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Utopian Territories: Space and Place within Contemporary Installation

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Abstract

My current research focuses on contemporary installation and how particular participatory practices explore space in the creation of utopian worlds. How is utopia modelled and visually manifested within the gallery space?

In Walton Kendell's *Art and Mimesis* (1993), the role of the artwork as prop, is identified as a method of imaginative socialisation, play and a coordinative tool for group imaginings. In contemporary installation; landscapes of the imagination, risky constructions and bold spatial negotiations can be seen to function as a site of difference from our everyday experience of the world. Described by Nicholas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) as "micro utopias" (Bourriaud, 1998, p.31), artists can explore installation as exotic worlds which function as if governed by alternate principles.

With a focus on Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller my research focuses firstly on localised versions of space and community, and then, with reference to the writings of Jean Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) the implications of politics and territory are argued to be a key determiner of social and egalitarian interactions. How has the globalised world affected utopian ideas which are increasingly further away from a singular utopian nation?

Finally, my thesis examines the inner workings of installation as a group territory and how we may explore and locate a contemporary version of utopia within the spatial boundaries of the gallery. In what ways do artists utilise space and object to encourage the experiencer to act as a key participant and test out new and imaginative possibilities? Finally, what futures are suggested in contemporary practices for the globalised utopian and the potentially humane world of installation?

Key Words: utopia, installation, humane, socialisation, hope

Introduction

My current research focuses on artworks within contemporary installation which create utopian worlds. A revised look at the concept of utopia has launched a stream of theoretical and modelled investigations in the form of artworks and political strategies in the 2000s. The production of exhibitions such as *The Spirit of Utopia* (2013) prompted by a resurgence of interest in the writings of Ernst Bloch, suggests a refreshed approach to utopia as both a space and place as a positive proposition. The exhibition aims, stated as "playful, provocative and creatively pragmatic models for social change" (Gallery, 2018), describe contemporary versions of utopia which test the potential of real life applications and affirmative action. Furthermore, Utopia the potential concrete realisation of utopia has also been revisited in critical theory by writers including David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000) and *Imaginary Communities* (2002) by Philip E. Wegner. Indicative of a renewed interest in constructing utopia, large scale projects such as *Utopia Station* (2003) and Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *Not Everyone Will be Taken Into the Future* (2017) have appeared as physically modelled utopias within contemporary art practice. It is possible to conclude that the question of the usefulness of utopia to political, social and artistic thought, its spatial histories and possible realisation is currently and energetically under review in the artworld. What are the inherent paradoxes and challenges when utopia is located as both a concrete place within the gallery but also a fictional "non-place" located within the imagination? This paper focuses on how artists are staging versions of a better world which extend the notion of utopia from the insular island as described by Thomas More and instead seek to represent diverse cultures and evolving versions of nationalities. It is important to ask, within contemporary utopias, what type of geographies, terrains and nations are being suggested? For this reason, my research is based on two trajectories, a revisit to versions of utopia from Plato to the present but also political writings which may inform an understanding of the purpose of contemporary artworks.

Definitions of Utopia

Although strict definitions of utopia vary, the term ‘utopia’ refers to an idealized place, its inhabitants, and the relationships forged within it. Utopia can be theorised as inherently political, as human connectivity is often linked to rules of governance that may, or may not, encourage democratic interpersonal relations. This is a core feature of utopian fiction writers such as Thomas More, Francis Bacon, James Harrington or in 20th century dystopias as modelled within the written word of George Orwell or Aldous Huxley. Utopia is often associated with a future destination, a “place not yet here” (Muñoz 2009, 12) or within fiction, as a place “imagined not realised” (Noble 2009, 12). As such utopia is a concept which is challenging to visualise in real workable terms as arguably the perfection utopia suggests cannot exist, or at present, it has not yet arrived. First coined by Thomas More in 1516 as a fictional island called “no place”, More literally states that utopia cannot geographically exist. However, in examples of contemporary installation, a re-strategizing and pursuit of utopia can be observed. In the work of Carsten Höller and Olafur Eliasson, installations can, and does at times, focus on the exploration of humane values, model alternative universes and claim back utopian territories. These are both sites which stimulate imagination but can physically coexist with the viewer providing the opportunity to physically explore the paradox of a “no place” that utopia suggests.

Utopia and Place Making

The exploration into control of space and built construction in relation to elevating human experience is not new. Argued by Ernst Bloch as a fundamental instinct or the “utopian impulse”, the constructed world can be traced back to distant lands in fairy tales to reflect what Bloch argues is representative of humankind’s innate hope or aspiration. On architecture for example Bloch writes “it adheres to...the visible world, absorbs it, reshapes it an experimental – substantial way” (Bloch 1955, 41) suggesting a relationship between environment as both a physical indicator of hope but also as a method of stimulating aspiration. When entering Anthony Gaudi’s *La Sagrada Família* (1882 – ongoing) for example, the experiencer may be coerced into a state of reverence or feel a sense of wonder at Louis Kahn’s innovative design of *The Salk Institute* (1965). In this respect these two examples are both monuments to the hope of what is and to perhaps shape what could be. In the case of installation work, a similar dynamic can be observed, although there are functional differences between these two fields. A key distinction between architecture and installation is the restriction placed on architecture as a functioning structure of practical purpose. In the case of installation, the artist may utilise space impracticably for creative reasons or position objects which are restrictive, temporary or non-functional to inform a narrative. The artist therefore, can attempt riskier, avant garde solutions to model hopeful or inspiring environments or constructions.

Object and Group Imaginings – Imaginative “Elsewheres”

In Carsten Höller’s ambitious invention, *Test Site* (2006), hundreds of thousands of participants were encouraged to blur the line between the real and the imaginary through the observation and experience of sliding. Supported and accompanied by two in depth documentations *Source Book* and *Test Site*, Höller presents an in-depth feasibility study on sliding as an alternate source of transport. The supporting literature (a practical guide to the implications of sliding) suggests a larger sustainable application of the slide in a functional city and details calculations on how the project would be implemented successfully as a cost effective and environmentally friendly project. *Test Site* embodies an experimental engagement with the possible not only within its physical manifestation but also an opportunity for empathetic behaviours. The spectator who directly observes the act of sliding can imagine the experience and empathise with the sensations and sounds of excitement, joy and surprise. In this case the interactions facilitated by *Test Site* (in this case the coordinated activity of play) create the opportunity for mirroring the experience of others. Höller writes “it is impossible to travel down a slide without smiling” (Adams 2015) but it is the onlookers who also smile and share in this utopian projection of what may be possible. Verbal and physical responses are mirrored, in addition to the imagined sensation of travel. The world that Höller invites us to envisage notably avoids cultural boundaries as it focuses on inclusion and place making as a method of reinforcing what it is to be human.

Test Site is an object-based installation which projects a larger imaginative possible world which is shared through the experience of the participants. The significance of imaginative group experience is rationalised in Walton Kendell’s *Art and Mimesis* (1993) in terms of the role of the artwork as prop. Walton identifies the artwork as a focus and facilitation of imaginative socialisation., The role of the object is outlined as a coordinative tool for group imaginings. Artworks are described as props and prompts by the “principals of generation” (Walton L 1993, 38) or by the mandate of the group. The artwork provides a focus for the coordination of group imaginings to “pool resources” and therefore a new community through the shared

experience is formed. The physical manifestation of the object provides a common and physical focal point (or authority if the work is examined within political terms), for the activity of imagining. Using prop as a coordinative tool group imaginings and perceptual shifts are shared communally. It is a site of “elsewhere” and “nowhere” but a shared vision of what could be. In *Test Site*, the humanity which is suggested through the work is a world where play and the imagination have increased standing as an exercise of freedom. This is a constructive modelling of a scenario where negotiation, compromise and empathy are encouraged experientially.

Through harnessing the artwork as a prop to prompt group imaginings, the artist effectively surrenders part of the role as producer as the participants form part of the work. The experiencers become connected as citizens of a self-driven experience rather than didactically controlled by one vision. The territory occupied by Höller’s utopia therefore, is characterised through free interchanges which are void of the barriers of language and personal experience. Höller’s slides focus on direct human and biological responses. All that is necessary to participate is to be human.

Simulated Communities

An alternative approach to Utopia can be evidenced in the work of Olafur Eliasson. Through highly visual and interactive environment’s Eliasson adopts an approach of simulated worlds in the gallery space. In *The Weather Project* (2003), for example, the viewer enters an installation and illusion of idealised inhabitation. Participants temporarily live within the artwork with others where the spectator experiences the art work from 360 degrees and may encounter other individuals within it. The site presents a seemingly infinite perspective. It is overhung by a technological sun emitting the illusion of heat and a machine produced mist permeates the space in the form as a fine vapour. The mirrored ceiling creates a visual illusion, but also encourages a method of interaction. From his or her own mirrored reflection, the viewer is encouraged to enter a state of self-awareness but also a consideration of spatial relations with others. Exploratory acts may be attempted within the parameters of the installation. Participants have been photographed holding hands, forming words and letters with their bodies and apparently experiencing a sense of community separate from that encountered in everyday life. This is both a real-life experience (and therefore partly governed), but also one that is motivated by illusionistic or fictive measures created by the installation work. The experience is lived through but with an awareness of the impossibility this world presents. It is both place and non-place. Olafur Eliasson argues: “It is about the horizon that divides, for each of us, the known from the unknown “ (Mairs 2015), suggesting that the work represents limitless terrain rather than a secular, isolated vision of utopia.

An extension of territory is also created in the work *Contact* (2014) by Eliasson, through a relationship formed with light and shadow. The silhouettes of each viewer take on a life of their own as the spectator is encouraged to correlate each form with another or move in a response to the observed shadow on a futuristic screen. Eliasson presents a constructive vision of scientific, universal togetherness. The experiencer may observe changing shapes in relation to others as an interactive image, whilst existing bodily within the physicality of space. Bodily perception therefore, is split between the felt and the observed through a method of play. It is encouraged to view the self in this artwork as inhabitants in relation to the cosmos as a world of evolving possibility.

There are however, clear possibilities and restrictions within this type of work and how it may relate on a universal scale. Stan Van Hooft writes “We are not citizens just of specific nation states, but we are also citizens of the world” (Van Hooft 2009, 4) and in Eliasson’s installations, the complexities of a world view of utopia can be only partially explored. A small number of participants are grouped at any one time and the boundaries of the gallery space restrict certain behaviours. Unwilling participants may choose to disengage, and the success of the work may be compromised by other cultural factors. Acceptable forms of physical contact between participants may vary for example from country to country. What can be ascertained however, is what types of behaviour the artist is promoting as desirable. Kwame Appiah writes in “Desires are simply not responses to the world, they’re aimed at changing it, not reflecting how it is.” (Appiah 2006, 19) and it is in this regard that Eliasson’s work may be useful. If more togetherness is reflected as desirable, it is possible to conclude that the work reflects that human contact (in the view of Eliasson) is lacking. In addition, it is possible to reflect on Eliasson’s work as politically motivated and a territory of revolution which will be discussed next.

Political Reflections on Installation Collectives

In Rousseau’s theses *The Social Contract* (1972) the opening line famously states that “Man is born free, and everywhere he is chains”(Rousseau, 1998, p.5), and it is in this volume that Rousseau formulates the idea of a

“civil” state, prioritising and organising itself around the principles of liberty and morality. The suggested potential for the people to overthrow authority is conceptualised in the phrase: “The laws that the community does not ratify in person, are no laws, are nullities.” in which Rousseau suggests that the will of the people on mass is capable of successful revolution but also that the will of the people on mass is just, as it serves the many. The essentiality of participation however, is also highlighted. The non-participator then is a person who acts illogically against self-interest, but the collective is symbolic of radicalism and power. In the case of Eliasson’s installation works, the experiencer is invited to test out the intricacies of working as a collective and must negotiate, mould and explore behaviours which are imaginative possibilities. These are secular places specific to the creation of something better which may then lead to the desire to act.

Rousseau also identifies the highly significant factor of the scale of the territory and its geographical features as influencing the type of government that will evolve. Rousseau writes on the formulation of the state that “It is the men that constitute a state, and it is the soil that sustains them” (Rousseau, 1998, p.49), indicating place is a significant criterion when considering any form of governance. The type of utopia (built, natural, size of territory) will determine the types of commonwealth that are possible and in this way installation works form their own terrain. Utopianism, when placed on a theoretical terrain will mould itself to fit the needs of the people.

When viewed as a site of enactment and action, installation practices provide the opportunity to explore focused forms of co-habitation which are akin to, but distinct from our everyday forms of assembly. In this respect, installation works provide opportunities for focussed and convincing testing grounds in which to explore the power of grouping as a catalyst for change. These perhaps involve, a temporary connection through shared experience, an interlinking of perspective and shared humane relations.

Conclusion

Is installation art, a possible location for utopia? Through physical interactive manifestations, we may not be able to theorise a utopia as complete or absolute, but these installations may lead us towards revisiting the potentiality of utopian futures as approaches or trajectories towards possible solutions. The approach to utopia within installation spaces is indicative of a changing perspective of what a contemporary utopia may look like but perhaps more importantly what the experience may be like. In this regard utopia is a construct of what it is to be more humane rather than an expression of how we ought to live.

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Short Bio

After working in senior arts management as Director of Studies at the International School of Creative Arts, I completed my post graduate masters study in Art History and Philosophy at Kent University (2017). I am currently in receipt of a PHD studentship at Loughborough University where I am studying the role of installation art in relation to utopia from origin to present day. In 2018, I have presented research papers at Loughborough University, (Loughborough), University of Chicago (Chicago), Loughborough University (London) and Warwick University (Warwick).