

NOWHERE, ANYWHERE, EVERYWHERE: LOCATION AS FICTION AND FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper frames the idea of “location” as a social construction and uses the concepts of nowhere, anywhere and everywhere to throw into relief the mediated ideologies that come to us through various institutions, such as museums and the media. The artists I focus on expose these ideologies through their use of fictional, narrative interventions into locations and conflate them with notions of place.

I propose that ‘the real’ itself is a social construction which is made actual through *mots d’ordre* (order words) as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These words serve to create realities, declaring a change of state and are most frequently used by ‘the state.’ This paper forms a shifting image of location citing examples from the worlds of art, religion and the military-industrial complex. It further shows that location is always a more complex notion when interrogated. The artists cited here present location as something of a dream, a nightmare, a memory or a joke. Ultimately, my interest in location relates to my own artistic practice and I find this topic and these artists critical to understanding contemporary art practice and its social and ethical complexity as it relates to power.

NOWHERE: WHERE IS THE CLOUD, LOOKING FOR THE SOUL, BI-LOCATION, FROM LOCATION TO PLACE, CAMOUFLAGE, TERRITORY

I am a location where many dialogues meet, conflate and mutate. I am a point of aggregation, many points of aggregation. I am a semi-autonomous collection of ideas, desires, wills, frameworks, cells, blood, nerves, guts. I am perambulatory. I relocate as my situation requires. Like an atom, I avoid collision. While I am attracted to and resonate with certain frequencies and energies, I also repel and emit them in equal measure. You are the same. You are a location where this is happening, passing through time as a flickering duration of matters.

Jumping around in time – in research – we find an essay that has been stored electronically in a database. Those servers are somewhere and yet diffuse, made of star-stuff, like us. It is the cloud, the puffy and ever-shifting mist of data, that now holds all of your personal information. And how is it that many of us have been tricked into this complete resignation of our personal information, our identities that are located in our persons? From whence cometh the invisible hand that has guided us to this point of giving in? Have we been obliterated through diffusion and turned into a mist, a not-so-anonymous data set? At this moment, can your location be pinpointed through your cell phone, triangulated via cell towers? Can we say that the physical has been transcended? Could it be that the only thing we have control over is the strength of our passwords? Do we want to be located?

Do we want to be a mist? Where are we, really? And to quote Neil Young, “everybody knows this is nowhere.”

Humans have still not been able to locate the human soul, though not for a lack of trying, scientifically even. [1] Perhaps the soul *is* consciousness and one can meditate into the soul and poke around. In any case, this absence of a specific location (in contrast to, say, where the heart is located in the human body) seems likely to persist. And even if we do locate this ultimate location, after we exclaim, “there it is!” we will still be asking ourselves, after a relatively short interval of time, these two questions: what next? And, where to now?

Stemming from the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation (where Christ’s body is simultaneously in Heaven and yet present in the Holy Eucharist ceremony), the Catholic Church recognizes the miracle of bi-location. Of course in the true tradition of any religion with a textual basis, there is a good deal of written religious legalese parsing the exact definition of bi-location, but it nonetheless concludes that it is not impossible for a holy person to be seen in two places at once. And if we consider other practices around lucid dreaming, spirit-walking, astral travel and so on, there is a good deal of out-of-body experimentation taking place (whether we believe in it or not) in many different forms, through many different belief systems, further destabilizing our embodied sense of location.

Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar’s book *Place* begins with a brief explication untangling the idea of place from the idea of location, as a way to enter the space of the topic. They say that, while place is used as a synonym for space, location, site or territory, the word carries with it descriptions of our relationship to the world around us. And they use the analogy that place is to landscape as what identity is to portraiture. Thus they enter their discourse of place through the idea of landscape and its connotations. [2] They reason that: A landscape, then, is the land transformed, whether through the physical act of inhabitation or enclosure, clearance or cultivation or the rather more conceptual transfiguration of human perception, regardless of whether this then becomes the basis for a map, a painting or a written account. [3] Applying this logic to their analogy, portraiture then is the conceptual and material shaping of an identity through representation, where identity becomes the sign and signifier, that thing making a claim for a reality.

Dean and Millar, having teased out that definition, leave us with the implicit idea of location as having a certain tactical and technological connotation that I believe implies a detached neutrality in its specificity. And when I think of the term in its many uses around geo-location and in the animal world of echo-location

(bats and dolphins in particular), science and technology has a prominent role in the supporting and shaping of discourses regarding ideas about location.

Enter the military-industrial complex's manufacturing of location (read: deception): shifting terrain, moving targets, dummy airfields, camouflage nets and stealth technologies. These practices bring me to the idea of concealing location. In the book *Hide and Seek*, author Hanna Rose Shell takes up the study of camouflage and photography as it relates to the military practice of reconnaissance. [4] Relating the fascinating story of American painter Abbott Thayer and his study of natural, animal camouflage, Shell writes:

"Thayer identified two distinct visual phenomena: 'obliterative countershading and 'disruptive patterning.' In the first, the parts of the animal lit brightest by the sun are consistently colored darkest, while those areas generally bathed in shadows are colored lightest. Witness the white bellies of wild rabbits or the silver undersides of sharks; the resulting visual compression of a three-dimensional form produces an illusion of monochrome flatness." [5] From Thayer's early curiosities and research, Shell goes on to trace the development of camouflage-producing divisions within both the American and British armies and their implementations in both world wars. Cloaking, obscuring location, is a necessary tactic for both animal and man, the success of which is mission critical.

Another prominent figure in her study is Len Lye who was charged with making a dramatized survival-training film by the British Army's Realist Film Unit. [6] The film depicts a mutual manhunt between a German sniper and a British sergeant. Set somewhere in a European forest, the two soldiers give chase to one another and make various attempts at creating field camouflage on their bodies using their wits, conditioned through field craft training, combined with what they could find in the forest. Shell writes: "This emergent form of multimedia practice, which I call 'dynamic camouflage' and which emerges in Lye's work, designates both a survival strategy focused on protective concealment of the mobile body within a changing environment, itself under filmic surveillance and a formulation of subjectivity, a form of consciousness adapted to that environment. It is founded on a specific logic of self-effacement that collapses the distinction between the filmed world and the natural (or protofilmic) world." [7] This concept of deception around strategic location, cloaking, masking, etc. has defined the last century of warfare in terms of its technological impact and remains highly relevant to both ongoing physical and virtual battles.

A quick search on the topic of invisibility reveals a Canadian company called Hyperstealth Biotechnology which has developed a technique called quantum stealth. [8] It involves bending light around a body or object, disrupting reflection such that the body or object mostly appears to disappear. Of course there are the well-known, low-profile airplanes like the stealth fighter and bomber

that are able to evade sophisticated radar detection. But this is different in that this technology potentially provides another layer of invisibility, that of the lens-based and of the naked eye. Camouflage and stealth technologies emphasize the importance of concealing location. And on the other hand, not being able to detect location is an eminent and potentially fatal threat.

And then there is the self-obliterative opossum that plays dead as if to say with closed eyes, if I can't see you or if you think I am dead, you can't hurt me. And to quote a refrain from the rock band Radiohead: "I'm not here. This isn't happening." [9] Like a frightened child with eyes closed tight wishing for invisibility or to transport away from danger, the child creates a territory, an imaginary safe space in harm's way. Artists demarcate, create space from nothing. From nowhere to somewhere, from location to place, philosophers Gilles Deleuze Felix Guattari say: "The artist: the first person to set out a boundary stone or to make a mark. Property, collective or individual, is derived from that even when it is in the service of war and oppression. Property is fundamentally artistic because art is fundamentally poster, placard [...] The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive; expressive qualities or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriate and constitute a having more profound than being. [10] They, along with Elizabeth Grosz, have much more to say about territory (and deterritorialization) and it is particularly true that artists of all disciplines seem to instinctively create territory through a destabilization of place no matter the form it takes." [11]

ANYWHERE: ARTISTS AND ORDER WORDS

Re-enter artists and art and re-enter Dean and Millar's parsing of place. Many contemporary artists work in society's blurry spaces of discourse. The artists' whose work I will discuss next engages the overlap between the definitions of place and location highlighting the complex interplay between the two words and calls into question a whole host of assumptions about physical space and the shifting terrain of meaning on which it sits, especially in relation to duration and memory. I begin this part of the meander by jumping back to Deleuze and his work on the philosophy of Henri Bergson. In Deleuze's book *Bergsonism*, he restates (then later unpacks) Bergson's argument that "duration is essentially memory" [12]

If we ask what, in the final analysis, is the basis of this duality in duration, doubtless we find ourselves in a movement[...] by which the "present" that endures divides at each "instant" into two directions, one oriented and dilated toward the past, the other contracted, contracting toward the future. [13] What most interests me about this idea in the context of the common conflation of place and location is exactly memory. The cloud is memory. Taking Dean and Millar into consideration again, they write: "Place is thus space in which the process of remembrance continues to activate the past as something which, to quote the philosopher Henri Bergson, is 'lived and acted, rather than represented.'" [14] Using the ideas of Bergson and Deleuze in

this context allows for the idea of simultaneity where the past is present in every moment and that duration/memory is “in the final analysis, defined less by succession than by coexistence.” [15] And in this way simultaneity allows for the idea that place and location can (subjectively) be anywhere, anytime precisely because of this Bergsonian link to memory.

These concepts of memory, place and simultaneity bring me around to the relatively recently theorized and named artistic tactic known as parafiction. The most well known explication and classification of this tendency in late twentieth/early twenty-first century art is the 2009 Carrie Lambert-Beatty article *Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility*. [16] In this important essay she defines the term parafiction, asserting that, “It [parafiction] does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real [...] these fictions are experienced as fact.” [17] She goes on to cite (and site) many prominent examples of this mode of making work from the *Atlas Group* to the *Yes Men* and analyzes how these works function, thereby laying a firm theoretical foundation for the further grouping of works under this term. [18]

Using her definition as a touchstone I would argue that for the work to be successful, it does not necessarily have to be experienced as fact and that ‘the real’ itself is a social construction which is made (f)actual through mots d’ordre (or order words) as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These types of words or phrases enact transformations that create the real from what was not real before. Therefore, the fiction can, if even for a moment, become real. This idea is very important in establishing what we believe (or perhaps, agree) to be reality and creates – if not creates, then confirms or reinforces – an instant power structure, a hierarchy to which we are subjected.

So what are mots d’ordre? The term is found in Deleuze and Guattari’s essay, *November 20, 1923 – Postulates of Linguistics* from their well-known book of philosophy, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Very simply put, Deleuze and Guattari argue that language is not informational or communicational, but that by its nature is concerned with order and that it imposes: “Semiotic coordinates possessing all of the dual foundations of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular-plural, noun-verb, subject of the statement, subject of enunciation, etc.) The elementary unit of language – the statement – is the order word [...] Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed and to compel obedience [...] A rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker [...] There are also intrinsic relations between speech and certain actions that are accomplished by saying them (the performative: I swear by saying “I swear”) and more generally between speech and certain actions that are accomplished in speaking (the illocutionary: I ask a question by saying “Is [...]?” I make a promise by saying “I love you [...]”; I give a command by using the imperative, etc.)” [19] Upon annunciation, we can transform a citizen into a suspect (“you are under arrest”); a suspect into a

convict (“I hereby sentence you to life in prison”). You can go from being promised to being married to being married (I hereby pronounce you [...]). You can even receive a pronunciation after you have died, as it is the state’s duty to sanction the official recognition of your death – which obviously would have to happen sometime just after actual death. There is always an unknown duration. Therefore, you always die twice: once actually and then a second time officially. Quantum physics tells us that atomic particles transform from some location or state into another location/state. It is the quantum occurrence – electrons bouncing from state to state and from location to location in an imperceptible amount of time and vice versa. Imagine for a moment, the location of the black hole at the center of the Milky Way. Where is it exactly? Is the event horizon a more important location to be aware of (the point of no return)? If wormholes exist, how do they connect two locations? What is the shift in perception of time if one passes through alive? Where does the wormhole take the time traveler? The doppelganger as time traveler. When you get there, wherever there is, plant a flag in it. Like the moon, like Cabinetlandia (more on this in a moment). [20]

More to the point, in this transformative sense, location and condition are linked to states of being where one party enacts a declaration that changes the state of the place or the condition of a group or an individual. This is enacted most often through the power of language. And this is how I see power as the most important factor in location, because, in thinking of location, I always ask the question, what is being located, who is doing the locating and for what purpose? Take for example the project by the staff of Cabinet Magazine called *Cabinetlandia*. They bought a magazine shaped parcel of land out in the middle of the New Mexico desert and declared it to be its own kingdom. It was no-place until they declared it as one. Its location is not strategic, nor does it fit into the mantra of the three ‘L’s’ of how to invest in real estate: Location, Location, Location! This declaration of sovereignty (their utterance/declaration of order words) produces the desired effect. [21] And likely it will remain an unchallenged sovereign place until it comes up against another larger, more powerful sovereign body which may through its own order words dissolve the state the Cabinetlandians have declared as their own.

Back to art and artists, one could say that, perhaps earlier, but most certainly by the time the Dadaists came together in Zurich during WWI, the idea of interventionist strategies and tactics as artistic means had taken form in their experiments with collage, performance, collections of found objects, media pranks and installations a kind of proto-parafiction. These kinds of tactics seek to identify and locate ideologies, to mock them, to turn them on their heads, to undermine power. [22] Interestingly as well, the Dada group was (eventually) spread out over six different European cities where their modes of making work were transplanted, thereby making the location of this named movement and its practices diffuse, not only located in Zurich or even more specifically tied to the Cabaret Voltaire, enacting simultaneous

strategies, tactics and interventions to cumulative and critical (sometimes comical and absurd) effect. DADA was portable; it could go anywhere. From here it is very easy to find a precedent for contemporary artistic practice and Carrie Lambert Beatty's category of parafictional art.

Ilya Kabakov, though not necessarily a parafictional artist, is an artist who works with one foot in the real, the other in the fantastical. One is generally never fooled into thinking when encountering his art that you are not looking at art. However, you do get a sense that you may possibly be looking at a reality. By 'a reality' I mean an alternate reality or a view into someone's private world and who may or may not be just off in another room. For instance one of his most well-known works, "The man who flew into space from his apartment," gives one the distinct feeling that, through the specific collection and arrangement of objects, one is peering into a real person's room, but not only their room, but into their mental state just before they left the room. [23] While very different in tactic, strategy and execution from artists like the Yes Men, this type of work still leaves a bit of doubt on both sides of the fact/fiction binary. It is also of note that this particular work of Kabakov's is not site specific. So, in a sense, this lends itself more to the instant recognition of the "staged" feeling.

Circling back to Dean and Millar once again, the work of artist Gregor Schneider is featured in *Place*. The work they present, *Totes Haus ur*, is site-specific. Here is how they describe the work: "In 1985, the then sixteen-year-old German artist Gregor Schneider moved into a vacant apartment on the grounds of his father's lead foundry in Rheydt and began a process of continual alteration to the building that continues to this day. *Totes Haus ur* (Dead House ur) is a strange labyrinthine space that exists behind a tiled three-story façade, an insistent architectural reminder that Freud's uncanny, the *unheimlich*, is closely related to the homely or *heimlich*. Here walls are built in front of other identical walls, thereby rendering the changes perceptible, but unrecognizable. Often the new walls and floors are lined with a thick sound-insulating material such as lead, thereby altering the rooms' characteristics in other invisible ways, the increasingly oppressive atmosphere palpable nonetheless." [24] In this case, the work is site-specific, creating a place inside a place, one where the uncanny can be located as feeling. This insertion of interior space into another interior is very potent given its location on the grounds of an industrial site, one where people come and go, live, work and die. This work also engages the ideas about duration and memory, as discussed and considering that the project is ongoing, it continues to create and actualize simultaneous memories new and old, real and manufactured.

Another work in this same vein is *Hello Meth Lab in the Sun*, a collaboration between artists Alexandre Singh, Johan Freeman and Justin Lowe. [25] It was first installed at the Ballroom Marfa in 2008. It is a series of rooms designed to look like the interior of a house that has been converted into a crystal-meth-producing

laboratory. The images of the rooms deliver a similar effect to those of Schneider's and Kabakov's work and suggest the recent departure and eminent return of the fictional occupants. Not site specific by nature and not an intervention whereby the "one-foot in the real" is present, *Hello Meth Lab*[...] nonetheless delivers a potent sense of a very specific location alongside a close approximation of what the "real thing" might be like. In this way the work, again, parallels reality and is not so much fictitious or parafictional as it is a hyper-real representation of the ills of the society in which it is situated, something that could be anywhere: in your town, in your neighborhood, right next door.

Lastly in this meander, under the banner of 'Anywhere' falls the heterotopia. Michel Foucault introduced this rich concept in his work entitled *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. [26] Briefly explained, a heterotopia is a place or location where all elements of society can meet and are combined in a way that is unusual, self-contained and serves some kind of function that cannot take place in normal society. Some examples that Foucault uses are the cemetery, the boarding school (in its nineteenth century form), the military, gardens, brothels and colonies. I would like to consider a very contemporary example: the airport, in particular the Abu Dhabi airport which has an area that, if cleared, you may enter another country, that being the United States. It is known as the pre-clearance area and one must pass through and into it before boarding a plane to the USA. It is located in the basement of the airport and once you clear this area and enter the USA (while still being firmly in the UAE) you continue to your gate, which looks like all the other gates and is obviously still very much located in Abu Dhabi and in the UAE. This is another instance of the order word creating something from nothing and in this case declaring a place to occupy two spaces at once: a certain magic followed by a very long flight to the other part of the USA that is located nearly half-way across the globe. The arbitrariness of it all – you may as well be anywhere.

EVERYWHERE: UBIQUITY OF FICTION AND RESISTANCE

Landing here finally, on the idea of "everywhere," the complete dispersal of locations, brings us back to where we began with the so-called "cloud." When I think of the cloud and the web that connects us to it, I can imagine something that is always on, something that never sleeps or blinks, until it does. This is perhaps getting into the territory of the film *The Matrix*, where simultaneous realities exist, the one that appears to us and the other that is behind the scenes, the real reality which is, in the world of movies, terrifying and involves a superior race of aliens feeding on human life, while pacifying our minds with a hyper-real representation of normalized place through a highly sophisticated virtual reality, plugged directly into a socket in one's brain. This kind of ubiquity and homogenization, as it is manifest through a virtual location/dislocation, is reminiscent of Bergsonian duration in the sense that these parallel worlds of the actual and the virtual are always running in synchronization with one another.

It is possible to détourn anything that is a part of “the spectacle” that is the contemporary, mediated world. [27] And most, if not all of the work that Lambert-Beatty cites in her article can be categorized as a détournement, interruptive, interventionist and one might even argue ubiquitous as the work often uses media space to manifest, whether it be television news or advertising or even the space of a gallery as its carrier. Certainly the strategies of using very familiar forms of media as material is deceptive in that it places a layer of believability over what may or may not be a veiled critical commentary.

This ubiquity of form is troubling in that it works both ways. Via the media, those without a critical consciousness are implanted with counter-productive ideologies through repeated exposure to bad ideas and false problems. In fact, one does not have to stretch too far to create a fictional hyperbole that is already the actual fabric of the twenty-four hour news cycle. But clearly this is where the parafictional interruption is used as a strain of resistance against those ideologies and hyperboles that the artists find are in need of challenging and wrongs theatrically righted. Where these aforementioned artists site their work is, to them, where they think the work will be most effective in creating a different reality or at a least present a strain of resistance to the dominant narrative. Through their interruptive practices across various mediums and strategies, they effectively are using their own order words to bring other ideas into existence. When effective, the work causes a cognitive dissonance to arise, which can be found in its own kind of internal location, somewhere in, near or around one’s “core values.”

And this is why the idea of location is such a loaded one. Whether the art is in a parafictional mode or in some other more liminal mode or location, actual or virtual, I believe that it is artists who are best equipped to perform these operations, to enact these strategies, to keep trying to activate the strain of resistance within our collective humanity through acts of destabilization that question ‘who’ has the power to proclaim the mots d’ordre that transform a location into a place.

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