

THE PULSE OF THE BODY

Uses and Representations
of Space



BOMBASGENS
CENTRE D'ART

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“Every society produces its own order, its own geographies and spaces, its own natures, its own knowledge and truths, its own bodies, cities and texts. These are socially produced spaces, always forming, always flowing, existing simultaneously and indivisibly in their material, symbolic and vital dimensions. As social spaces, they are produced by spatial praxis, the operation of the establishment through which material, symbolic and vital spaces are produced and hierarchically organised”.¹

Edward W. Soja

“Traveller, your footprints
are the road, nothing else.
Traveller, there is no road,
you make your own road as you walk”.²

Antonio Machado

“Bodies are becoming like cities, their time coordinates transformed into spatial ones. In a poetic condensation, history has been replaced by geography, stories by maps, memories by scenarios. We no longer perceive ourselves as continuity but as location, or, rather, as dislocation in the *urban/suburban* cosmos”.³

Celeste Olalquiaga

“Symmetry abolished, to serve as fodder for the winds”.⁴

René Cazelles

1 SOJA, EDWARD W.: *Postmetropolis. Critical Studies of cities and regions*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001.

2 MACHADO, ANTONIO: “Proverbios y cantares” nº XXIX, *Campos de Castilla*, Poesías Completas, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1980, p. 223. [English translation: Mary G. Berg and Dennis Maloney, *There is no Road*, White Pine Press, 2003].

3 OLALQUIAGA, CELESTE: *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*, cited by Edward W. Soja in *Óp. cit.*

4 René Cazelles cited in BACHELARD, GASTON: *La Poética del espacio*, FCE, Argentina, 2000, p. 63.

The Pulse of the Body. Uses and Representations of Space addresses, through the work of numerous artists, the ways in which we inhabit, know, perceive, signify, reproduce and represent space, within the unceasing institution of place which life implies. *The Pulse of the Body* is approached from a point of view that tends to overcome the strictly economic analyses about the construction of space, and it proposes an outlook in which everyday life, confronted to the dialectics between the lived-in space and the concept city, is considered as a possibility for social transformation, a life that establishes itself on the basis of a dynamic, participative relationship of the body with the place. The expression “take place” brings us closer to the meaning of this project in its double sense, referring both to the possession of space and to the possibility that something may happen and inhabit the space.

Technological revolutions are part of a historical process of change that goes well beyond the new technology to affect the social system as a whole. Since the 1970s we have been experiencing a politically determined exponential technical/scientific progress of unimagined proportions, and in the new setting of unchallenged capitalism it influences and transforms the two categories which have been considered as essential dimensions of the externality of the human: space and time. And it does so both in the most blatantly visible, like the landscape or the city, and in the most intangible, like socio-spatial organisation, memory and knowledge. The ideology underlying this techno-social transformation foresees the death of *place* and *distance*, and of anything having a spatial specificity, in the name of the speed of communications and the creation of virtual worlds. However, facing this idea of a global, undifferentiated world, there is actually a political and cultural resistance tied to the consideration of place and the local as spaces of identity.

Urban space is neither neutral nor innocent, but rather the base for a life prospect and a theatre for conflict. Thus, there is an axiom according to which the urban space, beyond its instrumental function and its willingness to cater to basic human needs, is a space of representation that expresses or materialises social trends. As Henri Lefebvre reminds us, space is not merely a medium for reproduction or containment, it is not a concept or an expression, but rather a constituent element, a product of the body, a product of society, and a “producer of society”.¹

However, stating that society constitutes in a spatial manner leads us to two terminology problems—the ambiguous definition of space, and the difficulty surrounding the concept of the social. In practice, the words “space” and “place” tend to point to common experiences. Heidegger considers that the more abstract term *space* can be understood as a “project of place”.² What may begin as indefinite space becomes a place as we inhabit it. Therefore, a place binds us and implies a certain degree of safety, while we associate space with freedom and movement. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold points out, space becomes place when movement comes to a stop.³ Ingold emphasises dynamic relationships, participation, practice and activity as a constituent action of space, and underlines the “poetics of inhabiting” as ways of being-in-the-world. Along the lines of Michel de Certeau, he proposes that the act of walking and the walker are an action and

1 LEFEBVRE, HENRI: *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1991.

2 HEIDDEGER, MARTIN: “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975.

3 “...people have drawn a living from the *land*, not from space. Farmers plant their crops in the *earth*, not in space, and harvest them from *fields*, not from space. [...] When we are at home, we are *indoors*, not in space, and when we go *outdoors* we are in the open, not in space. Casting our eyes upwards, we see the *sky*, not space, and on a windy day we feel the *air*, not space. Space is nothing, and because it is nothing it cannot truly be inhabited at all.” INGOLD, TIM, “Against space: place, movement, knowledge”, in KIRBY, PETER WYNN: (ed.), *Boundless Worlds: An Anthropological Approach to Movement*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2009, pp. 29-43.

a key player in the institution of space as place: “My contention is that lives are not led inside places, but through, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere. [...] I shall use the term *wayfaring* to describe the experience of this perambulatory movement. It is as wayfarers, then, that human beings inhabit the earth”.⁴ Within this process, the wayfarer traces a path and the meeting place may be defined by the interweaving of all those threads traced in the strolling. For Michel de Certeau, “history begins at ground level with steps. They are the number, but a number which does not form a series. [...] Their tingle is an innumerable set of singularities. The varieties of steps are the sewing of spaces, they weave places”.⁵

Regarding the notion of the social proposed by Lefebvre (space as the transformer of social dynamics, and the latter as producers of space) Bruno Latour addresses an issue which, in some way, comes before: the fact that the categories of nature and society become dissociated through a process typical of modern thought which has tried to separate the human from the non-human (animal, language, machine). The social is addressed as an interrelation among “actants”, who become so precisely because they interact with one another. The social is not the manifestation or the effect of an external cause (power relations, modes of production, etc.). The social structure is not independent of the society that sustains it, there is no complete, autonomous or final social order. For Latour the body is a link; its configuration is based on the interaction networks which link what is human through various heterogeneous devices. Lefebvre, in turn, suggests that all spaces which are appropriated by humans are inevitably related to their bodies and to their imaginaries.

The Pulse of the Body. Uses and Representations of Space addresses the possibility of making visible something which somehow remains invisible, although it is all around us and is characteristic of us. Our experience of place can be direct and intimate, indirect and conceptual, and today it is thoroughly mediated. We know with accuracy our home, and maybe the neighbourhood where we live, we may know something about our country and, through our travels, we may have a certain idea about the world. But we can hardly see the unceasing relations and exchanges we draw constantly, which reconstruct the physical and social space on a daily basis. It is in the complex dialogue among multiple visions that this project can enlighten us about the social construction of space—the social body, the poetic dwelling, the city and its boundaries, the architectures and their landscapes, the places of memory, of power and technology, are some of the items that trace a fabric of related images. Thus, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt, Robert Frank, David Goldblatt, Takashi Hamaguchi, and Paul Graham capture a dimension of the collective (which seems to be destined to fight the progressive denial of a meaning common to life) by establishing a link between place, experience, body and human relations. Their images point to a “socialised body” that is conditioned by the world and is shaped by the material and cultural conditions of its existence.

From a different standpoint, Luigi Ghirri proposes a poetic dwelling by looking for life in the weave, in the fragment or on the surfaces where the social is inscribed (posters, signs, advertising images or maps), in other words, in an image where life is re-appropriated in the subjective gaze. As Gaston Bachelard put it, “when the image is new, the world is new”.⁶ Paco Martí also distances himself from descriptive impersonality in his landscape compositions to bring us toward territorial intimacy. Through strategies involving fragmentation and camouflage, Francesca Woodman refers us to a state of the body that is marked by excess. She introduces time into photography through long exposures that make her body disappear or fuse with space and with objects. As a form of resistance, her *dwelling* rebels against death, which underlies all photographs, against its capability to freeze space and time. Likewise, the figures of Óscar Muñoz resist disappearing by re-emerging in every photo frame.

4 *Ibidem*.

5 DE CERTEAU, MICHEL: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

6 *Óp. cit.*, p. 59.

The city is presented as the machinery for life and as the hero of modernity, a place of conflict between lived space and planned space, between public and private interests, between architecture and memory. Yto Barrada shows the traces, the ruins of an imposed modernity. However, they are not nostalgic, but rather melancholic ruins, that is, lived ruins, the material of time already devoid of time, a past which was never a present, the denial of history and of the local, the expression of the divorce between architecture and social practice. Bernd and Hilla Becher, Humberto Rivas, Gabriele Basilico, Manolo Laguillo, Bleda and Rosa, and José Guerrero also offer us a kind of melancholic inventory of urban landscapes on the verge of the event—dissolution of architecture into time and place, landscape without human figures, presence of an absence. As Edward Ruscha shows us, when capitalism and rationality produce spaces, they draw boundaries—periphery, suburbia, heterotopias. However, those boundaries, which traditionally are oppressive places, can also be understood as spaces for openness. This is where the work of Xavier Ribas seems to position itself, where the notion of boundary may also have a positive meaning, not as the end of something but as the location where anything begins to assert its presence. In the paintings of Victoria Civera, that boundary manifests itself between the body and the landscape, between the private and the alien.

We inhabit space with our bodies, we construct ourselves within our sensorial experience of space, and in our interaction with objects. But, as we pointed out above, space affects us and *produces* us. Our gestures are not innate; as habits, they become filled with different meanings and they insert themselves into different cultural and social contexts. Our gestures speak and signify, as Antoni Miralda shows brilliantly with his militarised spaces, daily objects and monuments invaded by thousands of little toy soldiers, or as Sanja Iveković questions us through her re-interpretation of the fighting gesture of partisan women, “the pearls of revolution”. Antoni Muntadas, in turn, tells us about the body language of spectacle in the ceaseless media landscapes.

At the beginning of this text we spoke of the current technological revolution and the debate about how it affects space, about its influence in the relationship with our habitat. Today we are inhabiting a space of flows, defined by global computer networks, that paves the way for the emergence of a new economic order and a new form of control. Within this process, while a virtual space is created as a form of social control, the physical space is gradually invaded. The modern dream of the rational city has given way to the urban fragmentation resulting from speculation. Within the context of technological/industrial development, the economic reason or the profit logic is conquering new territories for urban design (tourism is prevailing as a new superfluous form of consumer wayfaring that voraciously invades cities, seas and mountains, while attempts are being made to put restrictions on migratory movements). Technologies transform the landscape. Timm Rautert and Lewis Baltz, who had already shown the effects of human activity during the progressive occupation of the landscape, photograph technological and industrial spaces. Their approach is based on the distance from the human factor and, within their artificial construction, these spaces seem both familiar and incomprehensible, like portraits of strangeness before an artificial space. Their unsettling gaze conveys not only a growing dissociation between man and nature, but also the progressive disintegration of the body, of the city, and of technology itself in its permanent obsolescence.

Within the post-industrial space of surveillance, spectacle and alienation, when the hypothetical disappearance of place and history imply a new order—the order of the lack of contact—, when we live connected to television screens and computers, the space for encounters, the hub of the flows, the place of conflict, is the semiotic struggle of language and images dictated by the tensions between technology, power and society, the fight for the space of representation and for the meaning of living. Matt Mullican and Carlos Garaicoa also work within the space of criticism and resistance, within the domain of signs, once again by fragmenting, displacing and rearranging, and by usurping codes to revoke mainstream meaning.

A large portion of the discourse on cyberspace, virtual reality and the development and control of communications has been based on the idea of spatial ubiquity, of reducing distances as a victory over space. In that regard, philosophers such as Paul Virilio have even announced “the end of geography”. We have quoted Ingold and De Certeau as two of the authors who link the wayfarer to the cultural construction of space, with its transformation into place as a symbolic or inhabited space. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, who position themselves on the opposite side of the “end of geography”, retrieve the performative power of walking and claim the path as a tool for knowledge, in response to a relationship with the environment as mere exteriority. In the meeting between humans and the world, or rather, in the interaction between body and nature through the kinaesthetic experience of walking, there is the possibility of constructing a new experience of the landscape which may transcend it as a contemplative cultural tradition to restore its symbolic principle as the first step for its becoming *place*.

One of the quotes we included at the opening of this text takes on full meaning, both in terms of time and space: «Traveller, your footprints / are the road, nothing else. / Traveller, there is no road, / you make your own road as you walk.»