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LOCATING POETIC OBJECTS: EXPERIENCING POETRY INTO SITE THROUGH WALKING, SOUND AND INTERACTION

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Abstract

Spatial thinking has constituted an area of growing interest – mostly known as ‘spatial turn’ – among contemporary art, academia and society, yet such a fascination does not constitute an ephemeral trend. Humans tend to think spatially; something apparent through the use of metaphors, conceptual diagrams and most importantly our own body and in-situ experience. The concepts of place and space have been central not only at the core of geographical thought but also at the fruitful intersections of arts and humanities revealing (geo)poetic elements in various expressive modes (i.e. *poetry, installation, performance, film or locative media*). Such a mingling of space/place, body, senses, art practice, technological extensions and poetic imagination can be encountered in the emerging field of ‘artistic geohumanities’. The current paper explores the ways space and place have impacted on the fields of performance art, installation art and site-specific/related practices; often mediated and extended through walking, audiovisual means and creative technologies (i.e. interaction). In particular, it reflects on the fruitful intersections of concepts such as location, site and site-specific art practices towards new conceptualizations and mediated sensory experiences of ‘poetics into site’ (i.e. *site-oriented walking, site-specific installation, expanded sculpture*).

Keywords: site specific art, place, geohumanities, walking, audiovisual

Introduction

The current article has a starting platform the postdoctoral research (2017-2019 – IKY Greek State Foundation Scholarship) the author conducts at the Department of Audio and Visual Arts, Ionian University; exploring the intermedia and interdisciplinary impact of site-specific art and walking performance in the field of Geohumanities. In particular, it explores the ways the integration of an object in site-specific performance can act performative, sensory and semiotic extension by revealing creative conceptualizations of place, body and technology. Such an interest often falls into what others have termed as *geohumanities*; an emerging interdisciplinary field which ‘signal[s] the growing interdisciplinary engagement between geography, arts and humanities’ (Centre for the GeoHumanities website). Therefore, such research can be identified as one on the fruitful intersections of contemporary art practice and urban/cultural studies; and in particular one which brings together performance, semiotics, body, place and audiovisual media into a dynamic entanglement towards new conceptualizations and experience of in-situ

poetics. In particular, the current paper is interested on what it means to walk ‘with’ an object (material, technological) ‘into’ site (city, periphery). For the purposes of this text, the linguistic prepositions ‘with’ and ‘into’ are used as cognitive devices for critical reflection on aesthetic site-specific practices at the intersections of walking performance and installation art; often mediated by audiovisual or other means. Thus, in the wider emerging framework of creative geohumanities, the paper aims to explore how such practices of performing and/or locating the object into site can create various spatial poetics and situated atmospheres; consisted of human and non-human actors.

The experience of place and space: On a geohumanistic approach

The concepts of space and place have been central not only at the core of geographical thinking but also on the intersections of arts, humanities and social sciences; revealing what recent intellectual voices have described as geohumanistic approach (GeoHumanities). Their origins stem from an array of classical Greek philosophers; particularly Aristotle and Plato. For Aristotle, place ‘takes precedence over all other things’ (Casey, 1997, p. 71), yet as a concept is understood in terms of time change, what he called locomotion. Place is closely interrelated to our existence. We move into physical space – often perceived as eternal, geometric, abstract – but we live in place – often described as bounded, local and inhabited. Place constitutes a result of our embodied experience, senses, emotions, memories and socio-cultural interactions. It is therefore what Tim Cresswell has argued that ‘places are practiced [...] they are continuously enacted by people’ (Cresswell, 2009, p. 170). People live and interact into place, it is the very word of where that their existence takes place. Therefore, in order to exist, the subject or object has to belong to a place; ‘it has to be located’, to echo Cresswell’s (2009, p. 170) reflection on Aristotle. Moving into what it means to locate our experience into place, Martin Heidegger on his *Being and Time* (1927) was particularly significant on the evolution of humanistic and spatial thought. Following Aristotle’s intellectual insights, he developed the notion of ‘dasein’ (being), meaning the process of dwelling, of being specifically *there* (Heidegger, 1993) and in particular a dwelling which refers to the ways people render the surrounding world meaningful.

The decade of 1960’s gave a quantitative revolution and a rational turn even in humanities. This entailed a turn to statistical analyses, quantified and scientific conceptualizations of space as a surface for measuring or mapping locations, distances and wealth. It was a space associated with the Cartesian view; reflecting wider scientific and economic transformations of the world. In this rational view; space became more of a cognitive surface of justification, objectivism and of knowledge rather than of philosophical concerns or rich experience. In other words, to echo Lefebvrian thought, space can be considered as abstract; meaning its ‘formal’ character which is defined by logical functions ‘homogenization and commodification’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 49). On the other hand, it has been argued that place can be also considered through behavioral and psychological lenses (Tuan, 1977). Indeed, place does not form a vague concept, yet it is a rich result of our sensory and felt experience in relation to all the environmental, material and cultural qualities. Jeff Malpas argues that place is ubiquitous – it is not only associated with our existence and experience but also with our ‘thinking about existence and experience’ (Malpas, 2015, p. 1). Place is a multilayered notion of spatial, bodily, topographic, social and cultural threads. Objects, subjects, spaces, ideas, concepts are

all situated in place in ways that we think, move or interact with them and into them – to echo what has been already argued as conceptual backbone of the current text. To restate, while the debate between space and place has been a longstanding and multiparametric one, humanities (inspired by phenomenology and philosophy) argue that while space can be grasped as blank, abstract and eternal; place is always associated with our sensory and emotional experience. In the words of Tuan (1977, p. 6) ‘what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to [...] endow it with value’. Other prominent voices of the field have identified a ‘conceptual complexity’ (Cresswell, 2009, p. 169) in the idea of place, which often contradicts with the everyday common use of it.

Having briefly defined space and place, it is also interesting how a constellation of related concepts such as the ones of location, sense of place, landscape and site are associated with an emerging geohumanistic experience of place. In particular, to talk about (geo)location is to refer to a specific set of coordinates in space, a resulting located point – what was firstly conceived by Eratosthenes as latitude and longitude and has been further used in contemporary GIS and audiovisual devices. Following this, the concept of sense of place (also *genius loci*) refers to the intangible aspects of a place; often associated with feelings, emotions, memories. Sense of place refers to the atmospheres, qualities and ambiances of a particular place; what I could call as a stratified time-based patina of atmospheres. Phenomenologically speaking, others have described sense of place as the interweaved result of physical and symbolic spaces of place; the merging ‘of the earth’s surface, the cosmological light conditions, buildings and the symbolic and existential meanings in the cultural landscape’ (Jivén & Larkham, 2003, p. 70). The material character of a place is often seen as locale; meaning all the architectural tangible aspects where social relations take place in it. Therefore, this leads also to a social perspective of place and space, one which was based on Lefebvre’s (1991) seminal insights during the 1970s on social space not only as a concrete, objective and material product but also as a dynamic milieu of subjective lived experience and ideology. Echoing a Lefebvrian perspective, ‘bodies themselves generate spaces’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 216) and most importantly it is the body itself a starting place which enacts the wider social construction and conceptualization of space.

Up to this point, I have argued that the (geo)humanistic understanding of place is deeply rooted to the notion of experience. This has reverberated in various ways during past decades; making possible various transdisciplinary approaches between art, performance, cultural geography, architecture, sociology among others; often mediated and extended by various audiovisual and other technological extensions. Such a wider spatial turn echoes historically the Foucauldian thought of 19th century as the era defined by a ‘great obsession (with) history’ in contrast with the 20th century, which is ‘above all the epoch of space’ (Foucault, 1986, p. 22). The dramatic technological shifts and the emerging global condition of recent decades have also shift the concept of our experience into place. Computers, mobile telecommunications, digital devices, electronic media and screens have been attached not only on our surrounding world but they have been also embodied. Thus, our experience can be often seen as screen-based or extended by various sensors. Yet, while our bodies sense in the local, our digital identities are able to communicate with the outer global. We are here and elsewhere and thus our experience becomes fused, often described as ‘glocal’, to echo Meyrowitz (2005). The new sense of place has been extended into a state of living, socializing and sensing between hybrid constellations of materiality and electronic bits. Having presented a brief trajectory of

the very main key-points of place and space that set the foundations for the nowadays geohumanistic turn - the next section explores how such aesthetic conceptualizations of place and experience are articulated in contemporary artworks of site-specific art, walking performance and audiovisual technologies.

Performing site, locating the poetic: Walking and thinking on the intersections

Geohumanities does not constitute a newborn term. As others in the field have recently argued; it is not ‘a new field or discipline’ but an conceptual umbrella for the ‘growing zone of interaction between geography and humanities’ (Richardson et al., 2011, p. 3-4). The interest of the current text falls into the need of geohumanities for artistic practices in the intersections of aesthetic performance, place and various technologies (i.e. video, sound, locative media). Walking has been an action in space and through time with huge cultural and historical background, while various intellectual voices and endeavors have underlined the aesthetic, performative, cultural, poetic and political potential of it. Following a historical thread of cultural and conceptual walking practices; significant “knot-moments” include the 19th century flaneur as the romanticized observer of the emerging urban modernity, later 20th century spatial practices of Dada excursions (1910s), Surrealists oneiric wanderings (1920-1930), Situationists International (1957) radical method of psychogeography as well as the rise of Performance art (1960s-1970s), related site-specific art practices and creative writing (1980-1990) and finally a series of contemporary artists who have integrated aesthetic walking and various audiovisual or locative media technologies in their interdisciplinary endeavors (mid 1990’s-nowadays). Therefore, due to text limitations, it is without doubt that walking has strongly impacted on the histories and imaginaries of place, body and mind. It has become a practice of a ‘symbolic transformation of the territory’ (Careri, 2002, p. 134) both in urban and rural settings.

What I would like to focus here is the poetic aspect of walking; a flourishing combination of verbal and non-verbal elements into place. An indicative example is Richard Long; a key figure since in late 1960’s radical consideration of walking as an aesthetic practice. His work ‘*A Line Made By Walking*’ (1967) forms one of his early performative pieces which makes apparent the need to draw a line as I have argued elsewhere (Psarras, 2018, p. 3) The artist walked repetitively back and forth out in a grass field flattening its surface; shaping a line. Such a sculpted line was photographed; a documentation of his ephemeral intermedia intervention into place. Here, I use the word intermedia to describe its fused character, one made of both sculpture (line) and walking performance (action); with further geopoetic implications. Long’s performance into site considers walking as method, a sensory and meditative tool which inscribes mind and body upon the surface. This acts as a reminder of walking itself as the meeting point of art and architecture, to echo Careri (2002, p. 148-149). In many examples of Land art, artists were pretty much interested in the combination of body, line, surface, site and materials. Their site-related or site-specific artworks and expanded sculptures can be seen as performative investigations *into* site and *with* materials; ranging from ephemeral to bounded results. This opened up a perspective of experimenting with place and space through what Stiles described as ‘an amplification of the process over the product’ (Stiles, 1996, p. 679) – a shift from the representational object to further modes of action / presentation of experience. Such a change can also indicate semiotic shift in the performative

intersections of body, language, object and site. What can be argued here is an underlying interconnectedness between semiotics, language and walking. Rendell (2006) reminds us an interesting thread between de Saussure's insight on langue (rules) and parole (speech) and de Certeau's description of walking as the process which turns 'space into a practiced place'. Keeping in line with the latter, an indicative conceptual work on the intersections of the performance, site and (expanded) poetry is the works of Yoko Ono 'Map Piece' (1962) and 'Walking Piece' (1964). Ono presented texts which can be considered both as poetry and conceptual instructions (also connections to Moholy-Nagy paintings through telephone) for potential open-ended performances into different places. The language and the enunciation of words becomes a foundation for further performative conceptualizations of place. They initiate as words; almost ready to be performed as footsteps as many times as the walker wants; creating both an imaginary and actual path of subjective experience even within the preplanned roads of the public space of the city. On the latter distinction, I draw to what others (Ingold, 2010, p. 127) describe for the path as 'a cumulative trace not so much engineered in advance as generated in the course of movement itself'. Smithson – pioneer of Land Art – probably set the foundations for expanding our understanding of the intangible poetics which stem from dynamic and performative constellations between bodies, places, objects, weather conditions, various media among others. In his 'Spiral Jetty' (1970), an earthwork sculpture (an territorial prosthetic), the artist used mud, basalt rock, salt crystals, water with people working with bulldozers and other construction vehicles, to create a half-kilometer counterclockwise path. The path gradually circles around itself creating a meditative experience; a performing of place with an inevitable locating of geopoetics. The work draws connections to the idea of a situated object into the empty territory; the prehistoric menhir.

Menhirs constituted markers upon territory with symbolic value; in other words abstract, yet direct objects and materialities which made apparent of a new system of relations (and ambulatory experiences) into the vast landscape. Such artistic methods and practices into site with objects created new conceptualizations of place which often shifted the overall consideration of art – to art as experience; art as an intervening idea into place. In contemporary context, the meaning of intervention and walking exists both in material and virtual levels through the nowadays use of locative media (GPS, digital mapping, sensors); revealing a media stratification in terms of our experience. Teri Rueb's site-specific interactive sound installation 'Drift' constituted a site work at Watten Sea coast, where walkers wandered among layered currents of sand, sea and implanted interactive sounds which often drift with the repetitive tides. The semiotics of such a walking experience into an open and symbolic territory (in front of the eternal sea) are tempting. In particular, the experience of wandering through invisible sounds seems to be sensory heightened through interaction; rendering sonic landmarks as resembling menhirs of sonic experience. The idea of the object as mediator of experience in such artworks and which functions both in physical and virtual levels, can be often founded in various locative media performances (i.e. Jeremy Wood's GPS drawings, Christian Nold's Bio Mapping, Gordan Savicic Constraint City). What this shows us is that the performing of places and locating of poetics that the current paper explores is also extended by various situated (in site) or wearable (body) technologies. Such performative – hybrid artworks can contribute with critical and aesthetic accounts on wider geohumanities by bringing together walking, poetry, semiotics, land art and locative media GIS technologies into a hybrid kind of geopoetics.

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