

Ananthropology, or the Problem of Other Bodies:

Heterotopia

By Michael Eng

No one has yet determined what the body can do

– Spinoza, Ethics

It is the first problem of an 'ethology', a Spinozist ethics: How should the body become a question?¹ While conceptual art of the sixties and seventies constructed powerful tools to combat the logic of commodity culture and the signifying structure of the art institution, today's generation of artists working in the conceptual tradition have responded to the system's recuperation of these tools with varying success. Thus, such critical devices as site-specificity, process-orientation, and the body – along with their most famous theorists (Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others) – have become like so many slogans and brand-names consumed and wielded by those wary and unwary of the art system alike. The phenomenon is the symptom, no doubt, of a collective mesmerization, a collective forgetting, and the result of a re-absorption of the critical apparatus

into the very bureaucratic organization of the social order it had originally intended to destabilize.

Such reversals are to be expected, at least by those familiar enough with the pessimism of Theodor Adorno or the melancholy of Benjamin. Nonetheless, a forgetting of this order has often precluded an interrogation of the theoretical fate of these tools and thereby postponed the necessary investigation into the future possibilities available to the critical agenda. Among these, reifications of 'the body' and 'space' are perhaps the most difficult to overcome. Most difficult, because although emphasis on the former has proved instrumental in problematizing the neutral role of the viewer and artist alike, and emphasis on the latter has been important for the thematization of 'the production of space,' to repeat one overused phrase, they are not separate issues but two moments of the same problematic: so-called attention to one term very often presupposes an abstraction of the other. In this regard, site-specificity serves as a notable example. This crucial concept, given to us by the intersection of conceptual practice and the 'critical regionalism' of contemporary architectural discourse, confronts the universal claims of the work with the

materiality of the work's context. It does so, however, at the cost not only of essentializing the category of space (or 'place'), causing us to believe in and parrot such phrases as the 'expression of the Site'; it also projects an ahistorical and idealized – and therefore normative and ideological – 'body in space' at the center of its experience for which we are often made to feel nostalgic.²

Knut Åsdam's Heterotopia (1996) does not so much offer a solution to this difficulty, in my estimation, as heighten it. It short-circuits any phenomenological description even as it calls for or appeals to one. The narrative it invites is not the narrative of the first-person, which would begin and end with the arrival and departure of the viewer. In fact there is no invitation at all, but rather the viewer becomes implicated in a narrative-in-progress, so to speak, which refuses any ideal (that is, general) approach to the work.

This is not to say, however, that there is no experience at all of the work; rather, any experience of it begins at a splitting of experience, or what Maurice Blanchot, and Foucault after him, calls the limit-experience. In the limit-experience, the subject – the 'I' that grounds

perception and thought – is no longer permitted a ground, a space, for 'self'-determination. It is not allowed to constitute itself as a knowing interiority against an outside to be known. Instead, it becomes outside, constituted everywhere, exposed.

Heterotopia accordingly exacerbates the tension between the story the subject tells of itself and the story that first produces the subject; it enacts a repetition of this splitting with a structure whose surfaces constitute a perpetual play of inside and outside. Before viewers reach the interior of the structure, they are directed along a raised platform/catwalk that serves as both the work's border as well as an outline of half the room. Along the platform viewers can look over the exhibition space, but only by being placed on display themselves. If we accept the claim that subjectivity in general is a type of everyday performance, then the spectatorship Heterotopia stages can be considered a performance of a performance, a kind of inside joke. With this play of spectatorship, where is the work? When does the play end?

At the end of the catwalk viewers must crouch down beneath the platform, which is raised only four feet, and descend a

small set of steps to reach the space below. Inside the work's cramped structure, viewers find a space resembling a club's chill-out room. There are black vinyl cushions upon which they can relax, and across the space there is a video playing on a monitor mounted to one of the work's wooden supports. The video, Untitled: Pissing, is another work. It shows a close-up of a man's crotch, which, after a few seconds begins to also show a growing wet spot on the man's left thigh. Soon the entire pant leg is covered in urine, pouring down, as if down the monitor itself. After the initial curiosity is satisfied, though, something humorous takes place. The video is on a loop, so the man simply pisses himself over and over again. At the same time, the monitor is placed at an angle corresponding to the corner where the work's two translucent glass panels meet. We can see other people in the main exhibition space walk by, but only from the waist down; as the man pisses himself over and over, his crotch coincides with the crotches of those passing by. The entire sequence becomes more hilarious with each repetition, and even though the space is small and we are aware, even concerned perhaps, with the limited room with which we have to move, the emphasis is on our relation to the other bodies moving around, and to the ad hoc community the work brings about.

What is the significance of the other in space? What connection, if any, is there to this humor Heterotopia supposedly generates? In the Preface to The Order of Things (1966), Foucault recalls the laughter caused him after reading a passage from Borges quoting a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia [sic]" and the taxonomy written there that divides animals into "(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."³ Yet for Foucault, the laughter this passage caused was not directed at the so-called Chinese encyclopedia, but as he says, "our thought ... [and] our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other."⁴

It is here specifically and with respect to Borges that Foucault first mentions the notion of heterotopia. "Our thought," according to Foucault, is characterized by a utopic longing, a desire for the "consolation," he says, of the common, of the Same, of Identity protected from the contamination of Difference. Heterotopias, on the

contrary, like those found in Borges, "dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences."⁵ Knowledge, then, as Borges shows us, is – contrary to the narrative that the history of Western thought prefers to tell – not the problem of other minds, but the problem of other bodies, of how they are to be organized and separated, bureaucratically ordered and assigned to their proper places. 'Space,' that is to say, is always already the concept of space. This concept, accordingly, presupposes such ordering and submits itself in advance to the act of dividing like with like, and unlike with unlike. To produce a 'proper' space is simultaneously to produce an 'improper' one as well. There is no body-in-space as such, no generic body in a generic space, but histories of the productions of bodies and the productions of spaces. When Foucault goes on to describe the rise of discipline in Discipline and Punish (1975), or the social ordering that presupposes the competing yet complementary images of heterotopia and utopia in 'Of Other Spaces' (1967),⁶ it is with the memory of Borges and these histories in mind.

Or, as Foucault himself intimates elsewhere,⁷ we can pursue the concept as well in Georges Bataille's notion of 'heterology,' that other site where the excess of bodies and the eruption of laughter combine to give the lie to the abstraction of 'space.' When Bataille proposes heterology as a disruption to society's appropriative elements (for which the institution of architecture, especially that of the museum, is the paradigmatic instance), it is to remind us of the excretive functions – not only sexual activity, but defecation, urination, and death as well – that society seeks to master and keep at bay.⁸ The unconscious knowledge of every society is this: within every clean, healthy, or moral body, there corresponds an abject body in death and decay. Nothing is more fitting before the sight of the cadaver, for Bataille, than the 'burst of laughter' that 'communicates' the fall of one system of control into its extreme opposite.⁹ In this sense, our laughter, Bataille writes, is "reducible, in general, to the laugh of recognition in the child ... All of a sudden, what controlled the child falls into its field."¹⁰

How does the laughter of Bataille and Foucault relate to the laughter provoked by Heterotopia? Untitled: Pissing, Åsdam says, "has a traumatic relationship to adult

masculinity, firstly in that it represents something that you are not supposed to do as a child, and secondly because it signifies a loss of control in relation to a straight defined masculinity."¹¹ What the work presents to us is not a solemn recognition of the ideological organization of space and bodies in general, but a farcical scene of a particular construction. Who are we laughing at in Untitled: Pissing: the generic image of a man pissing himself, or the Gap model who loses control at the moment he is modeling his generic khakis? Farcical, then, is the image of the businessman dressed for 'casual Fridays' finding himself in the space of a homoerotic architecture, the 'dork' in a gay club, who can't decide whether he's just urinated on himself out of homophobic fright or ejaculated out of homoerotic curiosity. Here the parody of the 'corporate aesthetic' of the advertising image recalls the parodies of Åsdam's Installation (1995) realized at the Whitney Independent Study Program, which reproduces the formica wood panels belonging to both American corporate spaces and family rooms alike, and which Rem Koolhaas analyzes in a not unrelated way under the name of 'Typical Plan' in S,M,L,XL.¹² With Heterotopia, though, it is a 'queering' of space at least two times over: the corporate and the domestic are made to perform a kind of abjection

that their spaces usually repress. At the same time, the work places an abject space within the homogenous space of the gallery, preparing the ground for the queering of architecture that Åsdam later undertakes in the Psychasthenia series.

If 'architecture' becomes queered in Heterotopia, however, it is not because it could be identified as a gay space. Such a simplification can only provoke further laughter. Queering belongs instead, on the one hand, to the presentation of the body as a theater of multiplicity and indeterminacy, the famous 'body without organs' of Artaud and Deleuze and Guattari. On the other hand, it belongs also to a radical historicization of the idea of the body supposed to inhabit such a space. What can a body do? This phrase becomes threatening not for its introduction of the idea of the abject body. Even the idea of a queer body remains an idea. It is threatening, rather, for its reminder that in our time (a time of AIDS, anthrax, and now SARS) a body is before all else contagious. Its predilection is towards contamination; its norm, as Sue Golding would say, is that of becoming-pariah.¹³

If in this sense Heterotopia goes further than Foucault or Bataille, or even Deleuze, it is because it recovers their Spinozist ambitions to think the question of the body against the horizon of a current condition. When Åsdam suggests that the work concerns 'actual bodies that fill spaces in society, whose subjects are gendered and have their body as a site of struggle, contestation and pleasure,'¹⁴ what does that struggle look like? How does it include 'us'? Again, the body in Untitled: Pissing is not so much another image of the body as it is 'my body' in terms of the image it has become. The violence of the advertising image comes about less from the desire it produces in me to possess the commodity than, as Guattari suggests, from the desire it produces in me to become the fragmented body it displays.¹⁵ The ideal body is now abject. 'One' never 'has' a body. One is never in 'space.' No one gets out whole, and "no one – and that includes you and me both – gets out of here alive."¹⁶ Gordon Matta-Clark's 'anarchitecture' meets Åsdam's 'anathropology.'

² Here Bernard Cache's critique of the architectural notion of the site (Vittorio Gregotti's in particular) in his Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories, [ed. Michael Speaks, trans. Anne Boyman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 14-15] meets Fredric Jameson's critique of the reification of the body in phenomenological descriptions of space in his 1985 essay, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," [in The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986. Volume 2. Syntax of History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 35-60]. One could also cite in this context Rosalyn Deutsche's eloquent reading of Henri Lefebvre's discussion of abstract space in her Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), as well as her distinction in the same volume between an "academic site-specificity," which emphasizes harmony with the site, and a critical site-specificity, which intervenes in the social, political, and epistemological determinations of the site as site.

³ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, (New York: Vintage, 1970), xv. The passage is from Borges's review, "John Wilkins' Analytical Language" (1942), in Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 229-32.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Order of Things, xviii.

⁶ See Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", Diacritics, Volume 16, Issue 1 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 29-52.

⁹ "Laughter," in The Bataille Reader, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 60.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Knut Åsdam, "Discussion" (in conversation with Claire Bishop and Ben Borthwick), in Knut Åsdam, Exhibition catalogue published on the occasion of Knut Åsdam Psychasthenia 10, Art Now, Tate Britain, 11 July-1 October 2000 (Galleri Tommy Lund, 2000), 57.

¹² See Rem Koolhaas, "Typical Plan," S,M,L,XL (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 334-50.

¹³ Sue Golding, "Pariah Bodies," Critical Quarterly 36, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 28-36.

¹⁴ Knut Åsdam, "Discussion," 53.

¹⁵ Félix Guattari, "In Order to End the Massacre of the Body," in Soft Subversions, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet and Chet Wiener (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 29-36.

¹⁶ Sue Golding, "Pariah Bodies," 28.