

Not the void exactly: *Species of Spaces*

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This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on a blank page.¹

What space makes possible is relations between objects and subjects and as such, West Space, in its earlier manifestation in the 'real' West, and in recent years from the first floor of a nondescript building in Anthony Street on the northern edge of the Melbourne CBD, has been making possible relations between art objects and subjects, for about two decades now.

During this time Sydney artist, writer, curator and academic Ryszard Dabek has been a regular participant in text projects, collaborations and exhibitions of art objects at West Space. In his recent show at West Space he employs the idea of space, and specifically the idea of 'species of spaces' (a title from French author Georges Perec's 1974 book), and curates an exhibition in which he asks us to consider the space between representation and experience, and especially the *absence* of space, the void, or rather, '... not the void exactly, but what there is around about or inside it'.²

In Melissa Laing's striking video *borderline*, the camera wanders hesitantly from here to there and back, traversing a space designed to process international arrivals; however human subjects are eerily absent. The viewer's relationship to the pictorial space and the slightly strange proportions of the objects within it are reminiscent of a scene created in 3D modelling software but its barely noticeable imperfections make it more likely that we find ourselves in a tiny maquette.

This most transient of spaces owned and operated by corporations serving the state, also functions in relation to time. It plots an in-between time, *not the void exactly* but a space where time is suspended, where relations are impossible, in which the *arrivée* is present physically but her status, like that of the camera, remains indeterminate. Here, where citizens whose legitimacy is yet to be established walk in the straight line which the authorities demand, no doubt watched by cameras or custom officers, and lately health officials, looking for signs of fever or the characteristic gait and the worried expression of someone with contraband concealed in their intimate space/s, the traveller is uncertain of her location in space and time, and



1/ Melissa Laing, *borderline*, 2008, video loop on DVD.

Images courtesy the artists.

2/ Ryszard Dabek, *untitled (Immeuble Molitor, Appartement de Le Corbusier)*, 2007/2009, framed pigment print, 30 x 22.5cm.



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whether or not the process of arrival is going to be successfully concluded.

The popularity of reality TV shows such as *Border Patrol* attests to the power of these in-between spaces. Where a decade ago millions split their sides over cavorting kittens and inebriated men and women attempting to dance on tables in *Australia's Funniest Home Videos*, these days audiences revel in *schadenfreude* watching the traveller who has to unpack every single one of their suitcases and seeing its contents being laid out and carefully examined by latexed hands, and/or being asked to accompany the officer to the interview room to argue their legitimacy with a more senior official.

Where Laing's gaze is determinedly fixed on political and ideological space, Brett Jones's mixed-media works (rice paper, tissue, PVA glue, surf wax, plaster casting, steel, sandblasted acrylic, ink on watercolour paper) are quite oblique and resistant to interpretation, read like a nostalgic meditation mourning lost referents. Each of the four works (*white flag*, *blank spaces...gaps in her outline*, *intractable*, and *blue*) interrogates what is not: negative space, erased space, absences of depth, of significance, of space in which to exist. This melancholy is evident too in the artist's prose poem on the theme of uncertainty: 'There is a point where the signs are clear, but then this point shifts in perspective.'³

In *Immeuble Molitor* Ryszard Dabek forces his exquisitely composed photographs of the interior of Le Corbusier's empty apartment on the outskirts of Paris, into a series of found frames of different sizes which have been stripped and coated a stark, duco-like, white enamel, mirroring the post/modernist crisis precipitated by the architect's hard lines.

The title of its companion piece, *you were there with me*, refers to the letters Le Corbusier's wife Yvonne wrote to her husband as he swanned around the globe and she languished in the iconic apartment. Dabek isolates and destabilises the fields of colour from the *Immeuble Molitor* photographs and releases them into an immaculately neutral 3D space. In direct contradiction to the straight lines preferred by Le Corbusier, they are allowed to float and intersect and be reflected by their environment, causing them to exist in ever-changing relations to each other, and seeming to revel in our inability to interpret them.

It is difficult to imagine work which is any more site-specific than the huge, stringed instruments spanning up to half a kilometre which have been installed in the hills of south western NSW by The WIRED Lab, an interdisciplinary audio research project instigated by Sarah Last. The project builds on the investigations pioneered by Alan Lamb, who is also a member, with his recordings of the sounds made by abandoned telegraph wires in the vast spaces of regional West Australia in the 1980s.

Difficult too to imagine a space or an instrument which better exemplifies the idea of 'maximalism' coined by

Melbourne composers/sound artists Robin Fox and Anthony Pateras who define it as 'an approach to sound which cultivates complex structures along both horizontal (dynamic) and vertical (timbre) axes'⁴; whilst being at the same time perfectly attuned to Cage's concept of aleatory music.

For the wires are an index of the specific atmospheric conditions, the wind, the rain, the flights of the insects in *this* space at *this* time. In *West Space* it is wireless headphones which enable us to travel beyond this space/time into these hills. If only what we were hearing was live, as it was when Last and her crew commandeered that most Modernist of icons – the train – for the *Locomotivus* sound art event in 2006 in rural New South Wales where the live sound of the wires was transmitted into moving train carriages.

It is the intention of the curator that through our interrogation of the spatial relations described by and in these objects and the juxtapositions between them in this specific space, we recognise that space is also an 'effect produced by the operations that orient it', as de Certeau has it.⁵ This, together with a beautiful catalogue (designed by Sarah Stubbs) containing solid essays by each artist and the curator, is what made this humble show in a small space a success. We were able to connect art with history, architecture and literature; and to engage with the world beyond the walls of the gallery, where economic and political realities determine relationships between softer, more vulnerable subjects and objects, and all the species of spaces between them. ■

1. Georges Perec quoted by Ryszard Dabek in *On Species of Spaces*, exhibition catalogue, 2009.
2. Dabek, 2009.
3. Brett Jones, *Exile* in *On Species of Spaces*, in Dabek, 2009.
4. Jim Knox, *RealTime*, 76, Dec/Jan 2006.
5. Michel de Certeau quoted by Dabek, 2009.

Species of Spaces was curated by Ryszard Dabek and exhibited at *West Space*, Melbourne, 11 June to 4 July 2009. Participating artists include Ryszard Dabek, Brett Jones, Melissa Laing and The WIRED Lab.

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