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Heterotologies

It seems that a great deal of art today takes the form of an investigation of space.

Beginning with the spatial relations of [minimalist sculpture](#), moving to Robert Smithson's [site/non-site relations](#), and evolving into street art, earth art, installations and interventions, all these practices seem to strengthen Michel Foucault's suggestion that the present epoch has abandoned the 19th century obsession with time in lieu of an on-going anxiety about space. His essay "Text/Contexts: Of Other Spaces" (available [here](#)) attempts to account for this phenomenon and, in doing so, lays out a useful vocabulary of speaking about spaces and the relations formed therein.

A space, it seems, is never simply a space. It is public or private, open or closed, productive or fallow. This suggests to Foucault that, despite the promise of rationality and the desacralization of modern life, spaces have not yet been practically desanctified. The taboos and rituals of spaces, whether in terms of access, purification, or location, still continue to a degree, detached from their precise spiritual praxis and filtered imperfectly down to us today. For example, graveyards would seem ideally suited as neighbours, and yet the resonance of the dead can make their proximity uncomfortable. Burial grounds are not parks, places for leisure or quiet contemplation, because it would seem profane to go about the business of living in the space of the dead. Likewise, in order to enter a church, courthouse, or art gallery you usually have to climb several steps and pass through an antechamber before entering into its proper space rather than merely entering its property. This serves to sacralize its procedures and render its space separate from the profane and public sphere. It was no mere happenstance that these spaces were often delineated with marble columns and classical architecture, sanctifying the interior through the formal vocabulary of a Greek temple. Alternatively, other spaces become demarcated as abject without due cause. Trash, dilapidated neighbourhoods, and infirmaries induce hygienic concerns both parts medical and moral.

Just as there are many types of spaces with many different vestigial rituals, there are also those spaces which encapsulate a reflection of many sites in relation to one another, available to be studied, contained, and treasured. These in-between spaces are perhaps the most invaluable for comprehending our construction and anxieties of space, and recently art has most often takes this form of investigation. Foucault divides these relational spaces into two types: the utopia and the heterotopia.

A utopia would be a purely virtual space- a placeless place. This character accords with the project of art for centuries: the representation of ideal space, with an imagined and lustrous polish that outshines its commitment to veracity.

A heterotopia, conversely, is not a non-space, but a counter-space. It is a real site that represents multiple spaces simultaneously, and yet also without absolute veracity. In a heterotopia, multiple spaces are represented, inverted, and brought into tension. As a formation of human geography, heterotopias present a kind of escape from normative public space. They bridge and connect sites, contest spaces, and are imbricated in ritual in an often subversive or accidental way. Museums are heterotopias, representing multiple artifacts that stand in for places and times, held vulnerably in the grasp of the sacred space of the temple of learning. Carnival grounds are also heterotopias, existing on the edge of urban limits and undoing the relations of order and decorum in the sites they border. A great deal of art in the past decades has taken this form: Dada collage, Surrealist maps, performance art, and found objects, to name a few.



Laura St Pierre, *05:14*, 2009.

There's been two recent bodies of work shown in Edmonton that strike me as incredibly productive investigations of heterotopias. Firstly is [Laura St Pierre's *Urban Vernacular Series*](#), which takes the form of sculptural, photographic, and digital interventions into liminal spaces. St Pierre constructs fragile, momentary structures that shine with the warm light of domesticity, and yet are built within the borderlands of industry, refuse, and nothingness.



Laura St Pierre, *03.06* (detail), 2009.

The spaces St Pierre investigates are the sort that usually remain unacknowledged and unseen. She works behind warehouses, at the borders of suburbs, and at the barren unbroken ground of forthcoming condos. These spaces, like the shelters she builds in them, are transient, ruinous, and uninhabited. And yet, the sites and the structures therein are troubled through their relation to one another, as the sacred categories of public/private, inside/outside, and work/domesticity are bifurcated and bleed into one another.



Laura St Pierre, *07:31*, 2009.

The materials of the site, the detritus, the archaeology, and recycled walls, seem to spontaneously fall into place, creating a dwelling for an abandoned inhabitant in an abandoned space. As heterotopias, these sites border and suggest something of our everyday environment, while nurturing our disavowed materials and transient survivors. The result is eerie, and perhaps predictive in its suggestion of an apocalyptic future-present.



A similar investigation into liminal space can be found in [Sydney Lancaster](#) and [Catherine Owen's Archives of Absence](#) project, performed on April 26th as part of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. Centring around the raised mound of earth that separated Owen's yard from the Whitemud Freeway, the project may best be described as a heterotology of the berm.



Like a shore on the sea, the berm proved to have its own tide, bringing in a multiplicity of strange objects, lost mementos, and traces from unknown sites and persons. The *Archive's* poetry relates the berm to the oil sands, the body, the audacity of wild flowers and the on-going and unstable maintenance of wild spaces that we demand be placed upon our parks and gardens. The berm seems to be both a voice, a muse, and an omen at times, but never merely a space as it was intended to be.



These words are complimented by a museological display of the artifacts of the berm, putting torn pornography, plastic leaves, and wilted balloons into proximity with one another and the space from which they came. If museums are heterotopias in the service of empire or modernity, then I wonder what sort of delightfully subversive potential lies in constructing a museum out of what comes to you from the highway, rather than what you build the highway to find and collect.

The attention given to liminal spaces by the *Archives of Absence* and *Urban Vernacular* is repaid in part through the visualization of spacial relations and their sacred inheritance that otherwise escape our awareness. The heterotopic sites discovered and constructed in these works are especially significant as they are more often the byproduct of industrial advancement than the intentional demarcation of a ritual space. As heterotopias of the formless and the disavowed, the berm and the St Pierre's fragile dwellings have a paradoxical suggestion of both presence and absence, conveyed through garbage and other remnants. Our instinctual reaction to these kinds of spaces, be they back alleys, ruined buildings, or industrial wastes, is usually one of revulsion and yet these spaces may form the most significant archive of our pursuits and rituals.

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The *Archives of Absence* was performed on April 26th as a part of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. Much of the visual components of the work remain up at [The Artery](#) until May 1st. The project also continues as a chapbook from [Red Nettle Press](#) and in a forthcoming publication entitled *Catalysts*. *Urban Vernacular* was shown at the Art Gallery of Alberta from October 2010 to February 2011 and can be found archived on [Laura St Pierre's website](#).

28 April 2011, 6:09 pm 1 note Anne Pasek Writer in residence heterotopia Michel Foucault space place
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