

MOMENTS OF LIMINAL SPACE: METHODOLOGIES AND PRACTICES FOR THE STUDY OF TRANSITION

Melissanthi Saliba

The waiting room of a train station is a space lost in time where I go to observe strangers. The waiting body becomes the threshold between the everyday experience of public spaces and the unexplored territory of subjective motional states and gestures. Moments of Liminal Space is an installation of rhizomatic portraits composed of video, prints and writing, mapping the waiting body, withdrawn from its everyday functional state.

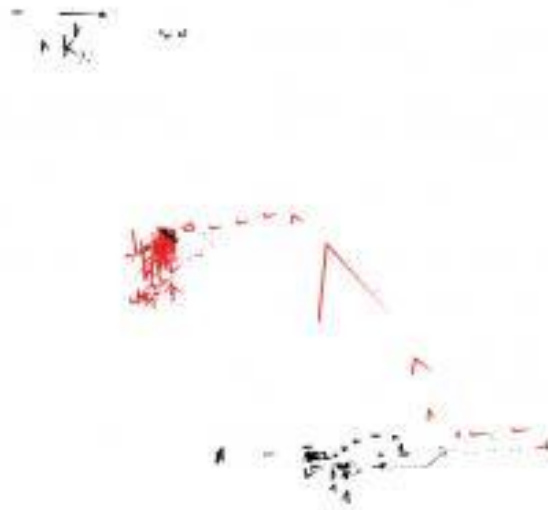


Fig 1. *525 Seconds Spent Together*, 2010, Melissanthi Saliba, Inkjet Print, 45x34 in.

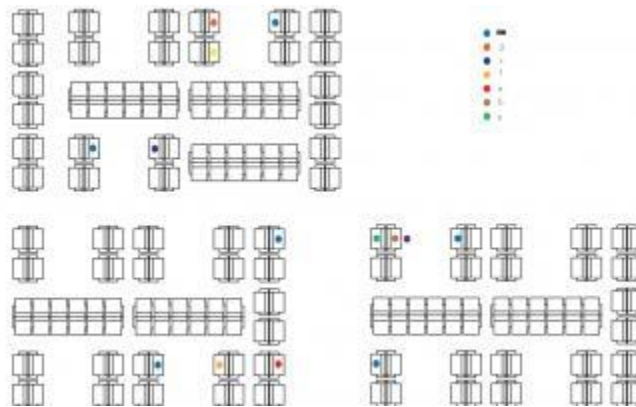


Fig 2. *People I have waited with and me*. Diagram of the Waiting Room in the Los Angeles Union Station, 2010, Melissanthi Saliba.

The waiting room of a train station is a space lost in time where I go to observe strangers. The waiting body becomes the threshold between the everyday experience of public spaces and the unexplored territory of subjective motional states and gestures. *Moments of Liminal Space* is an installation of rhizomatic portraits composed of video, prints, sound and writing. The waiting body, withdrawn from its everyday functional state, reveals the microgeography of the space that surrounds it. The project brings into attention the purposeless forgotten gestures of waiting, addressing their need for representation. *Moments of Liminal Space* suggest a subjective tracing and mapping of different ways by which individuals move in space.

The seemingly unimportant, the marginal, and the unintended gestural activity is placed in the center of attention as an experience that will reveal the spatiotemporal nature of contemporary public spaces. Movements of the body and gestures that aim almost solely at releasing physical and psychological pressure (adapters), become the rhythmic measure of time and space and reveal the ways by which individuals occupy and experience space.

The condition of being in transition between different locations, during which the waiting occurs, happens in spaces where bodies are prepared to exit the home of a culture and transfer to another place, often unfamiliar to their previous experiences. Los Angeles Union Station, constructed just before the end of the railway's heyday, is the setting for studying *Moments of Liminal Space*, considering its role as an archetype for in-between spaces.

This in-betweenness renders *liminal space* the land where the rigid structures of consciousness retreat and the Self opens up to the Other, the unknown potential of the waiting, the unconscious, the foreign territory that often controls the Self. The body under this condition becomes objectified and exists as part of the space. *Moments of Liminal Space* explores the waiting of strangers as an activity of the 'here' and the 'now.'

The slippery, momentary gestures of waiting, lacking of meaning, suggest a cultural sensibility based on the premise that the Self is a stranger. These movements are captured through the lens of a video camera, and then tracked and translated into 'data' that are 'expressed' rather than visualized through different media forms. Print, writing, video documentation and video animation are platforms used for the composition of waiting portraits.

The installation of the different parts of the artwork in space, establishes interconnectedness, a necessary condition for unfolding the *liminal*. It is through the different connections made by the viewer that meaning and form are interwoven. Waiting produces 'data' that can be interpreted in subjective ways and their expression becomes an attempt of factless portraiture that is focused on human experience rather than visualization through the knowledge of events.

The waiting body has its own movement rhythm, that escapes attention as an activity that happens in the background of everyday life. This point of entry to *Liminal Space* calls for the abandonment of knowledge in the sake of experience, through measuring that can only rely on the human senses and "geographies of human agency." (Pile 1996:48)

TOWARDS A LIMINAL DEFINITION OF WAITING

The *liminal* interprets the movements of the waiting body as *lapsi corpi* (slips of the body). In analogy to the role of the *lapis linguae* in Freudian methodology, the almost purposeless movements of waiting, can reveal concealed states of the body and the human condition of individuals. Waiting, interpreted as an error, can reveal moments of a bodily epiphany, becoming an activity that allows the body to either withdraw from the constraints of public space, or to collide with them by failing to obey. Thus, the *liminal*, becomes a condition in which body language can escape meaning and unfold in a form which retains its independence from external points of reference and rules of social discipline.

Waiting inherently takes place before something scheduled happens, and in that sense, it is a liminal activity similar to the speculative execution of code from computers. Speculative code ascribes to the computer processor improvised tasks that have no reference and are irrelevant to the 'main' program that is just about to happen. The reason for the execution of speculative code is keeping the processor on the right track, in terms of the sequence and the timing of the programmed computations.

The aesthetics of the improvised, the error, the unnecessary, the failure, are elements that the *liminal* system uses to its advantage. The *dérive*, as the act of purposeless drifting, offers the possibility to escape rationally defined and calculated space supposedly designed to achieve the highest level of efficiency in production and functionality. In the 1950s and 1960s, the *Situationists* proposed a strategy they called *psychogeography* to study and embrace *liminal* space, emphasizing the notion of experience as opposed to knowledge. Waiting as a set of unintentional gestures in space is a strategy resisting the vertical organization of meaning production.

Moments of Liminal Space focuses on waiting in order to map spaces through the movement of individuals. The unintended gesture is translated into 'information' through its tracking, and space is visualized as a dimension that opens up through these movements. The print work, explores the spatial dimension of waiting, through the position of the captured bodies. The duration, the frequency and the intensity are factors taken into consideration for the visualization of the movements. Waiting is approached as a drifting activity, a condition during which the body 'fails' to produce meaning, exposing its own image to the viewer.

Aharon Kellerman, writing about personal mobilities uses the term *homo viator*, to refer to human beings as constantly moving entities in both society and space (Kellerman 2006:1). Under the conditions of our new constantly mobile existence, the Self and the Other is deconstructed and reconstructed in motion. *Supermodernism*, a term introduced by the anthropologist Marc Augé, has appointed the transitory spaces as highly important in the context of the contemporary globalized condition. These are the spaces where one can encounter strangers, an experience that contemporary anthropology considers as rather valuable. Marc Augé refers to these spaces under the name of non-places:

If a place can be defined as a relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as a relational, historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places (...). (Augé 1995:78)

What Marc Augé calls *supermodernity*, seems to produce spaces which are at least 'relational' and 'concerned' with identity. The main difference that separates transitional spaces from the so-called anthropological, in the traditional sense, would be that meaning today is, most of the times, not superimposed. On the contrary, meaning in waiting spaces is created through the interrelations taking place within them. Places are spatial entities that exist on fixed points, whereas the transitory condition of non-places seems to relate more to a sensibility formed around space.

The waiting body is open to space through its senses to the point that it becomes strange and withdrawn. Phenomenology has offered an insight to the relationship between the human body and the space by focusing on experiential aspects. Part of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is devoted to boredom. Martin Heidegger begins his exploration by the hypothesis that a number of people are waiting inside a train station, and through this example he is trying to define the ways by which the waiting body is experiencing this condition. He speaks of the undefined, unexplained, and unjustified reasons that cause waiting to be boring. Through the unfolding of his thoughts, he presents the mechanisms and dynamics of waiting as processes that undermine consciousness. The idea of indifference is one of the central points of his thought:

Each and every thing at once becomes indifferent, each and every thing moves together at one and the same time into indifference. We no longer stand as subjects and suchlike opposite these beings and excluded from them, but find ourselves in the midst of being as a whole i.e., in the whole of this indifference. Beings as a whole do not disappear however, but show themselves precisely as such in their indifference. The emptiness accordingly here consists in the indifference enveloping beings as a whole. (Heidegger 1895:138)

The eventlessness of waiting renders the incision of time impossible. The mind cannot divide the experience in units, and along with that impossibility, comes the failure to divide the Self from the space, as the subject can no longer discern spatiotemporal progression. Every moment is equal and identical to every other one. The subject uses the capacity of the observer to define a point of view that retains a relationship to real space and time. The condition of waiting brings about the loss of self-image and eventually the transformation of the subject's perspective that remains detached from the rest of the world. The direct signal in the communication between the body and the environment is lost and under the condition waiting self-image can only be constructed through the Other.

LIMINAL SPACES AND THE RISE OF THE SEMI-PUBLIC

Los Angeles' Union Station is often being mentioned as "the last of the great stations." The reason for this distinct title was the fact that it was built exactly after the railway had reached its glorious period at the threshold of the 20th century (Bradley 1989:6). Union stations were stations where passengers could transfer from the trains of one railway company to the other. Eventually, these venues became nodal points, both for travelers and citizens.

The study and discussion around railway stations often draws comparisons between these spaces and other establishments that are loaded with great significance for the members of a community. People often compare the major stations of this period to cathedrals. The church is the archetype for all networks as it was the first medium that penetrated in full success most of the forms of human communities. It is not surprising that any network technology that shares similar goals would borrow elements of church culture. Murray Schafer, while referring to sacred sounds writes the following about railroads:

In the Middle Ages it was church bells that rang constantly, to which was later added the organ, the loudest machine on earth prior to the Industrial Revolution. During the early part of the 19th century, however, the Industrial revolution replaced the churches, and railroads carried industrial noise throughout the countryside.

Sound can define the limits of a community; exiting the range of the church bell could be synonymous to de-parting from a community, while exiting the range of the railway could be a retreat from civilization altogether. Railway was the most internationally spread travel network, it was an the equivalent of today's airways. Probably because of the hours that passengers would have to wait for their train it seems that the 'comfort' factor was an important one. In waiting rooms, habits belonging to private spaces would occur frequently. Passengers could rest, sleep, occupy space in more comfortable ways, to the extend that the opposite sex was excluded. Segregation, apparent in the waiting between two different locations, is implied by architecture. Sketches and floor plans of railway stations reveal spatial separations that reflect cultures and mentalities from the end of 19th and the first half of the 20th century.

Besides from the revival of Gothic architecture –seen as a religious style– reflected in the high ceilings,

the tower-like structures, the cathedral windows and other structural elements of railway stations that implied analogous interrelations of people in space, there was also an integration of Roman architecture. Roman baths were particularly inspiring spaces for some of the architects who designed railway stations. New York's Pennsylvania Station was modeled after the baths of Caracalla and the Washington D.C. station was inspired by the baths of Diocletian, both typical examples of Roman architecture. Public bathing, a quotidian Roman habit, was part of a culture revolving around the care of the body. Baths were spaces open to everyone, where an intermingling between the public and the private, would take place. The public aspects of these spaces were relevant to the role of the state, which involved the care for the citizen's body, but also the discussions that would take place there, concerning -amongst others- political issues. In addition, Roman baths have been acknowledged as a space where every man, including slaves, was equally privileged (Crowther 2007:98).

The architectural elements that architects used to design railway stations drawing from Roman baths were both formal and structural. Monumentality is the main element, as Roman baths meant to honor the emperor (Crowther 2007:95). An important characteristic that this influence could provide was the coexistence of the private and the public. These architectural references would establish the monumentality and meaning that was not widely apparent at the time within the function of the railway stations. Meaning in civic places is mostly obtained by their importance for the city, defining the difference and autonomous value of the city to others. Terminals acquire their importance from the potential of transition that they offer. Their importance lies on the indefinite interrelations that they can create between the City -the Self- and the Other. Terminals are spaces constantly referring to the absent Other rendering thus the construction of meaning around them an ironic and hard task. Waiting, before transitioning to an unknown destination, can create a state of openness, an in-between land where one is in the process of leaving the familiar culture and opening up to a new and unknown one.

CONCLUSIONS

The *liminal* suggests the exploration of the Self and the Other within the 'here' and the 'now'. This contemplative position is rooted within a condition of 'being' where time cannot be divided in past, present and future as it can only unfold through its contemporaneity. The gaze of *liminal* geography is excluded from the sphere of super-vision, as it involves the activity of wandering and encountering strangers, rather than the supervision of others.

The *liminal* takes place in transition and reveals ideas that can be seen only within the blur of mobility, presupposing the detachment of meaning from places and the emergence of spaces. To understand while being in transition is to abandon the condition of certainty connected to the already known that exists in fixity. *Liminal* time is eventless and microscopic, generating docu-fictional narratives, rather than documenting the significant. Meaning is relational, deriving from connections that are drawn between different points of observation and multiple forms.

Waiting engages with the everyday, the casual and the anonymous. As strangers withdraw from the sphere of language and meaning, the body becomes the actor. Through the movements of waiting, the body transforms into an object, becoming the visual abstraction of a functional and meaningful entity, allowing for the purposeless gestures of waiting to take place.

Liminal aesthetics suggest the reinvention of the Self as a stranger among other strangers. The encounter and the embrace of the unknown allow for a gaze eager to explore space through experience and engage with different cultures as equals. The absence of scientific premises and conclusions suggests a participatory geography where people are invited to interpret space using their own points of reference and their imagination.

References and Notes:

BOOKS

Augé, M., *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 78.

Bradley, B., *The Last of the Great Stations: 50 Years of the Los Angeles Passenger Terminal* (Glendale: Interurban Press, 1989), 6.

Crowther, N., *Sport in Ancient Times* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 95 & 98.

Heidegger, M., *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeil & Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1995), 138.

Kellerman, A., *Personal Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1 .

Pile, S., *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 48.

Ponty, M. M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962) .

Schafer, M., *I've Never Seen a Sound* (Lisbon: Twelfth International Congress of Sound and Vibration, 2005), 3.

EDITED BOOKS

Debord, G., "Theory of the Dérive", in *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1955).

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Billington, D. & Mark, R., "The Cathedral and the Bridge: Structure and Symbol," *Technology and Culture* 25, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, (1984): 38-39.