

## No longer here: inhabiting the non-site

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*Perception is the force for the world's infinite unfolding*  
(Erin Manning, 2009. 81)

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### ABSTRACT

The Peter Tscherkassky film “Outer Space” is, to appropriate a term from Robert Smithson, a cinematic non-site; a gothic tale of the implosion of time, space, and subjectivity. The very film itself tilts, shifts, and stutters; reality seemingly phasing in and out of existence as the fabric of space and time repeatedly trips over its own feet. The film’s protagonist is faced with the impossible task of navigating an environment that is haunted by itself, rendered spectral and clumsy by its own afterimages; where once there was a doorway, now there are three — all hovering in not-quite the same (un)place. Our protagonist is not immune to the instability of this space; her identity made mutable, flexible — she becomes multiple, lost in a sea of echoes as the walls of reality seem to collapse around her. Where for Smithson non-sites were “three-dimensional metaphor[s]” through which “one site can represent another site which does not resemble it” (Robert Smithson, 1996. 364), I have expanded upon this concept to create a guiding methodology that is rooted in occupying sites and states that function similarly to Tscherkassky’s film: sites of instability and modes of destabilisation — instants in which anything from a simple shift in perspective to a moment of total dissimulation occurs.

As I will explore throughout this essay, this destabilising methodology treats production as something that cannot be reduced to a single generative act but, rather, a process of gradual emergence. Furthermore, while discreet objects may be created, their meaning only emerges once they are given context through their interactions with other objects. As such, objects abandoned in a state a progress may only become ‘complete’ once introduced to another, seemingly unrelated, object. It is not uncommon for this process to take place over a number of years. There is a mutability inherent to this framework that problematises conceptions of the studio as a singular site in which production takes place. This is the key concern of this essay.

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### KEYWORDS

*Site, work, non-site, time, space.*

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### INTRODUCTION:

#### ***Ou-topos: inhabiting the non-site***

In the introduction to his monograph on Ilya Kabakov’s installation ‘The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment’, Boris Groys describes the implied protagonist of the work as “no longer [...] tied to a particular place, a particular topos, but [now resides] in an *ou-topos*, a ‘not-place’, weightless, floating free in cosmic infinitude” (Boris Groys, 2006. 1). Freed from

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the shackles of the terrestrial realm, the titular homespun cosmonaut is now floating in an ever-expanding non-site: the vacuum of cosmological space — that is to say, the *space* between celestial objects. For Groys, Kabkov has created a non-site, a place that is *outside* and untethered from the logics of typical experience with space and time. The distinction between Kabakov’s non-site and my own use of this space, is that for Kabakov the non-site is exterior, whereas for me it is interior. In ‘The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment’, the cosmonaut has disappeared, flinging himself through the ceiling of his apartment with his magnificent contraption, vanishing into the cosmos. In this work, the non-site is presented as a somewhere the cosmonaut has entered where we cannot follow; the non-site is liberation, but one that we cannot join. My own practice takes a radically different approach: instead of gazing up at the non-site, I am situated *within* the non-site. The non-site becomes a methodology, a guiding principle, a way of being-in-the-world. In this essay I will explore this idea of the non-site as it manifests in these two modes: as a space of geographic and temporal instability; and as a methodology for exploring these states.

To provisionally answer my earlier question of “what does studio mean within my practice”, I would say that there are two possible answers:

- 1) The studio is a sort of transcendental subject, something that travels with the artist to wherever the work is being produced. Wherever the work is happening (whether that be a physical space or a psychological state of being), that is where the studio is.
- 2) The studio is irrelevant. The studio is a physical site of production, in which works are conceptualised and then realised. The studio is, essentially, a workplace in the most literal sense. However, due to the fact that non-sites inherently problematise relationships with space, time and objects, there really is no way to adequately situate oneself within the non-site whilst still tying production down to any one particular site. To produce works through the methodology of the non-site whilst localising production to any one place is inherently contradictory.

Of these two possible answers, I feel that the second most adequately addresses my concerns. As such, this essay will largely be devoted to familiarising the reader with the non-site as well as how it is treated as a methodology and productive force within my practice.

## DRAWING WITH ABSENCES

In an article about a then-recent Gordon Matta-Clark work, Laurie Anderson wrote: “The thing about this house in New Jersey, though, was that it wasn’t a house but a cut, single line. The two halves were elaborate, non-functional buttresses — their purpose to reveal a line that changed everything [...] The house was a shell when it was sliced and the house disappeared when the line was drawn and in a couple of weeks the line will disappear when the wreckers level the whole thing” (Mark Wigley, 2018. 37). In Matta-Clark’s work, the house is transformed from a condemned former living space into the conduit for an ephemeral drawing. In effect, Matta-Clark was drawing with something that was not there.

For a body of work from 2018, I explored this idea of drawing with an absence. The work was a series of prints, selected from a second-hand copy of Anne Carson’s translation of Sappho’s fragments. What I found so stimulating about this text was the fact that Carson included visible signifiers of the disintegration that is inherent to Sappho’s writing. This transforms these classic poems of longing into something all the more powerful. By highlighting the erasures enacted upon these works by the ravages of time, the poems become elliptical and abstracted; a visible absence is created. What was also exciting about the text was that myself and the

previous owner (or owners) had annotated a number of pages from the book. The final prints I produced ended up being large-scale reproductions of these annotated pages, but with Carson/Sappho's writing digitally erased, leaving only the annotations; now floating in space, untethered from context and meaning — the text now erased twice: once by entropy and then again by the artist. For me the act of annotation is a visible gesture of an attempt at creating meaning or understanding; the reader visualising their interpretation of the text. By leaving these annotations to float in an off-white void, acts of interpretation are rendered futile; abstract and inscrutable. One annotation in particular caused some fuss and nervous laughter at the exhibition's opening, when the phrase "you burn me" was misread by many as "*you bum me*". While the unintentional humour of this could be seen as undesirable, I think the fluidity of the phrase is a perfect distillation of the act of distortion and destabilisation that I was working with.

This body of work is also illustrative of my approach to studio, because the works were produced during my morning commutes. The original idea for the work came from a barely complete thought, quickly jotted down in the notes app of my phone when I was reading Carson/Sappho's book on the bus. The note was then forgotten for several months before I rediscovered it one night around 2am whilst unable to sleep. This workflow is not unique to this body of work either, almost all of my works come from ideas jotted down in the 'notes' app of my phone whilst in transit (this is, of course, not unique to my practice — most artists leave notes for themselves). Almost every body of work I've produced finds its origin in a brief note on my phone, forgotten for months at a time until being resurrected by my chronic insomnia. This series was produced under particularly transitory circumstances, as the processes of digitisation and erasure were also completed during a morning commute. The pages were digitised on my phone (with the Adobe Scan app), and then the text was erased in Photoshop on my laptop. This all clearly typifies my use of the non-site as a guiding methodology in action: not only is the work itself an act of destabilisation (erasing a text to destabilise the reader's attempts at creating meaning), but the way in which it was produced lies outside of the practice of the studio as a singular site in which production occurs.

## HOW TO GET LOST IN A SMALL ROOM: A USERS' GUIDE TO DESTABILISATION

In the song "pabulum///CELESKINGIII" the rapper R.A.P. Ferreira (fka. Milo) asks "how he get lost in a small room?". For the three years since the release of this song I have consistently misheard (and misremembered) the lyric as "how to get lost in a small room", interpreting the rapper's elliptical style as an introductory guide to finding oneself lost, uncertain of familiar surroundings. To me, this is the essence of the distortions and destabilisations that I have been exploring through the idea of the non-site. A small room is a space with clearly defined boundaries; you can clearly see the walls and you are certain of where the floor and the ceiling are. And yet, somehow, you are lost. You know the room, and yet somehow you do not. This is a textbook example of *jamais vu*: a moment of total dissimulation and disorientation in which that which was once familiar has become utterly alien.

This act of defamiliarising a space is central to an ongoing body of work I have been producing using the State Library of Victoria's digital archive of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs. In this body of work, I have been selecting photographs of landscapes and cityscapes and then digitally zooming in on the image so that the image has been transformed into (for the most part) a picture of just the sky. However, because I am working with digital reproductions of these images, there is only so far, I can zoom in before data compression renders the image completely illegible. As solution to this problem, I zoom in as far as seems practical and then overlay an orange bar covering a portion of whatever landscape remains. This act of redaction creates a partition in the image, masking identifying details, leaving the image geographically

untethered and defamiliarised. By removing crucial identifying details, the sense of place is damaged (becoming a non-site), yet what is underneath the redaction has not disappeared, it has simply been obscured. What remains visible takes on a heightened quality, encouraging the viewer to consider what has been hidden, in a literal geographic sense but also more abstractly; for instance, who took these photographs, what motivated their creation, and what these images may have been disguising or omitting — considering the fact that to create an image is to place a frame around something, to choose what is seen and what is suppressed.

Furthermore, the sense of a non-place is compounded by the anachronism that comes from working with digitized versions of very old images — a combination of digital compression, data degradation, and physical in-the-world entropic decay creeping into the image. As J.G. Ballard wrote in his short story ‘The Overloaded Man’, “eliminating the vector of time from the de-identified object frees it from all its everyday cognitive associations” (J.G. Ballard, 1957. 116). This idea of freeing objects from the vectors of time and everyday cognitive associations ties into a number of passages from Pamela M. Lee’s study of how anxieties about temporality manifested across a number of art movements during the 1960s, which she terms “chronophobia”. In a particularly illuminating passage, she discusses the work of Robert Smithson and how his works can be connected to the works of Norbert Wiener and George Kubler. Lee argues that these scholars articulated “the acutely contemporary phenomena of noncontemporaneity, of not being with time” (Lee, 2004. 223). In ‘The Shape of Time’, Kubler writes: “The universe has a finite velocity which limits not only the spread of its events, but also the speed of our perceptions. The moment of actuality slips too fast by the slow, coarse net of our senses” (Kubler, 1962. 16), suggesting the existence of a gap between events occurring in time and our perception of these events — the result being distortions, inaccuracies, and outright fictions.

## A DIGRESSION ON A VIDEO GAME

‘Dear Esther’, a 2012 video game developed by The Chinese Room, is a perfect illustration of the destabilisations I’ve been describing — a sort of a hauntological psychogeography. In the game, the player navigates the landscape of an island in the Hebrides, and as they wander alone through the mountainous paths, they occasionally encounter fragments of voiceover narration, describing a series of letters to a woman named Esther. The basic scenario is that the narrator’s lover (the titular Esther) passed away in a tragic accident, and that he has travelled to a place they intended on visiting together. As the game progresses, there is a dawning sense of unease as the narrator describes situations that seem to not entirely match up with what the player sees. Ordinarily, this would be dismissed by the player’s suspension of disbelief, however the discrepancies between what is being described and the player’s actions begin to pile up, until suddenly there is a total break with reality about halfway through the game. At this midpoint, the player is exploring a system of caves and tunnels, the world becoming increasingly hyperreal as they push deeper until they fall down a waterfall and into a cave pool. But what they find at the bottom of the pool is a moment of quiet dawning horror: the sudden and impossible appearance of an empty highway, the scene of Esther’s fatal car accident.

In ‘The Weird and the Eerie’, Mark Fisher writes about an encounter with “something where there should be nothing”. That is to say, agencies and forces where there should be none (Mark Fisher, 2016. 67). Here the player uncovers a spatial and temporal distortion, a rip in the fabric of reality, a disturbing impossibility: one location somehow inside another. This moment marks a radical shift in the narrative, from here the narration becomes increasingly cryptic to the point of near inscrutability and the caves become increasingly impossible. It eventually becomes clear to the player that the narrator died long ago, the player slowly

becoming aware that they are wandering through the fragmented memories of a dead man. This is made explicit in the game's final moments, as the player is lifted into the air by an unseen force, which carries them back to the place where the game began. In effect, the player character is effectively stuck in an infinite time loop. Though if the player replays the game, they will discover this loop is imperfect. Dialogue appears in different configurations, and the scene of the car accident is every now and then (seemingly at random) replaced with an eerily empty tableau of a hospital bed.

These imperfect loops and spaces of dislocation and depersonalisation are not dissimilar to Mark Fisher's use of Derrida's concept of hauntology. In 'Ghosts of My Life', Fisher describes our zeitgeist as "essentially hauntological" (Fisher, 2014. 107), an epoch defined by its inherent ghostliness: a state of being haunted by the ghosts of lost futures and past traumas, all smeared together in a new temporality of "anachronism and inertia" (Fisher, 2014. 6). Fisher's writing essentially takes hauntology and applies a sort of eternal recurrence to it, however, in my application of this idea at least, these time loops aren't so clean and clear. Instead of the clean loop of a digital audio workstation — a perfect replication, theoretically capable of repeating endlessly — I prefer to conceptualise this recurrence as something closer to William Basinski's 'Disintegration Loops': a recursion that with each repetition slowly decays, generating new and unexpected re-combinations, gradually overcome by tape hiss and distortion. The line between what was here before and what is new or emergent becomes fuzzy and uncertain, time and place slip in and out of sync, and before long we have utterly lost the thread of where *here*, *now*, *there*, and *then* were.

This fuzzy and uncertain relationship with time is a key concern of my 2019 body of work 'Touching from a distance: LAT. 37°46' LONG. 145°15'E'. The work is a multimedia sculptural installation, featuring four descriptive systems: an educational cassette for identifying Victorian frog calls, heavily distorted satellite photography, and a carousel slide projector displaying photographs allegedly of the site in question alongside stills taken from a textbook on wetland rehabilitation. The base premise of the work is an attempt at creating a fully immersive representation of a location from my childhood through extensive documentation. However, the trick at the core of the work is the fact that the construction of an image inherently violates the capacity for truth. Images are inherently untrustworthy, creating an archive of damaged or, perhaps more accurately, *mutilated* instants. Every instant lives and dies between the blinking eyes of the witness; an *augenblick* lifespan so brief as to barely be present. However, the briefness of the instant's lifespan is violated by the image. The image zombies the instant, taking on an unnatural quality. The entire installation is essentially a search for the impossible: the attempt to represent and recreate a location from the past ultimately rendered futile. It is impossible for the installation, despite its attempt at creating a totalising, to accurately depict this site because the site in question has effectively ceased to exist. In 'The Shape of Time' George Kubler, borrowing a metaphor from telecommunications, illustrates this concern, writing "the instant of actuality is all we can ever know directly. The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant [...] The nature of a signal is that its message is neither here nor now, but there and then" (George Kubler, 1962. 15). In effect, the work presents itself as a total exploration of a site but ultimately opens up a rift, becoming a non-site as it confronts the reader in the contradictions inherent to representation.

#### EVERYWHERE AT THE END OF TIME WITH EVA HESSE

If we take as our basic premise Heraclitus' observation that "everything is in a constant state of becoming" — a worldview built upon the contention that all beings (from the pavement to cacti to you, the reader) exist in an eternal flux-state — then it would only make sense to assume that the final thing we *become* follows the second rule of thermodynamics: entropy. This is not to say, however, that all things are simply gradually dying or *becoming-inert*. Rather,

everything is moving towards increasing instability. The sculptures of Eva Hesse live in this space of disintegration and instability. Constructed with industrial materials (such as fibreglass and silicone) these sculptures were not designed with longevity in mind. These works were produced to explore Hesse's quirkily feminist and (I would argue) deeply queer exploration of post formalist aesthetics, particularly as an expansion upon and critique of minimalism. As a result, her work now exists almost entirely in documentation, with the vast majority of her sculptures now either too flimsy to exhibit or completely disintegrated. This may on the one hand seem like a great injustice enacted upon future generations, as the life's work of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential artists gradually disappears before our very eyes. And yet, as Eva Hesse herself said, "I'm not sure what my stand on lasting reality is. [...] Life doesn't last. Art doesn't last". And yet, her work has not really disappeared, just becoming something else. What art history seems to have assumed she was creating were objects, now — with the gradual disappearance of these objects — we can see that what she was really creating were moments in time, with all the fleeting beauty that implies.

Furthermore, the gradual disintegration of Hesse's work reveals to us is that transitory state of all works of art. While some may be more conducive to preservation than others, every work of art will disappear eventually. It doesn't matter what cleaning methods and climate-controlled storage facilities you throw at a painting, on a long enough timeline entropy comes for all. In the 2006 post-apocalyptic film 'Children of Men', the protagonist's cousin Nigel runs a Ministry of Arts program called the "Ark of the Arts", collecting and attempting to preserve culturally significant works of art during the collapse of civilisation. When the protagonist, Theo, asks Nigel why he bothers with this endeavour, pointing out that one day soon there won't be any people left to look at these works of art, Nigel simply says that he "try[s] not to think about it". Considering the gradual disappearance of Hesse's sculptures forces us to consider this possibility. As Pamela Lee writes "entropy's effects were not linked to physical and chemical processes alone. They [have] an impact on time itself" (Lee, 2004. 248). That is to say that witnessing entropy in the sculptures of Eva Hesse forces us to consider timescales far beyond the scope of our human lifetimes, it forces us to imagine a future in which all works of art reach the same level of decay as Hesse's.

The Caretaker's album cycle 'Everywhere at the end of time' (2016-2019) occupies a similar, though particularly harrowing, articulation of entropy's impact on temporality. Over the course of six-and-a-half hours, the listener witnesses this temporal entropy, as haunting samples from inter-war period ballroom records are slowly devoured by a tempestuous ocean of cavernous reverb and distortion, evoking the grief of losing a loved one to the Alzheimer's disease. Tracks from the early stages bear titles like "Childishly fresh eyes", before progressing through "Denial unravelling", then "Drifting time misplaced", and "An empty bliss beyond this world", before entering "Post-awareness confusions" until, finally, the "Long decline is over". This process, however, is not as simple as *something becoming nothing*, because these events are taking place over a time scale far too small for *something* to really become *nothing*. Instead, we are listening to familiar sounds become unfamiliar, reflecting the heartbreaking process of the Alzheimer's patient's loss of understanding of the world around them. The listener is witnessing the process of memory and meaning giving way to increasing instability.

Returning to where we began — specifically, the question of how a studio exists within a practice rooted in temporal and geographic destabilisation — I do think I have to stand by my earlier premise: in the strictest sense, I don't really have one. The approach upon which I have built my practice is completely antithetical to the idea of production being tied down to one location. The majority of my actual "work" is conceptualised on the bus or during late night fits of insomnia and is generally produced through processes of accumulation and emergence. Furthermore, the majority of the objects from which I assemble my sculptures and installations

are kept in a cramped little storage space underneath my grandmother's house. To call any of these locations my studio feels strange and inaccurate. Which makes perfect sense when considering, as I have attempted to throughout this essay, that the way in which I produce my works is completely dictated by the methodology of non-site. In order to work with anachronisms, slippages, and breaks with traditional modes of explaining subjectivity, one has to inhabit the space from which this line of thinking originates. To create the slippage, one has to surrender oneself to its (il)logics.

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