Washing your dirty linen in public: Displacement, Deviation and the Heterotopic world of ‘Untitled’, 1991 by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Paul O'Neill

The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.

Michel Foucault in Of Other Places (1986:22)*

The bed is thus the individual space par excellence, the elementary space of the body (the bed-monad), the one which even the man completely crippled by debt has the right to keep: the bailiffs don’t have the power to seize your bed. This also means - this is easily verified in practice - that we only have one bed, which is our bed. When there are said to be guest beds or spare beds, it seems we only sleep well in our own bed.

Georges Perec in Species of Spaces and Other Pieces (1997)

‘Untitled’, 1991 is a billboard project by Cuban born, American artist, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. It was initially displayed and installed in twenty-four billboard sites throughout Manhattan and its surrounding four boroughs in 1992.** Gonzalez-Torres was always interested in dealing with the notion of public and/or private. His numerous billboard works have been shown in the public realm and yet they are privately owned by an individual who has the responsibility for their public exhibition. In a conversation with Joseph Kosuth, Gonzalez-Torres said of his billboard works that, ‘People can buy these billboards, but they have to put them in public - they have to rent a public space. It’s like buying edition prints, except that you put them up on billboards...The conditions are such that you can only show it in public. You have to show it in public (cited in Kosuth and Gonzalez-Torres 1991: 76). This emphasis on public responsibility is key in relating to Gonzalez-Torres work. The owner takes responsibility for a private aspect of the artist’s life and work, and

Once Upon A Time...

This text originally entitled ‘Des Espaces Autres,’ was published in the French Architecture-Mouvement-Continuite in October, 1984 and was the basis of a lecture given by Foucault in March 1967.

‘Untitled’, 1991 was first shown in conjunction with Gonzalez-Torres’ exhibition entitled ‘Projects 34 at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991.’

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makes the work public over and over again, as the billboards can be reprinted and reinstalled into an infinite number of places over time. Each public space gives additional meaning to the content and context of the way in which the work is seen, and each time it is viewed there is an added responsibility on the public spectator to activate the work and transform it into private and personal meaning.

For those who are acquainted with Gonzalez-Torres biography, Untitled, 1991 can easily be read as a personal testament to the death of Gonzalez-Torres’ lover and life companion. In 1991, he died from an AIDS related illness; a disease from which Gonzalez-Torres himself was to die in 1996. This knowledge however, does not resolve the full meaning of the work, and in many ways, it is not necessary for an understanding of the work. However, my reading of the work is tainted by what I know of Felix Gonzalez-Torres’ life.

What ‘Untitled’, 1991 represents is an enlarged black and white reproduction of a photograph of an empty double bed. The bed appears to have been recently shared by two lovers, leaving fresh indentations of the bodies that had once nestled together in the bed. ‘Untitled’, 1991 configures, within a single field of vision, a spatial relationship between irreconcilable domains that by their co-existence in representation have produced an unstable state of place. There is an intersection of contradictory spaces, which appear to occupy different places of origin. This dual interaction highlights a spatial crisis, and is in part due to a long spectacular history of place in western culture which is based on visuality. We live in a society where we are both the observers and the observed of that culture. As an image centered culture, the visual world in which we live is not just a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images and their historical and social meanings. Places are never clearly classifiable within the visual representation of the city. They are constantly in flux, changing, unstable, and within ‘Untitled’, 1991 by Felix Gonzalez-Torres their foundations are being undermined. Places that are clearly identifiable as being spatially private, public, inside, outside, dominant, marginal, etc. are being scrutinized, exposed and repositioned.

In ‘Untitled’, 1991, the billboard image of the bed makes publicly present, an illusionary space which exposes the surrounding urban spaces for what they are. So-called public and social spaces, which are understood to be in the ‘real’ world beyond, are shown to be as unreal as the image of Gonzalez-Torres’ bed. At the same time, this counter-site proclaims publicly, to be as real as the surrounding world against which it is counteracting. It is both its familiarity and its incongruity, which calls its public placement into question. Its very place in the real world is under severe scrutiny, as it comes into direct contact with other public spaces that surround it. Somewhere between the pictorial representa-
How is it seen - a description

My experience of the ‘Untitled’, 1991 is of a second-hand nature (and therefore maybe tainted). Up until recently, I have only seen it through reproductions in various magazines and catalogues. These images are well documented installation views of the work, as it was initially seen in the context of the public realm. In these installation shots are incongruous images of the bed which floats and dangles from a height, whilst overlooking the city. The bed appears as a static entity amidst the kinetic activity of pedestrians, street life and road traffic. The image of the bed appears uncanny - situated both in and above many different locations. Among the many documented locations, are publicity signs for the circus (which reads; The Mongolians are coming), advertisement hoardings for auto-mechanics, donut houses, food stores, Cajun restaurants, the Authentic Argentine Cuisine restaurant, parking lots, gas stations. The ‘larger-than-life’ bed is positioned next to apartment blocks, traffic lights, motels, schools, signs for Adult Entertainment bars, derelict buildings and unused Ad Space (with phone number) advertising nothing but itself. Gonzalez-Torres’ billboard has no title, no accompanying text or caption that might explain the source, content, context or authorship of the work to the passing public. Its meaning is deliberately open-ended and ambiguous, thus allowing nothing but itself. Gonzalez-Torres’ billboard has no title, no accompanying text or caption that might explain the source, content, context or authorship of the work to the passing public. Its meaning is deliberately open-ended and ambiguous, thus allowing nothing but itself. González-Torres and many others. It is also representative of one type of space (the bed and it’s related history) within a social network of spaces and representations that have their own place in the history of anthropological space. As Lefebvre says of such representational spaces: they are, ‘redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements’ and have their source in history - in the history of a people as well as a history of each individual belonging to that people. According to Lefebvre; if we are to understand space and its history we need to look at it in a new light. It is necessary to study both the history of space and the history of representations, as well as their relationships with each other, with practice and with ideology. This means not only taking in the genesis of these spaces but also their interconnections, distortions and mutual interactions and links with a spatial practice of the particular society or mode of production under consideration. See Chapter. 1; ‘Plan of the present work’ in The Production of Space (1991).

This is a type of space that embraces the loci of passion, of action, of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time, and therefore history. It is an historical space which is assembled and displayed within another historical space. Both of these histories are here being called into question through their relative connectivity and their obvious difference to one other. This spatial dualism is further complicated by the fact that, ‘Untitled’, 1991 is both an object and an image of this object. It is a representation of a space (a bed) and a place (the particular bed, bedroom and intimate space of Gonzalez-Torres) which is itself located within yet another space (outdoor, in the city, in the consumer public sphere/advertisement arena) and another specific place (2nd Avenue/Southeast corner 106th St, 30 Dekalb Ave/Flatbush, Brooklyn etc.).

It is also a series of spatial narratives.” The narrative of the bed in ‘Untitled’, 1991 is both representational and representational. The narrative is representative of the intimate spaces and the, sexual lives of Gonzalez-Torres and many others. It is also representational of one type of space (the bed and it’s related history) within a social network of spaces and representations that have their own place in the history of anthropological space. As Lefebvre says of such representational spaces: they are, ‘redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements’ and have their source in history - in the history of a people as well as a history of each individual belonging to that people. According to Lefebvre; if we are to understand space and its history we need to look at it in a new light. It is necessary to study both the history of space and the history of representations, as well as their relationships with each other, with practice and with ideology. This means not only taking in the genesis of these spaces but also their interconnections, distortions and mutual interactions and links with a spatial practice of the particular society or mode of production under consideration. See Chapter. 1; ‘Plan of the present work’ in The Production of Space (1991).

This is space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists and perhaps, of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominant - and hence passively experienced - space - which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representa-
tional spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs (Lefebvre 1991:39).

Spatial Hauntings

Paul O’Neill

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‘The phrase ‘spatial narrative’ is here taken from Michel de Certeau in chapter 6 of The Practice of Everyday Life, where he claims that ‘every narrative is a journey narrative’, ‘all narrative is a space narrative’. All narrative is traversed by, and journeys through, scenes within and over places of space and places. Narrative traverses and ‘negates’ places in space and these places are that which are constituted by the writing of the narrative, Sue Shivango, Marc in Non-Places; introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity (1995), pp.80-87, for another reading of this term.

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What of The Other? 

My aim here is not to attempt a complete or conclusive critical history of the spatial histories at play within 'Untitled', 1991 and its surrounding environs, but to identify and explore its most evident spatial attribute, that of displacement. 'Untitled', 1991 is violently displaced from its origin and it is in this displacement that it finds its most effective sense of its own belonging - its place in the world. It represents a heterolitic place, as a place of difference, abnormality and irregularity. This is a 'place where things had been put because they had been violently displaced and then, on the contrary, places where things found their natural ground and stability,'(Foucault 1986:22-27). It has found its meaning through the fragmentary, arbitrary and displaced nature of its new location (locus: particular position) in the public realm. While it has also created an 'other' place, which is neither the place from where it originally came, nor the place within which it is now situated. It claims a space in the public mainstream as its own, and becomes a place of equilibrium - a place of renewed hope in the dual aspects of individuality and equality. 'Untitled', 1991 could be said to address the spatial sphere of privacyny, an issue which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed,'(Foucault 1986:24).

The heterotopic space represented in 'Untitled', 1991, proposes a system of opening and closing, which both isolates itself as a space and makes it penetrable at the same time. It is a site which is both accessible and hidden. It is a place where certain activities are carried out that would not be permitted in the open, and yet it does exist as a place in that society. They fall into Michel Foucault's category of 'heterotopias of deviancy: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed,'(Foucault 1986:24).
Heterotopias of deviation are often unsafe spaces, where the safety of the individual cannot be guaranteed or protected by the society in which they exist. Society can provide only limited protection, through policing or by placing a limitation on the individuals freedom. These places originate in a context of distortion, a context within which individuals and groups are disassociated from the rest of dominant society. These places are subject to defamiliarisation. They are historical and experiential zones that are ideologically and literally erased over time. They are social places that are always and already hybrid, places made up of interlocking and conflictual histories which have left their traces of the “ideal” or to a future-perfect place of utopia, heterotopias are very much real places which actually exist in the lived world. However, they are not fully accessible like other so-called public places. These hetero-topias of deviation could also be said to be privileged or sacred. These places require both permission and access, through certain actions, desires, or in the social world. They are subservient and everyday, equal and different at the same time.

If we are to take home as an example of how place could be acknowledged to have a natural historical origin and that this gives an individual a fundamental understanding of one’s own sense of place in the world. We could therefore say that ‘Untitled’, 1991 is not ‘at home’ with itself. It appears to be ‘out of place’ in the world on at least five different levels:

Firstly, it is environmentally out of place; the private and intimate domestic interior of the bedroom and the ‘home’ bed is not keeping with the surrounding environment of the public, impersonal, urban exterior of the cityscape. The bed does not fit in to the environment in which it has been placed. Secondly, it is socially out of place, as the image of the bed represents a place which is widely seen as being unhomely or heterotopic in its social narrative. After all, this is a social place that is a site of sexual activity and in this case, that of two homosexual men - one of which has recently died of AIDS (a sexually transmitted disease) and the other, who is HIVPositive. Thirdly, it is historically and politically out of place, when these highly public and overt sites are generally preserved for both access to, and use by members of a society that reinforce a certain status quo. The users of public billboard sites are generally ‘with power’ and their views would be commonly understood to be both politically and ideologically dominant (when this has not been the case these places have been re- appropriated through force). In this case, we have a Cuban born American, queer, HIV positive, conceptual artist hanging up a picture of his bed (dirty sheets and all) in twenty-four public places, that are highly visible sites in a major city of The United States of America. Fourthly, it is culturally out of place, when we can see an advertising billboard that behaves in a manner that is inappropriate to its cultural value. It is not actually publicizing anything for public consumption, and this in a public space which is ordinarily regarded as a site of consumer display and potential consumption (usually objects and services for the home (certainly in the early nineties; before mass internet access, mobile phones, e-commerce etc.). And finally, the image of the bed is out of place with the representational world (the world in re-presentation). The image is reproduced in monochrome (black and white), and it is a flat, two-dimensional image of a three dimensional object which is massively over-sized. Therefore, it could be said to be a long way from being an actual simulacrum of a real bed - as is mimetically possible through mechanical image reproduction or photographic technology.

The gigantically-imagined bed has a newly acquired eeriness which is again unhomely in its sentiment. The bed has become proportionally disjoined from the dimensions of the human body, which once slept upon it. The body has become separa-
ed from its place of comfort, sleep and dreams. Sleep is no longer a possibility; sleep which is capable of situating the individual in their own place of rest - the place they can call home. As Maurice Blanchot writes,

...sleep is intimacy with the center. I am, not dispersed, but entirely gathered together where I am, in this spot which is my position and where the world, because of the firmness of my attachment, localizes itself. Where I sleep, I fix myself and I fix the world. My person is there, prevented from erring, no longer unstable, scattered and distracted, but concentrated in the narrowness of this place where the world recollects itself, which I affirm and which affirms me. My person is not simply situated where I sleep; it is this very site, and my sleeping is the fact that now my abode is my being (Blanchot 1982: 266).

The bed is no longer a place that centers the body - it is too large. It is also over-laden with memories. The traces of bygone memories are left behind in the unmade bed. Meanwhile, a more general body to object relationship is no longer possible - the object has out-sized our relation to landscape as our immediate and lived relationship to nature and the environment as it surrounds us (see Stewart 1993:70-103). We know the gigantic only partially - our relation to landscape is equated with everywhere. The bed of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is no longer located in heterotopia, nor is it ever to be a fully homogeneous space and culture - an empowered space of equality, optimism and acceptance. It is no longer merely elsewhere, it is a place that is and always has been individually known, but which has yet to be fully classified. The place represented in Gonzalez-Torres’ work of ‘Untitled’, 1991 remains to be given a proper title, and yet the title of this public work will always be very appropriate indeed.

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Foucault claimed that in order to identify, classify and successfully name something in the world we must firstly name everything that this something is not, before we can begin to name what it is. See The Order of Things; An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, (1970) pp.125-166.

The bed of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is no longer a place that is really heterotopic by nature. These could be said to be the non-representable aspects of the place of Felix Gonzalez-Torres bed - a place that is really heterotopic by nature. These are perhaps the hetero-senses or emotions of the other which are almost unimaginable to the spectator. These senses are impossible to imagine, or replicate in the representational-image. They can only be suggested by the ruffled bed sheets. One can imagine the relative comfort of sleep, the implied intimacy, the sexual performance, the tender touch, the absent partners.

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The gaze is somehow different. What it sees is a place which has its origins in an non-occularencentric space. Instead, this place of intimacy is one that prioritizes all the other senses which cannot be made visible; that cannot be reproduced into a predominantly spectacular society. The senses of touch, affection, warmth, smell etc. could be said to be the non-representable aspects of the place of Felix Gonzalez-Torres bed - a place that is really heterotopic by nature. These are perhaps the hetero-senses or emotions of the other which are almost unimaginable to the spectator. These senses are impossible to imagine, or replicate in the representational-image. They can only be suggested by the ruffled bed sheets. One can imagine the relative comfort of sleep, the implied intimacy, the sexual performance, the tender touch, the absent partners.

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