

## Miwon Kwon - The Wrong Place

It occurred to me some time ago that among many of my art and academic friends, success and viability of one's work is now measured in proportion to the accumulation of frequent flyer miles. The more we travel for work, the more that we are called upon to provide institutions in other parts of the country and world with our presence and services, the more that we give into the logic of nomadism, one could say, as pressured by a mobilised capitalist economy, the more we are made to feel wanted, needed, validated, and relevant. It seems our very sense of self-worth is predicated more and more on our suffering through the inconveniences and psychic destabilisations of ungrounded transience, of not being at home (or not having a home), of always traversing through elsewhere. Whether we enjoy it or not, we are culturally and economically rewarded for enduring the 'wrong' place. It seems we're out of place all too often.

But what is a 'wrong' place? How does one recognise it as such, as opposed to a 'right' place? What do we really mean by these qualifying adjectives? Is being in the wrong place the same thing as being out of place? And what are the effects of such mis/displacements for art, subjectivity, and locational identities? In light of the intensified mobilisation of bodies, information, images, and commodities on the one hand, and the greater and greater homogenisation and standardisation of places on the other (which, by the way, facilitates the smooth, unimpeded mobilisation and circulation of these bodies, information, images, and commodities), I continue to wonder about the impact, both positive and negative, of the spatial and temporal experiences that such conditions engender not only in terms of cultural practice but more basically for our psyches, our sense of self, our sense of well-being, our sense of belonging to a place and a culture. Within the limited critical discussions concerning present-day, site-oriented art, one tendency has been to valorise the nomadic condition. Referencing the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as theoretical support, some critics have championed the work of artists such as Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion, Renée Green, and Christian Philipp Müller, among many others, for having abandoned the phenomenologically-oriented mode of site-specific art (best exemplified by Richard Serra's sculptures). This is a mode that is seen to be outdated now. Moving beyond the inherited conception of site-specific art as a grounded, fixed (even if ephemeral), singular event, the work of these younger artists are seen to advance an altogether different notion of a site as predominantly an 'intertextually' coordinated, multiply-located, discursive field of operation.' This is the reading, for example, of art historian and critic James Meyer, who has coined the term 'functional site' to distinguish recent site-oriented practices from those of the past.<sup>2</sup> This conceptual shift has embraced the idea of meaning as an open, unfixed constellation, porous to contingencies—an idea that most of us accept and welcome. But in the process, the idea of the fluidity of meaning has tended to get conflated/confused with the idea of fluidity of identities and subjectivities, even physical bodies, to such an extent that a certain romanticism has accrued around the image of a cultural worker on the go. It is not only the artwork that is not bound to the physical conditions of a place anymore: it is the artist-subject who is 'liberated' from any enduring ties to local circumstances. Qualities of permanence, continuity, certainty and groundedness (physical and otherwise) are thought to be artistically retrograde, thus politically suspect, in this context. By contrast, qualities of uncertainty, instability, ambiguity

and impermanence are taken as desired attributes of a vanguard, politically progressive, artistic practice. But I remain unconvinced of the ways in which a model of meaning and interpretation is called forth to validate, even romanticise, the material and socioeconomic realities of an itinerant lifestyle. I am suspicious of this analogical transposition and the seductive allure of nomadism it supports if for no other reason than for the fact of my own personal ambivalence toward the physical and psychological experiences of mobilisation and destabilisation that such nomadism demands.

At the same time, however, I remain wary of the more prevalent position, the anti-nomadic and anti-technology argument, like that proposed by art historian Lucy Lippard. In her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multi-Centred Society*, she presents a holistic vision of place as a kind of text of humanity, "the intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology" that is understood as such from a position of being an insider'. Place is, according to Lippard, "a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar..., the external world mediated through human subjective experience" . It is Lippard's contention that despite the fact that our sense of identity is fundamentally tied to our relationship to places and the histories that they embody, the uprooting of our lives from specific local cultures and places through voluntary migrations or forced displacements-has contributed to the waning of our abilities to locate ourselves. Consequently, a sense of place remains remote to most of us. And this deficiency can be seen as a primary cause in our loss of touch with nature, disconnection from history, spiritual vacancy, and estrangement from our own sense of self. Her argument is not only that we need to pay closer attention to the role that places have in the formation of our identities and cultural values, it is to encourage a particular type of relationship to places so as to divert or turn around the trends of the dominant culture. Vaguely recalling Martin Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy on dwelling and place, which diagnosed the modern condition as one of an existential "homelessness" (according to the philosopher, the world hasn't been the 'right place' for humankind for a very long time), Lippard presents the notion of a sense of place as therapeutic remedy: sense of place is "the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation".'

In this regard, even as she recalls the conservatism of Heidegger, or more accurately the conservatism of his subsequent interpreters such as Yi-Tu Fuan and Christian Norberg-Schulz, Lippard seems to incorporate aspects of the Marxist analysis of the "production of space" as well. She begins, for instance, from the basic premise that space is not a neutral container or void within which social interactions take place but rather an ideological product and instrument in itself. More specifically, she believes that the rapacious growth and transformation of capitalism has subsumed the distinctions of local differences and cultures, and that the particularity of places are continually being homogenised, genericised, and commodified to better accommodate the expansion of capitalism via abstraction of space (or 'non-places' as some sociologists prefer). These processes, in turn, exasperate the conditions of alienation and placelessness in contemporary life.

Much of this I agree with, but unlike Henri Lefebvre, who provides the deepest dialectical consideration of the "production of space" (his phrase); Lippard seems

unable to resist the nostalgic impulse. In the end, the task of a progressive oppositional cultural practice is conceived as a retrieval and resuscitation of a sense of place, a sense that ostensibly once was but now is lost. Her project implicitly calls for a slower, more sedentary mode of existence. Despite her disclaimers, hers is a vision that favours the 'return' to a vernacular, non-urban sociality of small-scale spaces and face-to-face exchanges. Not that such a vision isn't appealing: the problem is that perhaps it is all too appealing, not only to us individually but to the machinations of capitalism itself. What is lost in Lippard's thinking are Lefebvre's important insights on the dialectical rather than oppositional relationship between the processes of expanding abstraction of space and the 'production' of particularities of place, local specificity, and authenticity of cultures (a concern that informs many site-oriented art practices today). Production of difference, to say it in more general terms, is itself a fundamental activity of capitalism, necessary for its continuous expansion. One might go so far as to say that this desire for difference, authenticity, and our willingness to pay high prices for it (literally), only highlights the degree to which they are already lost to us, thus the power they have over us.

Yet it is not a matter of choosing sides-between models of nomadism and sedentariness, between space and place, between digital interfaces and the handshake, between the 'wrong' and 'right' places. Rather, we need to be able to think the range of these seeming contradictions and our contradictory desires for them together, at once. To understand seeming oppositions as sustaining relations, how do we account for, for instance, the sense of soaring exhilaration and the anxious dread engendered by, on the one hand, the new fluidities and continuities of space and time, and on the other hand, the ruptures and disconnections of space and time? And what could this doubleness of experience mean, in our lives, in our work, within ourselves? I want to remember the lessons of two scenes-or wrong places-in this context. One is Fredric Jameson's by-now famous telling of a deliriously confounding spatial experience at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. It is an historically unprecedented experience of hyperspace that, for Jameson, serves as an emblematic instance of 'the originality of postmodernist space'.<sup>5</sup> The second scene is one described by novelist Don DeLillo in his two-act play *Valparaiso*, 1999, in which the protagonist, Michael Majeski, an average middle-class businessman (assumed white), on an ordinary business trip to Valparaiso, Indiana, ends up in the other part of the world in Valparaiso, Chile, presumably by mistake, to then have to confront himself as a minor media celebrity on his return home. Majeski's extra-ordinary misadventure of falling off the track of his set itinerary, ending up in the wrong place (which isn't to say that he gets lost), is the starting point for DeLillo's fictional critique of the postmodern condition. In both Jameson's and DeLillo's work the disruption of a subject's habitual spatio-temporal experience propels the breakdown of its traditional sense of self.

First to the Bonaventure Hotel: for Jameson, the building is like an alien ship, a space capsule. It is "a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city", which turns its back on the city fabric to create an isolated zone (not unlike a shopping mall) that might as well be floating in outer space. Indeed the view from one common approach to the hotel off of Third Street is of a building that seems to be hovering above the ground, a mirage-like vision of a shiny dirigible. This physical hermeticism and disjuncture is accentuated by the building's glass skin, which "repels the city outside". The glass skin exterior "achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the

Bonaventure from its neighbourhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds V'!

If the glass skin presents a dissimulating perceptual experience of the building as a whole, the sense of disorientation is furthered by the dis-coordination between exterior and interior spaces. Jameson highlights the experience of entering the building: the building has three entrances, yet none of them are recognisable as such not only because they lack the familiar fanfare of architectural symbols (marquees, banners, oversized doorways, etc.) but because all three land you in a kind of no-man's land—either a second-storey shopping balcony or the sixth floor of one of the four interiorised towers. Once admitted into the building in such an unceremonious fashion, one must further negotiate elevators, stairs, or escalators in order to get to the lobby's front desk. Which is to say, the traditional hierarchies of spatial organisation (of front and back, outside and inside, centre and periphery) or choreography of spatial experience (designing of an entry with a sense of arrival, for instance) are forgotten at the Bonaventure Hotel. Jameson continues with descriptions of the milling confusion" and the "bewildering immersion" of one's eyes and body once inside the hyperspace of the lobby atrium,

*with its great central column surrounded by a miniature lake, the whole positioned between the four symmetrical residential towers with their elevators, and surrounded by rising balconies capped by a kind of greenhouse roof at the sixth level .... Hanging streamers indeed suffuse this empty space in such a way as to distract systematically and deliberately from whatever form it might be supposed to have, while a constant sense of busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed, that it is an element within which you yourself are immersed, without any distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume 7*

In describing the intensity and destabilising aspects of the Bonaventure Hotel lobby in vivid detail, Jameson throws into relief the disparity between the spatial organisation (or disorganisation) of such new postmodernist hyperspaces and a subject's capacity to comprehend and mentally 'map' these spaces. The heightened visual and sensorial stimulation in the Bonaventure lobby, as vacant as it may be in one sense, functions well to obscure the proper perception of one's surroundings. According to Jameson, there remains no vantage from which to take in a perspective, no possibility of depth perception, only readings of surfaces upon surfaces. And movement through such spaces becomes exaggerated and totally controlled, directed and restricted by transportation machines functioning, in Jameson's view, like "allegorical signifiers of that older promenade [which] we are no longer allowed to conduct on our own".<sup>8</sup> So that rather than our being able to make sense of the space, the space makes sense of us, acts upon us, with "something like a vengeance". This "mutation in space" simultaneously thrills us and incapacitates us (or incapacitates us through the intensity of sensorial thrills). "[P]ostmodern hyperspace finally succeed[s] in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mapable external world". If Jameson does not celebrate places/buildings like the Bonaventure Hotel, he remarkably does not condemn it either. He is more intent on analysing the nature of an altogether different order of spatial experience as a means to access the logic of a larger field of the late capitalist political economy. He sees "this alarming disjunction

point between the body and its built environment... as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" .° In other words, the breakdown of spatial experience in both perceptual and cognitive registers-being lost, disoriented, alienated, feeling out of place, and consequently unable to make coherent meaning of our relation to our physical surroundings-is the cultural symptom of late capitalism's political and social reality.

As various critics have pointed out, there are many elements in Jameson's thesis to contend and argue against: his economic determinism, his dismissive attitude towards poststructuralism, his use of the concept of 'cognitive mapping' as a sly stand-in for class consciousness. But a point of particular interest in the context of this essay is the idea that a new spatial paradigm has developed at a faster rate than our capacity to perceive and understand it. It is implied that economic changes have a more direct bearing and quicker impact on cultural forms, like architecture, and that our bodies, with their physical habits, and our consciousness, locked into received knowledge, trail along belatedly. So places can feel wrong not because it does not correspond to our self-perception and world view but rather because our self-perception and world view are out of synch, too outmoded, to make sense of the new spatial and economic organisation that confronts us. I implied toward the beginning of the essay that a place that instigates a sense of instability and uncertainty, lacking in comfort, a place unfamiliar and foreign, might be deemed 'wrong'. And by extension, a place that feels like 'home' might be deemed 'right'. But this is wrong. The determination of right and wrong is never derived from an innate quality of the object in question, even if some moral absolutes might seem to preside over the object. Rather, right and wrong are qualities that an object has in relation to something outside itself. In the case of a place, it indicates a subject's relation to it and does not indicate an autonomous, objective condition of the place itself. So it is not so much that the Bonaventure Hotel is a 'wrong' place (although critics like Lucy Lippard would think it so, and to some degree, as with most Marxist geographers and cultural critics, Jameson too is likely to deem such spaces as politically and ethically problematic). The more important point here is that it is we who are wrong for this kind of 'new' space. We fall far short of being able to understand the organisation of its logic, which means we are subjected by it without even recognising our own subjection.

So under such circumstances, what do we do? For Lippard and many others, the goal is clear: retrieve the older model of spatial experience so that we can feel comforted, secure, empowered, and 'whole' again in relation to our surroundings. Conditions of groundedness and connectedness are themselves imagined as resistant to the forces of the dominant culture. But to my mind, this kind of old-school oppositional politics seems unproductive, limited at best, since, as noted earlier, it fails to recognise the extent to which such opposition sustains dominant cultural trends. Instead, it seems it is only from the position of being out of place that we can attempt to develop new skills-perceptual and cognitive-to map the new hyperspaces wherein we have to survive. But I don't want to celebrate, as some critics might, the conditions of disjuncture, instability, uncertainty, and estrangement as a basis for self-knowledge or as the basis of a critical cultural practice either. Because to embrace such conditions is to leave oneself vulnerable to new terrors and dangers. At the very least, we have to acknowledge this vulnerability. In one sense, Don DeLillo's play Valparaiso can be

interpreted as a darkly cast study on the toll that such exposure takes on the integrity of a sense of self. The play begins with the character Michael Majeski's having recently returned from the unintended destination of his trip, the wrong Valparaiso in Chile (there are four Valparaisos in the world as far as I'm aware). Upon his return, he is confronted with numerous demands from the media-radio, television, newspapers, magazines, documentary filmmakers-to recount his experience. It is a great human interest story, after all.., we all want to know what happened. How could anyone make such a big mistake? Didn't he notice that he was headed for the wrong city? When did he notice? Why was he going to Valparaiso in the first place? What happened exactly? Who is Michael Majeski? What was he like as a child? What are his dreams? Does he love his wife? Submitting to such questions, he performs 67 interviews in 41/2 days in 31/2 cities at least we are told so by the wife character), being forced to repeat his narrative over and over again in front of microphones and cameras, simultaneously constructing and confessing his identity, his life history, including his struggles with alcoholism and the drunken car accident that debilitated his only son.

It is quite clear, with most of the scenes set in talk show 'living rooms', that DeLillo's primary concern is not so much the originality of the postmodernist space as confirmed by its architecture but the omnipresence of broadcast technology as an organising force in our lives and minds. Indeed the collapse of traditional spatial and temporal modalities, and the fragmentation, discontinuity, and intensities presented by new modalities, is not so much described in terms of physical forms as is in Jameson's narrative) but performed by the characters through language. The dialogue is full of truncated hesitations, random misfires, incomplete thoughts, and broken repetitions, as if the characters aren't really speaking to one another but through and past each other. Their disjunctive conversations sound more like each has his or her own uncoordinated soundtrack. Their words do not constitute even a monologue in that there are no real listeners, not even an inner self. Everyone speaks to, and answers to, an invisible ear, one that belongs to a phantom body of a televisual public. The fractured nature of DeLillo's language is not unlike the one that might be spoken by Jameson's schizophrenic postmodern subjects, who, in the throes of an overwhelmingly intense, even traumatic, present is unable to make coherent sense in any recognisable, conventional manner due to an utter breakdown of the basic temporality of narrative continuity. But DeLillo's play also has much to say on spatial issues too, even if only implicitly. First, the space of our public conversations is now fully circumscribed by the camera or rather the media: life is footage waiting to be shot. Experience is not real unless it is recorded and validated through the media. It is in this mediated virtual space (rather than an architectural hyperspace) that we talk to each other today. This is the way we tell each other things, in public, before listening millions that we don't dare to say privately. Secondly, spatial experience, like the broken temporality of language, is discontinuous and creepily disembodied. The words do not reach deep, they collage fleeting surface impressions. And vision does not (cannot) distinguish between what is seen and the mediation of that scene. Majeski describes the beginning of his journey to an interviewer:

*I'm watching the take-off on live video. I'm on the plane, I'm in my seat. There's a monitor on the bulkhead. I look at the monitor and the plane is taking off. I look out the window and the plane is taking off. Then what. The plane is taking off outside the*

*cabin and the plane is taking off inside the cabin. I look at the monitor, I look at the earth."*

Thirdly, it is important to remember that the plot of the play is premised on an instance of a locational misrecognition, on a character temporarily losing his way in the world. How does this happen? Majeski leaves his house early in the morning to board a plane to Chicago. From there, he is to be picked up and driven to Valparaiso, Indiana, some 40 miles away. But at the airport, the ticket counter attendant notices a discrepancy between his ticket (for Chicago) and his printed itinerary (for Miami). She tries to be helpful and finds him a seat on the Miami flight about to take off; and even though he was fully prepared for the Chicago trip, Majeski, not wanting to be discourteous makes a quick nondecision to head for Valparaiso, Florida, via Miami. Once in Miami, instead of boarding a charter plane, he somehow ends up on an international flight to Santiago, headed for Valparaiso, Chile. Details remain vague. Majeski recalls the experience on a television talk show: Yes. It was strange. The aircraft seemed too big, too wide-bodied for an intrastate flight [ .... ] And said nothing. I was intimidated by the systems. The enormous sense of power all around me. Heaving and breathing. How could I impose myself against this force? The electrical systems. The revving engines I ....] The sense of life support. The oxygen in the oxygen masks[ ....] I felt submissive. I had to submit to the systems. They were all powerful and all-knowing. If I was sitting in this assigned seat. Think about it. If the computers and metal detectors and uniformed personnel and bomb-sniffing dogs had allowed me to reach this assigned seat and given me this airline blanket that I could not rip out of its plastic shroud, then I must belong here. That's how I was thinking at the time 12 Majeski ends up in Chile not out of absent-mindedness, but because he recognises a hitherto unknown logic of belonging. A sense of belonging that is not bound to any specific location but to a 'system of movement'. Majeski does not resist the ways in which bodies are channelled through the sky along the prescribed trajectories of commercial air travel. He believes in its intimidating logic, has faith in its procedures, and respects its timetables. He attributes almost mystical powers to the system. He might have ended up in the wrong city, but, in a sense, he was in the right place all along. So that when he reaches Santiago, fully aware of his mistake, it no longer matters how far he has strayed. He is calm. Instead of turning back, he is convinced to complete his mistake, to go all the way to Chile's Valparaiso. "For the beauty and balance. The formal resolution." (Indeed if Michael Majeski had been an artist and his trip had been a project for an exhibition, I would have been moved to think it a brilliant critique of site-specificity.)

Often we are comforted by the thought that a place is ours, that we belong to it, perhaps even come from it, and therefore are tied to it in some fundamental way. Such places ('right' places) are thought to reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity. This kind of continuous relationship between a place and a person is what is deemed lost, and needed, in contemporary society. In contrast, the wrong place is generally thought of as a place where one feels one does not belong-unfamiliar, disorienting, destabilising, even threatening. This kind of stressful relationship to a place is, in turn, thought to be detrimental to a subject's capacity to constitute a coherent sense of self and the world. But thanks to the perfection and formal beauty of Majeski's mistake, we can think about the 'wrong place' in altogether new ways. Rather than 'losing himself' because he ends up in the wrong place, quite the opposite seems to happen in

Va/paraiso. It is from the instance of being in an airplane headed for the wrong city that Majeski begins to recognise himself, or rather his own estrangement, and is set on a journey to account for his identity. And it is in the telling and retelling of the tale that his rather tragic and fractured sense of self is revealed not only to us, the audience, but to the character himself. Which is to say, it is the wrongness rather than rightness of place that brings Majeski into focus. Furthermore, as the play progresses, it become less and less clear as to whether Majeski was trapped in a journey headed for the wrong place or if the trip was in fact an attempt to escape from a wrong place- his home, his job, his marriage, his family, his life, 'himself'. A lesson to be drawn here is that an encounter with a 'wrong place' is likely to expose the instability of the 'right place', and by extension the instability of the self.

The price of such awakening is steep, however, as is revealed in the concluding scenes of DeLillo's play (not to be divulged here). Suffice to say that the psychological unmooring of Majeski as a result of his trip both liberates and shatters him. In light of DeLillo's inconclusive conclusion, how should we characterise Michael Majeski's perfect mistake? Was he in the right place at the right time or in the wrong place at the wrong time? We often use these phrases, 'in the right place at the right time', or so-and-so was 'in the wrong place at the wrong time', to describe degrees of fortune and misfortune, to indicate in shorthand someone's good luck or bad luck, and to concede casually (but definitively) the presence of chance or fate, or perhaps even God, as a force in directing the great and terrible things that happen in our lives. It is a moment when we acknowledge that things are beyond our will, as Majeski does himself when he concedes the power of the 'system of movement'.

But if we return to a consideration of art at this point, it is clear that the idea of the right place or the wrong place for art has less to do with chance or luck and more to do with the distinctions of propriety and impropriety as set by social conventions, ideological regimes, religious dictates, or habitual familiarity. Thought in these terms, one could argue that throughout the twentieth century, the history of avant-garde, or 'advanced', or critical' art practices (however one might want to characterise those practices that have pressured the status quo of dominant art and social institutions) can be described as the persistence of a desire to situate art in 'improper' or 'wrong' places. That is, the avant-garde struggle has in part been a kind of spatial politics, to pressure the definition and legitimation of art by locating it elsewhere, in places other than where it 'belongs'. But in breaking with its traditional grounding, I wonder if such artistic endeavours haven't unknowingly acquiesced to a different order of belonging: to a system of movement and ungrounding somewhat analogous to the one that Don DeLillo's Michael Majeski confronts.

In the past, the avant-garde was extolled for its improprieties, for its acts of transgression against fixed, grounded order of traditional art categories and institutions. In recent years, the very idea of the avant-garde and its program of 'improper' behaviour has come to be viewed as historically exhausted in as much as such programmes have been co-opted or, in the least, the social conditions within or against which such behaviour was perpetrated no longer exist in tact. Once heroic improprieties are now seen as pathetic improprieties. But critical artistic practice is neither heroic nor pathetic. There are no other options than to confront an ongoing predicament as a predicament. It bears the burden of the necessity and impossibility

of modelling new forms of being in-place, new forms of belonging. This precarious and risky position may not be the right place to be, but it is the only place from which to face the challenges of the new orders of space and time.

1'See Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another Notes on Site Specificity', October 80, Spring 1997, pp. 20-30

2 See James Meyer, "The Functional Site", Documents, no. 7, Autumn 1996, pp. 20-29.

3 Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local' Sense of Place in a Multicultural Society*, New York New Press, 1997, p 11

4 Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*, p.12

5 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham. Duke University Press, 1991

6 Jameson, "Postmodernism", p 42.

7 Jameson, "Postmodernism", p 43

8 Jameson, "Postmodernism", p.42

9 Jameson, "Postmodernism", p.44

10 Jameson, "Postmodernism", p 44

11 Don DeLillo, *Valparaiso*, New York Scribner, 1999, p. 32.

12 DeLillo, *Valparaiso*, pp. 86-87.

13 DeLillo, *Valparaiso*, pp 86-87.