RESEARCH REPORT

Between the Visible and the Invisible

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'Between the Visible and the Invisible' is based on a constellation of some of the most thought-provoking contemporary works developed through artistic research, inquiring into collective notions of memory, time and space – a moment when nothing is certain, concrete or stable; and how artistic practice could capture this sense of being 'in-between'. The paper refers to Fatehrad's recent curatorial project (Sharjah, UAE 2018) with the same title organised around three themes: disappearance, suspension and becoming. 'Disappearance' focuses on the ephemerality of recorded memory via sound or image; 'suspension' expresses a presence that is invisible yet substantive, thinkable through feelings; and 'becoming' concerns the mediation between bodily drawings and the cohabitation in holding a certain space through limited time. The concepts of diaspora and politics of location together offer a conceptual framework for a historicised analysis of contemporary (trans)national movements of people, information, culture, artistic practices, commodities and capital. 'Between the Visible and the Invisible' reflects on a rupture in time that is the exposure to a new mode of temporality based upon the continual mutability of all form. Referencing the context of 'plasticity' by Catherine Malabou (2010), this paper explores new modes of temporality through a series of multimedia installations, in particular, (i) the Psychoréographies – a performative inquiry for inner and outer spaces (15', 2015) by Nikolaus Gansterer and (ii) Anubumin (18', 2017) by Oliver Ressler, to expand on the notion of speculation within contemporary art and spatial politics.

Introduction

> There are many maps of one place and many histories of one time.
>
> Julie Frederikse[1]

The world is a form of spectacle, stage or performance; it is in a way a panoptical stance in itself, which takes a position to observe. Panoptic surveillance (technology) was derived from photography – to observe, collect and display – and museums/galleries (exhibitions), zoos, circuses and other shows, similar to the camera, all involve the fetishistic principle of collection, display and the figure of panoramic time as a commodity spectacle (McClintock, 1995).[2]

My recent curatorial project, the 'Between the Visible and the Invisible' exhibition, (Sharjah, 2018) essentially staged a space between departure from one's homeland and arrival in a new land, a non-graspable experience of being, becoming and being suspended in a dark unknown. It was not about simply being visible or invisible, rather about being somewhere between the two, about not being just one or the other at any given moment in time. Similarly, 'becoming-animal' is not 'becoming *an* animal', as Gilles Deleuze says, and neither do the two terms signify a simple transformation which is too simplistic; rather, the two entities co-establish and transgress the borders between each other (Malabou, 2012).[3]

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[1] McClintock, A., 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest.* Routledge. p. 122.

[2] McClintock, A., 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest.* Routledge. p. 123.

[3] Malabou, C., 2012. *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity.* Polity Press. p. 17.

Through a combination of multimedia installations (**Figure 1**), the exhibition 'Between the Visible and the Invisible' captured the ideas of disappearance, suspension and becoming. Printed photographs, multi-channel sound, film essays, fictional documentaries, performances and site-specific installations staged a language of 'in-transformation' – light, ephemeral and changeable. Recorded memories via sound installations, voiceovers and images provided the vocabulary of disappearance versus appearance – a moment when the two overlapped. It was as if the memory of the event, the place or oneself faded out like a scene from a film, or rather a moment in which a blurry figure disappeared in the corner of the still image: the body was there, as you recognised it for a moment, but it is no longer there.

Given the current discussions across the globe in relation to immigration, asylum, borders, barriers etc., 'Between the Visible and the Invisible' had an important part to play globally by contributing to the contemporary notions of belonging, history and memory, as well as to our understanding of others, especially those who have had diasporic experiences[4] and found themselves in 'another world', between two lands/cultures, neither of which they really belong to (Brah, 1999).

The exhibition site was located in the city of Sharjah where the majority of inhabitants are outsiders who have immigrated to the UAE for work. I have made several trips to Sharjah myself having been invited by Sharjah Art Foundation to the March Meeting 2016 and the Sharjah Biennale 2017. During my visits, I learnt that the status of these 'guest workers' is highly uncertain – with no social benefits even after many years working in the country, in stark contrast to the UK where, after five years, it is possible to obtain a residence permit.

I found this dramatic difference unsettling and was greatly inspired by the plight of these guest workers. They are neither Emiratis nor Indians, Americans, Pakistanis or whatever; they are a combination of both but not fully one or the other: a form of being which is invisible yet substantive, non-descriptive yet fully sensational, reshaping who they are and shaping a new home for themselves in their adopted homeland, moving through different stages of temporality.

As a new form of being in the new land emerges, it becomes a stranger to the being that was there before, thus the loss of symbolic reference points – their surroundings and what lies ahead – all seem to hide in darkness and the unknown. This is perceived as a painful moment and the transformative being is, therefore,

Figure 1: *Between the Visible and the Invisible*, Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah, 2018.

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[4] Avtar Brah contextualises the position of the adopted home as a 'diasporic space' which is not only inhabited by those who have immigrated into it (and their descendants) but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. The word 'diaspora', according to Webster's Dictionary, derives from the Greek *diaspeirein* (disperse), in turn, from *dia* meaning 'across' and *speirein* meaning 'to scatter' but, for this dispersion to occur, there has to be a centre, locus or 'home' from which people scatter, fragmented and ununited.

enveloped in mysterious feelings of loneliness and abandonment.[5] Malabou notes that it does, however, 'have the potential to establish a new being which were not predictable before. The openness of the *result*, its uncertainty may come across scary. The quality of the unknown is that it lies within the potentiality as well as the danger of the unpredictable. One may endure its fear to sculpt a new being, to become anew' (Malabou: 12).[6]

Thus, the space between departure from one's homeland and arrival in a new land is a non-graspable experience of being, becoming and being suspended in a dark unknown. It is not about simply being visible or invisible, but rather about being somewhere **between the two**, about not being just one or the other at any given moment in time.

The notion of plasticity

French philosopher Catherine Malabou refers to plasticity as sculpting a positive natural being that shapes our identity and thus results in being recognized as an individual in this world. Intertwined with our individual interactions in our social environment is our capability of coexisting with others and learning through our exchanges, she says (Malabou, 2012).[7]

"A smashed up face is still a face, a stump, a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche" (Malabou: 16).[8] In other words, the destruction (to be a moment of the unknown, to be a new homeland) has its own sculpting tools. It is in a way the "deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers herself"[9] that allows other things to happen (Malabou:9). The potentiality to be suspended opens up the platform of becoming, to become a new being which is in constant transformation. "These types of beings impose a new form on their old form, without mediation or transition or glue or accountability today versus yesterday, in a state of emergency, without foundation, bareback, sockless."[10] (Malabou: 11) Hence it becomes a shifting pattern of exclusion and inclusion between the old and the new.[11] (Malabou: 14)

> "An autobiography appears to be the tale of a full life. A succession of acts. The displacements of body in space-time. Adventures, misdeeds, joys, unending suffering. My trues life starts with an end."[12] (Ros: 13)

On Nikolaus Gansterer's *Psychoréographies*

The displacement of the body in space/time is demonstrated most clearly by Nikolaus Gansterer's work installed at the centre of the exhibition space. The link between thinking, drawing, and action has been a constant preoccupation for Gansterer.

Psychoréographies – a performative inquiry for inner and outer spaces (15', 2015) (**Figure 2**) was produced by the Vienna-based artist during a temporary artist residency in Marseilles. As a 'stranger' in the city, Gansterer started to explore the urban public space through psychogeographic techniques. The video shows his process of drawing with chalk on the studio floor, while the camera shoots from above, capturing the vast space and the artist's movements in it. Two voiceovers accompany the video. One is a recitation of Henri Lefebvres' *Rhythmanalysis*, which is also written out simultaneously by Gansterer, combining text with lines. The second voiceover is a series of rather vague recordings seemingly made by Gansterer himself as he explored the city.[13] This is because, for orientation perhaps, Gansterer took off walking across the urban landscape of his temporarily adopted home, recording his thoughts on what he encountered as he went. It is as if the inner self of the artist draws its presence from walking, seeing/observing and documenting the buildings, alleys, crowds, and roads he comes across.

In other words, Gansterer's work represents a search for a language that can capture uncertainty. The single-channel video displays the movement of the artist's body inside a space, traced by drawing in chalk on the floor. Even the lines on the floor appear from Gansterer's readings of Lefebre's *Rhythmanalysis* (as mentioned above), as if the notes were an actualisation of his thoughts on the theoretical thinking. A line
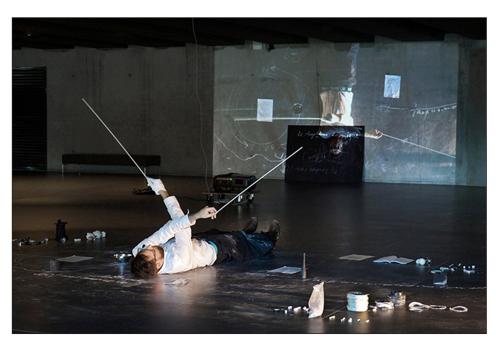
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[5] Malabou, p. 18.
[6] Malabou, p. 11.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[8] op.cit.
[9] op.cit.
[10] ibid., p. 12.
[11] ibid., p. 3.
[12] Casas Ros, A., 2007. *Le théorème d'Almodóvar*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard. p. 13.
[13] Gansterer, N 2015, *Psychoreographies*, Nikolaus Gansterer, accessed 20 April 2019, <www.gansterer.org/Psychoreographies/?n=6>.

Figure 2: Nikolaus Gansterer, Still from the film *Psychoréographies – a performative inquiry for inner and outer spaces.*

in this video is not just a bit of chalk on the floor, but rather a trace of a thought at a moment of time on the gallery floor.

On Oliver Ressler's *Anubumin*

On the other hand, **expand on connection with the above** Oliver Ressler in collaboration with Zanny Begg expands on the notion of speculation within contemporary art and spatial politics through ***Anubumin*** (18′, 2017) (**Figure 3**), filmed in Nauru, a very small and isolated island with a population of below 10,000 located in the middle of the Pacific. Nauru has had a mysterious past – and present (it now houses a controversial detention camp on behalf of the Australian government) – and this is captured and conveyed by Ressler's fictional documentary.

Anubumin starts with a scene of an aeroplane landing at the island's tiny airport. We briefly witness the landing and see a blur of green, the camera shaking a lot as hand-held equipment was used throughout. The rest of the film is similarly captured (often surreptitiously) through a narrow viewpoint – from a carried bag or hidden in bushes.

The narration of the film moves between documentary and fiction, showcasing scenes of hidden captured footage alongside voiceover interviews with whistle blowers in Australia about 'the situation in Nauru' (having exhausted its natural resources and dabbled for a short time in money laundering, the refugee detention centre the island now houses has been severely criticised for its institutionalised human rights abuses).

Through the film, "we witness a temporary moment of life and, at the same time, crisis and struggle that co-exist on the tiny island surrounded by the ocean."[14] Through his work, Ressler points at "invisible corruptions, hidden behind the scene of pop culture, and people trying to survive and resist."[15]

Ressler thus captures the darkness of the in-between island, of the void between the truth and misconduct – hence the title of the film ***Anubumin (means darkness)***. On top of the whistle blowers' shocking stories, there is footage of Christmas cards made by children; the children were housed in tiny portable homes which were designed to be temporary but, in many cases, it is over 5 years now and they are still there. Here the darkness seems very real. There seems to be no way out of this tiny island for these people. The tiny makeshift houses are more like a prison where the occupiers are being constantly watched, monitored, mistreated and abused, day and night.

The nature of the Panopticon here is of violence, not like the more natural form of observation that was discussed earlier (exhibitions, shows, etc). ***Anubumin*** thus questions humanity by shining a light on this state of in-betweenness – both support and violence simultaneously.

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[14] Ressler, O 2017, *Anubumin*, Oliver Ressler, accessed 20 April 2019, <www.ressler.at/anubumin>.
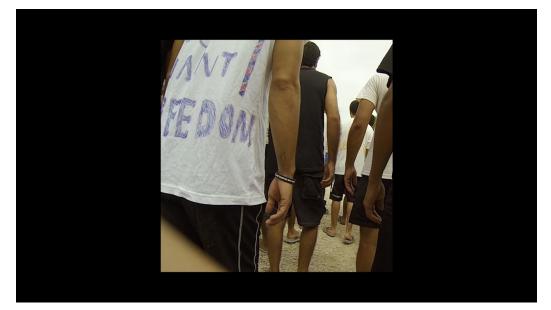[15] Op.cit.

Figure 3: Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, Still from the film *Anubumin* (18', 2017).

This is particularly pertinent in today's climate of mass immigration and crisis. The historical past is, in this way, intertwined with the present. At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Diasporic journeys are about settling down, about laying down roots 'elsewhere'.[16] (Brah: 614) These journeys must be historicised if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device.

There are two sides here: ***Anubumin*** is a fictional documentary but it nonetheless includes actual facts/evidence. History thus appears here both within and via art, in different ways, as a complex transaction between documentation and fiction, in which fiction is the guiding hand to bear the darkness and level of violence imposed on inheritances of the camp.[17] (Brah: 614)

Conclusion

To conclude, at the 'Between the Visible and Invisible' exhibition, the gallery space was used as a canvas to juxtapose the echo of departures and to reflect on the socio-political conditions of the host city (Sharjah, UAE), as well as to highlight the multiple levels of uncertainty around the world in the current political climate.

By referring to the notion of plasticity, the author has hoped to share new modes of temporality that are articulated within the context of uncertainty. The unknown and the dark in-between, as mentioned above, are also empowering and nurturing platforms for curiosity, change and flourishment, as seen with *Psychoréographies – a performative inquiry for inner and outer spaces* and *Anubumin*, both reflections on different experiences of migratory life (temporary adopted homeland and forced homeland respectively). These semi-biographical accounts demonstrate how the same geographical/physical space can come to articulate different histories and how 'home' can simultaneously be a place of both safety and terror.[18]

The question remains, could we establish a language to trace the personal experiences of diaspora and how could the images of these journeys provide us with an in-depth understanding of the travels involved? Today we can probably agree that there are many different notions of 'here' and 'there', and words no longer have a singular meaning for everyone. It perhaps depends on who is referring to 'here' or 'there', where she/he is coming from and how long she/he has considered 'here' as 'here' and 'there' as 'there'. There does not necessarily have to be this dichotomy of course; it is possible to be both 'here' and 'there' at the same time.

Georges Didi-Huberman in his recent publication refers to the notion of 'in-betweenness' as uncertain transformation of identity. He argues "You feel less here, and more there. Where 'here'? Where 'there'? In dozens of 'heres', in dozens of 'theres', that you didn't know, that you didn't recognise. Dark zones that used to be bright. Light zones that used to be heavy. You no longer end up in yourself, and reality, even objects, lose their mass and stiffness and no longer put up any serious resistance to the ever-present transforming mobility."[19]

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[16] Brah, p. 615.

[17] op.cit.

[18] Brah, op.cit., p. 615.

[19] Didi-Huberman, G., 2018. *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions.* MIT Press. p. 8.

Applying what Didi-Huberman says, in both of the works mentioned above, it is essential to neither be 'here' nor 'there', but rather to take a position in-between; in other words, to be far enough to see well but close enough to understand well.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.