoria Park in Causeway Bay. Haircuts, massages, manicure, pedicure, and lunch. Their one chance to entertain. Denied any private space where they work, they appropriate public spaces. They make them their home for a day. Transit spaces become spaces of transitory identity.

Meanwhile estate agents take over marginal spaces along the street - often no more than 50 cm deep. With their properties displayed on the walls, and with little more than a chair, desk, laptop computer and mobile phone, the estate agents spill out on to the street, turning it into a makeshift office. The boundaries between public and private become porous, as private seeps into public, and vice versa.

Shops left vacant between leases are squatted by temporary stalls, often – like some transvestite – leaving a tell-tale trace of their former identity. Plastic goods, toys, kitchenware, cooking utensils, still in their boxes, are piled up high and marked up with hand-written signs.

Spatial appropriation has become the dominant logic of the commercial world in Hong Kong. Massage parlours sit on top of swimming pools on top of car parks on top of shopping arcades, in a manner that makes Rem Koolhaas's famous model of the Downtown Athletic Club look distinctly conventional. A Russian bar sits on the fourth floor of a commercial block in Kowloon. The bar contains a giant deep freeze, where the temperature is -25 c. Put on your Russian hat, your fur coat, and dream of Vladivostok, comrade, as you knock back your vodka. If it were not in Hong Kong this bar would look bizarre.

In Hong Kong space becomes an ever-renegotiable commodity within a rapid turnover marketplace. Forget the modernist slogan of 'form follows function' and the dream of spatial determinism. Homes become casinos become police stations become brothels. Slaughterhouses turn into museums, power stations into art galleries. Spatial identities are defined less by architectural form and more by the events that take place there.

But these spatial appropriations are all the more remarkable the more temporary they are. Overnight a conference space turns into a wedding hall into an exhibition hall, a bar or perhaps even a brothel, and back to conference space again by the morning. Hong Kong – itself once the site of colonial appropriation – has become the site of intense commercial re-appropriation.

Temporary spaces, temporary identities. Identity now is always a form of performance. We are the roles we act out. No longer constrained by our material bodies, our race, our gender, our backgrounds, our genetic make up

and so on, we can now re-invent ourselves; we can redefine ourselves. 'Who will you be in the next twenty-four hours?' asks an advert in *Wallpaper** magazine.

As such identity approaches the notion of drag. Heterosexual, bisexual, gay. Change car, change identity. Identity as fashion accessory. Identity as cultural camouflage. 'We are all in drag now,' notes Ackbar Abbas.

Drag spaces. Zones of temporary strategic appropriation; an ever changing landscape of territorialisation and deterritorialisation; Hong Kong is the site of a complex choreography of spatial appropriations. The architecture of cross-dressing.

Theoretical Exegesis

In his book, Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Marc Augé comments on the growing proliferation of soulless, leftover spaces in contemporary society.¹ He draws a distinction between what he calls ‘places’ – spaces encrusted with historical meaning, such as churches and museums, and ‘non-places’ – anonymous and uniform spaces, such as airports, supermarkets and motorways. In his lament over the impoverished nature of contemporary society, Augé bemoans the emergence of these ontologically vacant ‘non-places’ that have come to dominate supermodernity.²

Yet recent studies of airports and other transportational spaces by Rem Koolhaas and others have revealed that – far from being left-over spaces – these so-called ‘non-places’ are the new spaces of opportunity within our contemporary cultural horizon. They might not conform to traditional definitions of spaces of culture, yet they are precisely the spaces in which new cultural practices are being developed.

We must be wary, surely, of the inherent conservatism in Augé’s approach, which often betrays a certain cultural elitism. Moreover, at times, his seemingly moralistic distinction between ‘place’ and ‘non-place’ reminds us of the Heideggerian distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’. Who, we might ask, is to assign values to these spaces? And on what grounds? For what is inauthentic for one generation – a plastic chair, for example – might equally be authentic for the next.

But the biggest problem with Augé – and equally with most architectural commentators – is that he interprets space largely through an objective discourse of form, and overlooks the subjective ways in which that space might be appropriated. By contrast, many cultural theorists – such as Homi Bhabha – tend to understand cultural artefacts not only in terms of objective forms, but also of the subjectifying narrative in which those forms are inscribed. It is not simply a question of the nature of the spaces themselves, but also of how they are colonised or appropriated.

How then might we construct a theory of spatial appropriation for architecture? One possible strategy could be derived from the work of Judith Butler on the question of gender identity, and developed into a theory of spatial identity.³

According to Butler, it is precisely our actions and behaviour that constitute our identity, and not our biological bodies. Gender, she argues, is not a given ontological condition, but is performatively produced. We may effectively rearticulate our identities and reinvent ourselves through our performativities. Here it is important to note that identity is the effect of performance, and not vice versa. Performativity achieves its aims not through a singular performance – for performativity can never be reduced to performance – but through the accumulative iteration of certain practices. It is grounded in a form of citationality – of invocation and replication. As Judith Butler explains: ‘Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act’, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals and dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.’⁴

Butler figures gender identity not as something interior – an essentialising ‘given’ – but rather as something exterior, a discursive external effect. It is borne of ‘acts, gestures and enactments’ that are ‘performative’. Importantly, this relates not just to lesbian sexuality, but to all sexualities, such that heterosexuality itself

emerges as a socially transmitted construct that depends upon a behavioural norm being 'acted out'. Here the connections between gender and 'mime' begin to emerge. Indeed Butler's whole discourse, it would appear, depends upon mime in general and the mimetic in particular. All behaviour is based on a kind of mimicry, including normative heterosexual behaviour that is thereby 'naturalised' and instantiated by the force of repetition.

*Gender, in this sense, approaches a notion of drag. It is a position that is 'assumed', and played out within the logic of conformity to some accepted norm. In making this claim, Butler destabilises the traditional authority of heterosexuality: 'To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealisations.'*⁵

This has obvious ramifications for any discourse of the politics of space. Butler's incisive comments on gender — gender identity being defined not in biological terms, but in performative terms as an identity that is 'acted out' — can be profitably transposed to the realm of physical space. For if identity is performed, then the space in which that performativity takes place can be seen as a stage. After a certain number of performances that stage will no longer seem neutral. It will be imbued with associations of the activities that took place there, on the part of those who witnessed those activities. If identity is a performative construct — if it is acted out like some kind of 'film script' — then architecture could be understood as a kind of 'film set'. But it is as a 'film set' that it derives its meaning from the activities that have taken place there. Memories of associated activities haunt physical space like a ghost.

It is here that Butler's thinking can be deployed as a way of cutting through much confusion that exists on the question of the politics of space. Too often there has been a simplistic collapsing of a particular political ideology on to a particular form, as though a political ideology can be conflated with an aesthetic ideology. According to this logic, certain forms are in and of themselves imbued with a certain content. Just as there are seen to be certain 'democratic' forms, so there are certain 'feminine' forms. It is this thinking that Fredric Jameson has sought to challenge. Form, for Jameson, is essentially 'inert' and whatever content is grafted on to it is 'allegorical' in character.⁶ There is no intrinsic meaning or political potential to any form. Whilst there may indeed be certain forms that 'lend' themselves to democratic purposes rather than totalitarian ones, and — equally — no doubt certain forms that 'embody' a feminine sensibility, it is surely a mistake to map certain activities on to certain forms, as though those activities were a consequence of those forms.

What Butler's logic seems to suggest is that particular spaces are given meaning by the practices that take place there. The gendering of space, in other words, depends more on the performativities that are articulated there than the form itself. A space can only be gendered by association. Certain associations are 'projected' on to those spaces, but those associations are defined not by the material properties of those spaces, but by the activities that take place there. Moreover, they depend upon the memory of those associations being kept alive. In this sense, a space used for particular activities will accrue a certain character over time, but as new activities take over — and as memories of the former activities fade — the space will take on a different character. A 'masculine' space may invert into being a 'feminine' space. A 'fascist' space may turn into a 'democratic' space. And, by extension, a 'colonial' space can be turned into a 'post-colonial' space. Often these processes are

charged with a sense of strategic reappropriation, and are set against the memory of previous associations. At other times they may be facilitated by conditions of amnesia or the repression of memory, factors which release a space from its previous associations.

Symbolic attachments may be grafted on to physical form. This opens up the possibility, as Vikki Bell has suggested, of a discourse of performativity and 'belonging', where 'belonging' might be perceived as an identification with a certain place.⁷ It suggests a way in which communities might colonise various territories through the literal 'performances' — the actions, ritualistic behaviour and so on — that are acted out within a given architectural stage, and through those performances achieve a certain attachment to place. This is based on the idea that just as communities are 'imagined' communities, so the spaces of communities — the territories that they have claimed as their own — are also 'imagined'.

Central to this sense of belonging is the principle of ritualistic repetition. Repetition leads to a normalisation and consequent familiarisation. When acted out within a particular context it may lead to an associative sense of belonging that effectively materializes this process of identification. What then happens through these stylised spatial practices is that these spaces are 'demarcated' by certain groups by a kind of spatial appropriation. This is a visceral process of identification which depends upon bodily memories. Through the repetition of those rituals these spaces are 're-membered', such that those participating reinscribe themselves into the space, re-evoking corporeal memories of previous enactments.

The space becomes a space of projection, as memories of previous experiences are 'projected' on to the material form of the space. At the same time, the body becomes the site of introjection, a recording surface registering those previous spatial experiences. As a combined result of the echoing and reinforcement of these two sets of experiences — introjection and projection — over time, a sense of mirroring and consequent identification is achieved. Identification is always specular. It is always a question of recognising the self in the other. The rituals are naturalised through these corporeal memory acts, and the spaces in which they are enacted become spaces of belonging for those involved. These spaces are 'appropriated' through these rituals and become communal sites of embeddedness.

If identity is to be perceived as a form of 'drag', so too spaces can be perceived as a form of 'drag spaces'. And nowhere is this more obvious than in the temporary colonisations of walkway spaces and underpasses in Hong Kong by Filipina workers on Sundays. Moreover, they challenge in the most effective way the proposition of Marc Augé that walkways, underpasses and thoroughfares can be relegated to the status of 'non-places'.

References

- ¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, John Howe (trans.) (London: Verso, 1995).
- ² Augé's critique echoes the thoughts of Siegfried Kracauer, for whom modernity was characterized by a form of transcendental homelessness, embodied by the Hotel Lobby, the space where silence reigns and guests bury themselves in their newspapers to avoid exchanging glances. On this see, Siegfried Kracauer, *The Hotel Lobby* in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 53-58.
- ³ For a more detailed discussion of these matters, see Neil Leach, *Belonging, London: Postcolonial City, AA Files*, 49, 2003, pp. 76-82.
- ⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 12.
- ⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 125.
- ⁶ 'I have come to think that no work of art or culture can set out to be political once and for all, no matter how ostentatiously it labels itself as such, for there can never be any guarantee that it will be used the way it demands. A great political art (Brecht) can be taken as a pure and apolitical art; art that seems to want to be merely aesthetic and decorative can be rewritten as political with energetic interpretation. The political rewriting or appropriation, then, the political use, must be allegorical; you have to know that this is what it is supposed to be or mean — in itself it is inert.' Jameson, *Is Space Political?*, in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.258-59.
- ⁷ Vikki Bell (ed.), *Performativity and Belonging* (London: Sage, 1999).