

The condition of (im)possibility

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“In the entropology of globalization, all management generates abandoned spaces. All creation as applied force entails negation; all production entails neglect.” G.Clément

Capitalism began with an event. This event took the form of an eviction. It was when the common lands and agricultural holdings were destroyed and people were forcibly removed from their territories and ways of life. This act of separation of nature, society and culture, known as primitive accumulation, has been one of capitalism's essential traits. Depriving people from their means of production, it destroys, or better employs for its own benefit, the complex network of relationships between the environment, socioeconomical and cultural structures-what is namely understood as ecology. The essential point to grasp is that this process of division of the natural surroundings from society persists until today as a constantly reproduced form. Therefore, any contemporary discourse on nature should not dispense the complex political relationships and the charged ideologies that accompany it.

In the last two decades, the dominance of globalization has had an even more profound impact on the way we think about politics, society and democracy. It has also deeply affected our concept of nature and the notion of ecology. During the current economic crisis, the above terrains of thought and action are perpetually exposed to conflict, under the emergence of a neo-liberal eco-govermentality. It is more than obvious that what controls, subverts and undermines these terms, as well as the spaces they occupy, is the capital itself. In an on-going circle of production and consumption, the system sustains itself by reproducing – or perhaps staging- its own collapse and resurrection. This mechanism, which is often referred to as the “strategy of tension”, enables it to exert and reproduce violence, as a recuperative response to external acts of resistance.

However, the event of the global economic crisis has respectively opened up another terrain of thought: that of “un-productivity”. By “unproductivity” I am referring to the ethicoaesthetic practice that negates ever-growing production and consumption as dominant models of existence. Of course such a process cannot envisage itself outside the framework that initially makes its enunciation necessary. Therefore, it cannot claim complete autonomy in relation to the politics of space that follow globalization.

In the following text the term “unproductivity” is examined in relation to the notion of the “third landscape”, as that has been theorized by landscape architect G.Clement. The latter is here perceived as a potential terrain where a discourse between the concepts of environmental and social justice can be set forth. Within this frame the work “The condition of (im)possibility” -outcome of my research into Clement's theory- is introduced as a materialization of such discourse in an artistic context. What I am interested in exploring here is how such an “ecosophical” perspective could reveal a new form of political ecology: one that operates as a counteraction to the systemic control over the environment, whether that is natural, institutional or social.

Evictions

Any “ecosophical” practice, has first of all to examine what is exactly at stake, in order to act against prevailing models of production. It is important to clarify that when referring to “production”, I do not consider only the products of material labour but also the whole terrain of knowledge production in the fields of science and culture. This aspect of capitalism, known as “cognitive” capitalism, acts as a catalyst for the configuration of individual and collective desires. It, thus, promotes specific, codified models of action that the domains of politics, art and nature are susceptible to. I will attempt to address two main issues that rise as effects of such policy of control.

Firstly, it is the artificial homogeneity that is imposed upon the sociopolitical and natural environment. More specifically, a fundamental prerequisite for liberal economy to take place successfully is that markets must, necessarily destroy and supplant more complex forms of human relationships. What is the consequence of such a policy in social and environmental ecology? Under these conditions, the notion of democracy is being gradually altered to conform to a global liberal model. Instead of its constitution on disensus, it is orientated towards an abstract consensus on the dominance of the market. Such notion of artificial positivity is respectively applied to nature,

perceived as a homogeneous, commercialized entity, in direct relation and dependence to the system of production. The second point of discourse is the fact that capitalism's effort to erase negativity, debate and to justify its violent spatial politics, is facilitated through the reproduction of a rising ecology of fear. This form of ecology, is linked to the notion of the "other". Fear of the "other" serves fundamentally as a justification of systemic violence, on whatever form that might take. Under the prism of the current economic crisis and the larger schisms that it has produced, the rise of liberal-fascism, racism and other forms of segregation, can only be considered as "natural" products of such an ecology.

What I am interested in highlighting, however, at this point is the spatial implications of such politics. A fundamental aspect for the survival of neoliberalism is the implementation of a new form of colonialism, the colonialism of real estate. Such a process, whose origin lies in the reasons mentioned above, is being manifested predominantly in the urban environment as a series of precise, targeted "interventions". For such a mechanism to take place successfully the market employs the term "land value". This term operates as an abstract definition, detached from the complex social, environmental and political attributes that in the first place make the term legitimate. "Land value" is, therefore, utilized by regeneration strategies as means to impose consensus over the mechanisms for the production of space. Of course, under this facade of unanimity lie violent processes, in the form of evictions in urban space and nature. What is actually taking place is a wider policy of displacement that acts as part of large-scale gentrification projects. However, it is not only the urban centres that are affected by such policies. As J.Skinner writes in his text "Poetics of the third landscape": "Pastoral is easily read as a production regime - or a regime of the real estate, debt or other forms of speculation-which I group under 'production' "¹.

In the work "The condition of (im)possibility" this notion of displacement is the starting point for a spatial intervention inside the gallery space. The installation consists of a 3.60m long freestanding wooden corridor with a single 30 cm wide opening. Inside it lie wild plants, also known as weeds that have been randomly collected from several wastelands outside Edinburgh. This wild vegetation is left to grow with the help of neon lights. Through the spatial juxtaposition of an architectural construction with the wild plants, the work seeks to explore the notion of the "unwanted". The latter is here implied through the tensions created between the controlled environment of the gallery, the restrictive character of the corridor and the organic, anarchic nature of the weeds. It is also suggested by the fact that the term "weed", irrespectively of the type of plant, is not considered a botanical term. Rather, it is a term used to describe any form of vegetation, which is not desired in a specific context (agriculture, gardening etc.). Perceived as a social and cultural construct, and consequently one embedded with antagonism and conflict, the "unwanted" or the "other" becomes here the core element of artistic production.

Returning to the notion of "productivity" in a wider environmental context, one has to examine what could the possible paths of a new political ecology be. I would suggest perhaps that instead of competing for an alternative production, another path would be to raise un-productivity as a radical mode of operation. Or, respectively, as a model of resistance against the current call for renewal of production due to the effects of the economic collapse. It is important to highlight here that in this context unproductivity and creativity are not necessarily opposed. Rather, unproductivity opens new ways and possibilities for developing a creative insight over everyday life and labor. Creative contemplation becomes a potential path of subversion against the capital's obsession with production.

Gardens of resistance

So where such an "aesthetics of refusal" could manifest itself spatially? One does not have to look far to find such spaces. As landscape architect Gilles Clement suggests, these lie, not outside-as one would expect-, but in the margins of the anthropogenic landscape. He refers to them as the "third landscape". For him, these territories consist the locus of an alternative social imaginary, against the prevailing model of production/consumption/preservation of space.



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2010

3.60 x 2.10 x 0.30 m wooden corridor, fluorescent lights, pots, wild plants
Tent Gallery, Edinburgh



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Clement's definition of the "third landscape" is that of spaces that issue from the neglect of previously exploited ground. Their origin can be extremely varied: agriculture, industry, tourism etc. However, despite the fact that these fragments of landscape have no common origin, they involve all space, since they are by-products of any human activity upon nature. They form the type of landscape that had a function within a certain economy, only to be rendered "inactive" due to structural changes in the production system. One could therefore say they are "unwanted", even if that is for a limited amount of time. During the current economic crisis, one can notice that many of these undetermined territories seem to enjoy a moment's respite, away from the threat of development. What is it, however, that makes these spaces valuable? And for whom? In the terminology of real estate and regeneration strategies, they are nothing but wasteland waiting for a developer's strategic intervention, for them to attain a certain existence and status in the market. However, from an "ecosophical" perspective, these fragmented landscapes, that unfold between garden/wilderness, production/preserve, work/leisure dichotomies, contain a certain power. They possess a complex identity, or more specifically, an environmental, sociopolitical and aesthetic impact.

From an environmental perspective, they are valuable sources of biodiversity, plots of land where nature is left to develop self-sustainable ecosystems. It is a territory for a multiple of species with nowhere else to go. Clement characterizes the "third landscape" as a "privileged site for biological intelligence"². They are sites with an inherent antagonism, since they undergo an ongoing conflict as part of a process of constant adaptation. In these terms, abandoned sites are critical for facilitating and understanding the survival strategies of other species and the migrations that lead to new speciations. This last feature, the migratory character of the plants that occupy these spaces, is also what exactly enables them to multiply. That is succeeded irrespectively of the surrounding economic or political conditions. Consisting from different types of weeds, one could claim that these spaces reveal an almost "tactical" manner of survival. They are gardens in motion, that instead of developing a symbiotic, dependent relationship with the surroundings, they manage to accommodate a self-sufficient system of a local economy.

How could, however, one claim that such traits can aspire to an alternative understanding of market economy and its relationship to spatial politics? A key point to that comprehension is the paradoxical relationship such spaces have with the notion of "production". While themselves unproductive, according to current economic terms, they have a direct link with production. For example, in the urban sector they correspond to land waiting for the executions of projects suspended through budgetary cuts or political disputes. They exist, therefore, as by-products of an economy of excess and at the same time as indicators of its violent fluctuations. Being in a state of transit, they are characterized by certain elusiveness in economical and political terms. That is because their land value cannot be adequately defined in real estate terminology. Consequently, the "third landscape" consists of spaces stripped from function that escape the system, even temporarily, because of their inherent ambiguity.

Dealing with the artistic potential of such territories, the work "The condition of (im)possibility" is a response to Clement's theory within the context of an exhibition. The gallery is consequently addressed not as a closed system of fixed relations but as a locus of open possibilities. Therein a space that is located between the artificial and the natural is materialized. By introducing the "third landscape" within the environment of art, the relation of unproductivity and creativity becomes a central requisite. In this case, the creative process consists in the collection of the plants and the formal decisions for the production of the architectural construction. The work, however, continues to develop independently after its installation. Due to the adaptation of the plants and the life forms they encompass to the conditions of the gallery, a temporary ecosystem is gradually developed for the whole duration of the exhibition. Artistic production, therefore, lies in the act of highlighting the existence of those contingent spaces, which resist their delineation within a specific institutional or environmental framework; or, phrased differently, of simply creating the conditions for their spatial manifestation.

Due to this certain elusiveness in institutional and spatial terms, the "third landscape" has therefore an ambivalent yet crucial relationship to power. Clement himself states: "The third landscape refers to the third estate, the space expressing neither power nor submission to power."³ There is a paradox

here. On one hand, such landscape consists a place of possibility. It encompasses positivity, since it is an “empty” place with the potential of a series of events to unfold within it. At the same time, it is charged with negativity and conflict, because through its chaotic evolution and subversive nature, it resists closure. It reflects the inability of the system to control all space. Resisting homogenization or a general consensus over its function, the identity of the “third landscape” remains open to contestation. Or, to paraphrase C. Mouffe, the conflicts and antagonisms of secondary landscapes form the conditions of possibility for the existence of a pluralist space. At the same time, they constitute the condition of impossibility of its final achievement.

The condition of (im)possibility

The “third landscape” maintains its powerful meaning due to its dual, contingent nature, which I will call “the condition of (im)possibility”. Though one could claim that it is a direct product of evictions in space, it is manifested in a surprisingly “democratic” way. This is due to the fact that any site could potentially become a “third landscape”. This attribute is what leads to my understanding of such territories as a new form of common lands in the post-industrial era. However, the term “common” does not allude in this case to a site of material production but, rather, to a space where incidents and encounters outside the norm occur. It is these encounters that could contribute to the formulation of an alternative collective imaginary, concerning nature and the everyday.

Of course the condition of the “third landscape” does not only entail a space of continuous potential. It also alludes to the risks that such a space is subject to. The primary risk is its gradual recuperation by the system that has created it in the first place. Primitive accumulation and terrains of subversion (in this case the “third landscape”) are not separate substances. Rather, they are linked by social and economical dynamics, which underlie both of them. During the current economic crisis, however, such dynamics are once again open to contestation. Therefore, “the condition of (im)possibility” is not solely a point of closure; it can be also the key point for reinventing processes that take into account this ongoing cycle of accumulation and deviation. What I am referring to here is a conceptual practice based on the assumption that every exclusion inevitably produces a sphere of inclusivity, however temporary or contingent that might be.

In the work “The condition of (im)possibility”, this relation of exclusion and inclusivity consists the key point for the viewing experience of the installation. The semi-artificial garden is revealed only when the visitor moves to the backspace of the gallery. Accordingly, the narrow dimensions of the corridor physically exclude her/him from a direct experience of the wild plants. The act of engagement lies, however, exactly in this act of recognition and reinvention of a relationship based on common exclusion. The space of the work is therefore that created between the viewing subject and the revealed “garden”, there where an unorthodox encounter takes place.

Since the “third landscapes” are spaces of events, of temporary action or even of non-action, they consist of sites of a potential labour of subjectification. Revealing the limits of human agency, undermining any notion of authority, they evoke a new aesthetic understanding of nature. Such an understanding perceives aesthetics as an act of seeking unorthodox contacts, of mixing practices of various origins or of simply recognizing what is already there. Could the act of non-intervention consist of an “existential event”, deriving its power from its mere insignificance? The “third landscape”, embodying “the condition of (im)possibility” , is not meant to affirm or negate such a potential transformation. Rather, emerging from the chaotic realm of the everyday, it provides us with the potential “to live the given materials of time and space less materially”⁴ .

Footnotes

1 Critical Ecologies Article: Resources and further inquiries related to Jonathan Skinner, "Poetics of the Third Landscape", 2010

2 Gilles Clement, Manifesto of the third landscape, Paris, 2005

3 Gilles Clement, Manifesto of the third landscape, Paris, 2005

4 Critical Ecologies Article: Resources and further inquiries related to Jonathan Skinner, "Poetics of the Third Landscape", 2010

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