Heterotopia
- Art, pornography and cemeteries

by Knut Åsdam

If one considers the primary obsession of the twentieth century to have been about time and place, like Foucault did, then it is possible to draw on the notion of heterotopia in relation to contemporary art, contemporary culture and the migratory society. Connected to this, as we will see, is the question of identity — which also has to do with space and place — since space (in which the subject is known) is never something neutral, but a linguistic and historic dimension, which simultaneously privileges and impedes various subject-formations.

Like utopia, heterotopia is a place/space which has the property of being outside of the society which produced it, while at the same time carrying a relation to all the other remaining, "external" spaces. Heterotopia suspects, neutralises or inverses the relations which it signifies, mirrors or reflects.
The difference between a utopia and a heterotopia is that a heterotopia possesses a material reality. If one says that the reflection in the mirror is a utopia, then the mirror as object and as medium is a heterotopia. Or, to be more precise: the mirror is a heterotopia when it reconstitutes you as standing and looking at yourself being reflected.

At all times, societies have had their heterotopias, and they have often been among the most interesting and revealing sites in their societies. Historically speaking, we can divide heterotopia into two main categories (and several sub-categories): heterotopia of crisis and heterotopia of deviation. These are places for individuals in crisis or deviation in relation to the society to which they belong. I.e. places for menstruating women, adolescents, the elderly, mentally ill, and sexual deviants. But these spaces could just as well be places for purification, privilege and knowledge as places that were meant to prevent its subjects from that kind of access.

Foucault lays out certain principles for heterotopia:
- All societies constitute heterotopia.
- A heterotopia can change its function because of changes in the society that occur over time. Any heterotopia has a specific function with regard to the society to which it is related.
- A heterotopia can, at one and the same place, layer several different places that in of themselves seem incompatible.
- Heterotopia is usually linked to slices of time and these open up to heterochronies.
- Heterotopia always presupposes a system of opening and closing, which both isolates it and makes it penetrable. A heterotopia is not accessible for everybody as a public space, but rather poses certain criteria.
- They always have a function in relation to all the places/spaces that remains (outside). Either in terms of creating an illusional space (heterotopia of illusion) and which reveals all the "real" spaces as built on illusion, or by creating a space that is another, another real space – which is just as perfect as our places are messy and disjointed (heterotopia of compensation).

Some examples of heterotopia are cemeteries, movies, gardens and carpets, boarding schools, bordellos, toilets, pornographic spaces, holiday camps, mental institutions and saunas. (Gardens are among the oldest of all heterotopias and were originally a representation of a microcosmos. Foucault also demonstrates how carpets were initially like gardens which could move across space.)
A more recent example is the motel rooms situated along the highway, where people go to carry out illicit activities, besides, the heterotopic principle also provides a good characteristic incipient years of the World Wide Web.

A heterotopia can also change its meaning through history (in much the same way that a signifier acquires a new signified), like for instance the porn-theatres in Times Square in New York. Following the new regulations governing the district, the traditional stomping grounds for the sex industry in New York have been transformed into Disney entertainment centres for the "whole family". From being a space that reflected the surrounding society through the investments of sexuality or "perversity" as such – the area is being turned into a heterotopia of compensation, constituted by an over-perfect representation of American middle class and working class ideals.

Another historic example of a heterotopia which has altered in character over time are the balconies in the movie houses in the segregated United States: The balconies in the movie houses come from a legacy of the theater and were originally isolated and privileged spaces for the nobility or for specially selected guests. Through the politics of segregation in the United States, the function of the balconies was shifted to become the only seating allowed for colored moviegoers, while they were denied acess to the main hall. This turned upside down the historic conventions — where the balconies had previously been a place of privilege and privileged distance/withdrawal — while it simultaneously confirmed the existing political priorities. Through this – albeit reprehensible – subversion of the conventions of the theatre, the entire economic and political structure in the United States became linked to a space that was meant to be isolated from a notion of the State as a whole. As a phenomenon, this shows a main point of the notion of heterotopia: how space and place are always agents for processes of subjectivity, and stand in a political relation to the society that produced them.

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It's not easy to be aware of a heterotopia in your own time, but I think examples have emerged in art, both through its own activation of heterotopic spaces for the viewers, and through the continued interest within contemporary art for spaces and places within our contemporary and historic culture. Throughout history, the 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.

One of the first visual artists who outlined the notion of heterotopia — and let it unfold within his work — for the sake of a historic understanding of both political investment and identity-formation, must have been Dan Graham. Graham picks up on the historic framework from Romanticism's English gardens and the Renaissance's Italian gardens through to modern urban planning, and reveals the bourgeois subject's construction — through a representation of a hyper-perfect understanding of reality. His work becomes an accommodation of a historic and discursive subject, displaced from – but also in direct contact with – the surrounding environment. Often, he reduces this function to a minimum and allows it to determine the entire work. We see this in his recent pavilions, where one of the few things that happen is that the viewer is placed inside a filtering of reflections of him/herself and the surrounding milieu, inside of a historical and socially specific architectonic situation. His pavilions are also simple socialisable spaces, where you can "hang out" and reflect on the more political and social-psychological themes that are being discussed in the videos or in the architectonic and social situation itself. (i.e. The rooftop café at the DIA Center for the Arts in New York.)

Dan Graham was also one of the first artists who had an immediate connection to the youth- and popular-culture of his own time (in an entirely different way than pop art's aestheticising of youth culture). With Graham, one can see a problematisation of the subject which takes punk as seriously as suburban housing. It is not a matter of adopting the aesthetics of punk, but rather of valuing it and treating it with a taken-for-granted seriousness (and humour).

Dan Graham also picks up historic heterotopic strategies, in order to elicit a discussion around contemporary social structures of power and subjectivity. One example would be the video *Rock my Religion*, where Graham presents parallels between the practise of spaces of deviation and crisis of punk and the religious Shaker movement. Another example is the article comparing Eisenhower and the hippies. His articles in the *New York Review of Sex* and the ads in *Screw Magazine* also constitute examples of this kind of activated space.

In recent years, artists like Jocelyn Taylor and Lovett/Codagnone have made multi-page projects in porn magazines. Where these projects had to fulfil demands from the publisher in terms of sexual content, the projects did not have a particular focus on – or function as – promotion of the artists. Rather they functioned as an active overflow of the term and the function of 'pornography'. They confronted the reader directly with discussions and themes concerning spaces of identity, (and created a non-space within a non-space).

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It comes as no surprise that women have been central to the creation of several heterotopic spaces. From special places where the menstruating woman was kept apart from society — either because of her overwhelming spiritual powers (as in historically in the Urba-culture in West Africa), or because she was considered to be soiled — did also the honeymoon constitute such a place: a non-space in relation to its society. Just as important as the celebration of a union of families was the de-localisation of the "woman's deflowering" — which "was carried out by the man" — and which was something that would preferably take place on a ship, in a train or in a hotel room; non-spaces in relation to her or his home-society.

Representation of sexuality has been central in relation to the creation of many heterotopic spaces, and it is interesting to think about the role the stage has had in this context. The theatrical stage was a place/space that brought together supposedly incompatible spaces (such as the bourgeois public and street realism), and also functioned as a place where female sexuality was symbolised, masculinised as expression, and made fitting to the public. This is similarly the case with the cinema. Things were never so given though, and both cinema and theatre also provided a space for transgression of the masculine gaze — a plane of deviation in the meeting between expectations and representation.

Camille Norment's installation, *Degas' Dancers* (1995), touches onto this. In a heavily theatrical, black-painted space, the surface of the floor is filled with point-shoes with attached high heels. They are arranged in pairs, but in order to fit into the different positions that they suggest, one would have to have a perfect mastery of the body. Classical dance becomes coupled to Chinese toe-binding, extreme physical regimentation, fashion and a fetishisation of both the shoes and the woman as phallic. Besides, it steals up on you that the scene or rehearsal space you are standing in, is not in a theatre but rather a strip club.
Classical ballet, the shoes and representation (as such) of 'woman' are Western cultural fetishes of the most traditional kind, and they possess a European ethnicity: these <u>concepts</u> of 'fetish' and 'function' are solidly based in Freudian economy of desire. Furthermore, the masculinisation of the representation of the woman and the skin colour of the shoes show everybody that what is at play here is a delineation of — or a claim to, the European woman.
However, the shoes as fetish object also engages an economy of desire for a contemporary feminine gaze, as a *female fetish*; and here opens up to us the possibility of a field of desire, which transgresses the patriarchal-capitalistic twentieth-century notion through which everything is defined in terms of lack.

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With his latest installation at Max Protech in New York, Glenn Ligon had problematised the spatiality in which the viewer finds him/herself, and that which the viewer recollects and constructs his complex of identity around. The first thing that met the visitor, was the sound of Al Green songs — laid as an "ambience" in the room, and which moved between foreground and background (from whether or not you "focused" on it). Spread around in the space, stood a fragmented reconstruction of an African-American home from the 60s' or 70s' — with small sets of furniture that outlined different rooms within the family space. Together with knick-knacks, were photo albums and magazines in which family photos were combined with porn pictures, and the weekly family magazines were strewn about together with gay porn magazines. The gallery space and the family room were "shifted" and queered, by that the anticipated sexual signification or sexualisation of the family was bypassed.

In this connection I use 'queer' as the political term sprouted forth from 'queer theory', which again grew out of a meeting between post-structuralism, gay, lesbian and feministic thinking and activism. 'Queer' is here not necessarily bound up with

sexual praxis (bi, homo or hetero), but is a quantity of identity for one's subjectivity which is in deviation from the - historically speaking - patriarchal, authoritarian and compulsory heterosexually dominating structures of power. ('Queer' is then also a deconstruction of historic, heterosexual masculinity, as it were.)

'Queer' is what Deleuze and Guattari would have called 'a line of flight', a 'becoming minority', and 'to always be in the room next door'. This is not a matter of avoiding conflict, quite the contrary. It is rather a project for finding the points of conflict (the discussion between powers of conformity and deviation) – to move right there in the area of crisis; to just manage to escape — just evading being turned into a cell of the law. So-called 'queer space' is – per definition – heterotopic, because of the power strata of sexuality and its investments into all social, public and personal spaces.

In Glenn Ligon's *Twin* (1995), one sees a bed with an extra pull-out mattress. The extra bed is pulled halfway out under the top mattress and reveals a large number of magazines — hidden from the upper bed which is neatly made up. The magazines consist of a mixture of *Jet* and porn magazines with pictures of men in various constellations. Already in the title, it is clear that the bed and the space have another character than what is evident in the more representational surface. Like a ghost, or a double of the family's anonymously representational son, the orientation of puberty lies there — and which hidden from view tries to spin an identity from the accessible sources in relation to race, class and sexuality.

Ligon's installation is interesting from several perspectives: the work is doubly heterotopic - through the boy's room as such, and through the theme of homosexual sexualisation of that room and the family architecture. On the one side, there are the articulations and the activation of a so-called 'queer space'. On the other side, you have the teenage room, the homosexually sexualised boy's room and the '70s (as a cultural signifier) as other strata of the heterotopic spaces. Besides, the African-American middle class home is also situated in a very special political relation to the representation of norms and social structures, although it is not heterotopic in and of itself.

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Heterotopia is not restricted by the classical opposition between individual and society, and by that the prevalent (Freudian-Lacanian) model of the unconscious is disrupted. (A heterotopia is far from being something politically correct in itself – that's a relation that does not enter the picture. As we have also seen in some of the examples, a heterotopia can be a forcibly suppressing space or a space of pleasure, and can be a "good" or a "bad" place for different individuals.)

Félix Guattari knew how to utilise the possibilities given in a heterotopic situation. Until his death in 1992, he worked not only with philosophy and political activism; his chief occupation was with the experimental psychiatric clinic, *La Borde,* in Paris. For Guattari, the clinic embodied a possibility for finding other therapeutic forms of treatment for people with at times considerable mental difficulties — based on his notion of schizo-analysis. Like Foucault, Guattari was preoccupied with employing the notion of 'subjectivity' instead of the notion of the 'subject'. He was also

intensely interested in breaking away from the dominance of Freudian-Lacanian models of desire and from traditional psychoanalysis in general — based as they are on patriarchal and capitalistic models. Guattari understood them just as much as functions for the production of subjectivity as analytical models. Moreover, he was opposed to psychoanalysis' universalising claim.

In its inception, the *La Borde* clinic might very well have been defined as a heterotopia of crisis. But internally, it possessed a self-awareness and the activity of a heterotopia of deviation.

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One could say that in their incipient years, The World Wide Web and the Internet constituted heterotopic spaces. Perhaps they were heterotopia *par excellence* in much the same way that the ship was to Foucault (who in spite of everything was almost a contemporary). (To Foucault, the ship was a perfect example of heterotopia: a floating space, a place without place, a society that closes up around itself but which is, at the same time, changeable in relation to the surroundings.) But perhaps this is to let the term thin out a bit — the net has always had so many subspaces. Moreover, it is now undergoing intense changes, and the power structures to which the Internet relates are not really all that clearly defined; the site of power – as well as the site of resistance – are situated in an ambiguous zone without borders in the conventional sense. Nonetheless, it appears that the Internet's investments are rather easy to spot and that, for the most part, it is merely reproducing a space of liberal capitalism which we know so well from before. Even though the power structures have become nomadic and deterritorial, this does not mean that they cannot have a segmentary and conservative effect. However, it is still difficult to say what the position of WWW or the Internet is, and it is not a very helpful question, since the Internet is not one thing but rather a structure that is creating its own heterotopic spaces, points of deviation and assault-groups.

As a way of concluding or enveloping this article, I'd like to refer to Alessandro Codagnone's installation, *Mean-Room,* from 1994; an installation as a heterotopia *par excellence.* The present article is indeed also something like a public toilet; full of anonymised graffiti and references, and with glances at other subjects in the text.

Knut Åsdam, December 1995
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