

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

The Spatial Justice of Dispossession: Four Lessons

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, A.

This is a pre-publication version of exhibition catalogue text published in Bieniek, M. and Miśniakiewicz, M. (eds.) Dispossession: Wrocław Cultural Capital of Europe 2016 Exhibition Catalogue, published by Biuro Festiwalowe IMPART in 2016. pp. 79-88. The final published version is available online at:

<http://www.wroclaw2016.pl/upload/downloads/programs/dispossession.-k...>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

DISPOSSESSION at the 56th VENICE BIENNALE
ORGANISED BY WROCLAW EUROPEAN CULTURAL CAPITAL 2016
CURATED BY MICHAŁ BIENIEK AND MAŁGORZATA MIŚNIAKIEWICZ

The Spatial Justice of Dispossession: Four Lessons

Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos

Dispossession revisits, recreates and reimagines spaces, new and old, hidden and folded, revealed and repressed. The curators have chosen to commission pieces intimately connected to spatial practices. Indeed, how else, if not through a profoundly spatial exhibition, could the precipitous movement of space be captured? *Dispossession* understands space in its complexity, and teaches us how to approach it in four complex but rewarding lessons. The exhibition as a whole reflects a space of movement between belonging and departing; it produces a space of desire, between the actual and the virtual; it contains a space of quiet desolation whose inside is folded into a horizontality of hope. The curators of *Dispossession* have achieved this subtlest of feats: to give shape to the melancholy of emptied rooms, hastily abandoned lives, and tragically lost objects of self-definition, and to make this a force of possibility and of eventual reorientation.

Why space? *Dispossession* delimits a new, necessary and urgent space. This is not the space of nostalgia or spectrality, but the very space that emerges in the ontology of the body. Every body is space. This does not simply mean that every body moves in space. No doubt, it does so too. But we must go further than that: a body's ontology is spatial – and when we say body, we do not just mean human bodies, but we must include the nonhuman, the inorganic, even the immaterial. A body extends in space, it produces space, but also contains space. Every corporeal fold, surface, or cavity multiply space fractally, stretch it to the limits of memory and desire, and rushes it into a blossoming that knows no limits between inside and outside, body and environment, self and other. Space as the great unifier.

The space of the exhibition is filled with bodies in various stages of departure. Manaf Halbouni's vehicle, forever immobilised in its fugue, contains the desire of another world, a better world somewhere outside. Massimo Ricciardo's boat cemetery in Lampedusa delineates a fenced-off space that attests to the bodies of the ones who have not drowned. Holger Wüst's unfolding life of the quintessential Venetian square, San Marco, delivers utopia by integrating the refugees in flat black and white amidst the lions and mosaics of the church: there is a better world, he tells us. Just look closer, just wait, and life unfolds with the pace of a slow, deep breath. The Open Group allows us to touch this other world, in reconstructing actual and virtual models of houses that had to be abandoned in the thick of time, still replete with smells from baked bread and cut hay. So where is this better world? Is it here or outside? Is it in the past or can we reconstruct it in the future? Where is the space of hope in being dispossessed?

This is the first lesson that this exhibition teaches us: *there is no outside*. Everything is perched on the edge of the world, as Andriy Sahaydakovsky tells us: *am Rande der Welt*, a thin line that separates *here* from yet another *here*. There is an invitation to cross, to jump over and to wallow in the utopia. But with the overarching knowledge that all ends up where it starts, in the tiny, claustrophobic room where sugar cakes up like blood, and where impossible balances are maintained because of the lack of

oxygen. A lighthouse is placed on its border, Thomas Kilpper's Lighthouse for Lampedusa, showing the end destination while warning you that the other side is not what you imagine. It is all here, this side and the other, utopia and dystopia, fear and hope. You will always carry it with you, holding onto space as if it were a suitcase, or, as Oksana Zabuzhko writes in the text of her installation for the exhibition, "and you can throw together a new, portable, backpackable home for yourself, a snail's shell that would keep you whole." You have been dispossessed, you have remembered, you have even reclaimed, but you have never departed.

Curiously, we are slowly approaching a new space: the space where spatial justice might emerge. Spatial justice is not about access to resources or democratic decision making. Rather, spatial justice is about bodies and their space. We must strip down and move on. Spatial justice is the question that emerges when one body desires to move into the space of another body, and occupy that very space at the same time as the other body.¹ Space as the great violence: for only one body can ever occupy the same space at the same time. All bodies need to be emplaced, yet one body's emplacement pushes all other bodies away. Stronger bodies move in, weaker bodies slide off. We have been endlessly moved out: we have had our houses occupied by their future, our personal objects swallowed by foreign jurisdictions, our narratives frozen into digital photography. Our bodies have learned to extend. A body is no longer defined by its skin. The line of the world is shaking: all bodies bleed into one another, becoming assemblages of other bodies, other technologies, memories and fantasies, narratives of belonging and returning, dreams of identity and identification. We need those fantasies. But we also need to understand this: that *our skin does not separate us from each other, but brings us together in assemblages that cannot flourish unless collectively*. We are bound with each other, bodies of common skin trammelling the world, screaming for our just spaces. This is the second lesson that this exhibition teaches us.

Dispossession is the other side of movement. We are all dispossessed. We all seek justice. However, the spatiality of justice cannot be prescribed. No one and nothing can guarantee your just emplacement. Many promise it: refugee traffickers, the great Mediterranean sea, Szymon Kobylarz's cosy room of hushed bourgeois tones where everything is frozen in a statistical destiny of weak and strong bodies. Floating above all this, Manaf Halbouni's *der Fuhrer* delivers the ultimate theological promise: casting its all-seeing concrete and steel eye over every movement, it whispers in your ears: you have arrived. Your destiny is fulfilled. You are below me, content in your displacement. But we know now, after having moved and having been moved, corridors of departures and rooms with their backs to the present, that nothing can ever finally redeem your movement. Is this, the third lesson that we learn from the exhibition, the ultimate anti-theological gesture? It tells us, softly but firmly: you might want to return to your past by reconstructing it, step by step and brick by brick as The Open Group have done; or in the way Tomasz Opania's narrative of the dispossessed becomes an endless palimpsest of actual and constructed memories – not lies, never lies, we do not need these to multiply our past and make it impenetrable and untenable. The past is already a space of converging parallels, ever ready to fix you in atmospherics of return. You might even want to pack your car and throw yourself

¹ Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2014) *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*, London: Routledge

forward to the future where a utopia of return is beckoning. But, *despite all promises, there is no guarantee that your body will find its just emplacement.* If anything, there is an expectation that it won't happen, and that you are blessed with the desire for the eternal return, Nietzsche's gift to the world.

Quiet desolation continues. We are all damned to return, and before that to wander, and while doing so to displace other bodies with every movement, gesture and breath we undertake. The skin of the world moves collectively like a giant amoeba and all the bodies flow along, in confluence or opposition. This is the atmosphere of the world, a geological reality that burns anything that reaches it from the outside. A vast umbrella over our heads: *Führer*, statistics, or digital realities that determine not only how we move and how we pause, but how we think, feel, sense. Susanne Keichel digitalises our preconceptions, trampling facts and reality: the killing of Khaled Bahray in PEGIDA-infested Dresden has been shown not to be racially motivated. So what? The atmosphere is one of immediate causality, unexamined hatred, direct opposition. Orderly mixed, the photographs produce a space of inner folding so absolute that one is left with only one option: go deeper, keep on categorising, keep on hating. Atmospheric of media push bodies in specific corridors of affective compulsion: we no longer need god, state or the other to discipline us. We self-police by dividing the world in axes of evil and good, terrorists and avengers, refugees and Europeans. We are captives of our own atmospherics, little bugs in the glasshouse of our obsession with security.² We do not want to be saved from our misery, we wallow in the luxury of our claustrophobia.

We cannot tear the atmospheric skin, even if we wanted to. But there are passages of eruption, where the skin becomes translucent and its escape vibrant. This is the real crossing. Remember the first lesson: there is no outside. There is nowhere else to cross. The skin does not separate but unites. A body swims in the continuum of a universe that has no limits. *Yet, it crosses.* A body crosses from atmosphere to atmosphere, from enclosure to enclosure. This is the existential condition of bodies and their spaces: they move in order to find their just spatiality. And although there is no guarantee, no safe prescription for spatial justice to emerge, there is a way in which spatial justice is given a solid push. Dorota Nieznalska's installation delivers the final lesson of this exhibition: *we must withdraw.* A wagon assembled by pre-war German doors that are presently found on Polish soil, a memento of the fact that Germans were there before the Poles, and that they might someday return, unexempted from the damnation of the eternal wandering. Stepping onto the wagon, which is creaking and shaking with the weight of a past and that of an even heavier future, one is enclosed in a perpetual motion. The wagon is bound somewhere fearsome, windowless and without outside, an active memory of the trains en route to concentration camps; the body is trapped inside, surrounded by all these illusions of exit: for the walls and the floor are all doors, unopenable, hermetic, derisory.

Yet, in this claustrophobia, the gesture of withdrawal is fleshed out. Withdrawal is not a passive movement, a moment of weakness that allows a body to give its space to another, stronger body. Far from that, withdrawal is a courageous, revolutionary move that stretches the skin of the world from the inside: a line of flight that screams out its

² Peter Sloterdijk (2013) *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, Cambridge: Polity Press

desire for reorientation.³ The body withdraws from the atmosphere of frozen emplacement, that all-determining position that is as inevitable as it is desirable; and moves into a re-oriented atmosphere, a differently understood possibility of spatial justice, unencumbered by the preconceptions, historical exigencies, and fantasies of return and belonging that plague our bodies. Nieznalska's gesture of withdrawal is a politically remarkable moment of reconciliation: take the door of the enemy and make it a vehicle of departure *from* the lines that separate friends from enemies. We board that wagon dizzy with reorientation, giddy with the possibility of so many doors, so many otherworlds, so many crossings.

Have we achieved spatial justice? Have we returned to our ancestral homes, claimed our ancestral faiths and lands, kissed our dream lighthouses? Perhaps we have. We would be the lucky amongst the earth, the ones who have returned and found the doors there and ready to be opened. We might have encountered a space where justice emerges, where our body can finally rest. *But we need to move on.* For if we stay, we shall freeze. We will become atmospheric ghosts, singing nostalgic songs of nationalism, territorial pride, religious supremacy, racial superiority. We risk becoming the ones who exclude those other bodies who keep on searching. An atmosphere requires shut doors, no windows, immense inside, complacency, fat belonging. We must strip and move on. Space is waiting, fearsome and disorienting, but eternally folding further inside. Space as manifold. Dig deeper, find a flat surface, an opening in the folds, where the body can rest again. This is the horizontality of hope. End of lesson.

³ "Withdrawal, freaks!" Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Continuum, at 277