Essay Title: Species of Spaces

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FINEARTS 799: Master of Fine Arts

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6 November 2020

Abstract

The spaces we occupy are like containers, holding social, emotional and aesthetic narratives. Following the tradition of Western genre painting, where a room becomes a site for inquiry, this thesis examines the forces at play in the representation of an interior space in order to further my art practice. To understand the narratives informing our spaces, I found the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1901-1991) trialectic (a triple dialectic) model of space creation a useful framework to organise my research interests. This thesis is consequently split into three categories that correspond to this model. The first section, 'The Epoch of Space', relates to Lefebvre's notion of 'conceived space'; that is, the conceptualisation of space. This exerts social and political power on spaces. In this section, I also look at French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) concept of heterotopias, first mentioned in his book *The Order of Things* (1966) and later explored in more detail in his essay 'Of Other Spaces' (1984). The second section of this thesis, 'Brush History Against the Grain', relates to Lefebvre's notion of 'lived space'. The forces at play here are social relationships and autobiographical experiences. As a starting point for this section, I use recollections of my own personal 'lived space'. Following this, I reflect upon the ideas that Harvard University Professor Svetlana Boym (1966-2015) explores in her book the *Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and link this with Berlin-based art and culture theorist Jan Verwoert's (b. 1972) 2013 essay 'Historic Desire Unbound: On the work of Paulina Olowska'. The third and final section of this thesis is 'Representation of the World', which corresponds to Lefebvre's idea of 'perceived space' and represents "the practical basis of the perception of the outside world" (Lefebvre, 1991 p.40). This input into the model contains characteristic spatial sets that question and transform the social constructs of a site in society. Thinking about the sites artists occupy, I have situated this as contemporary art spaces. This section ends with a discussion of two recent painting shows. Drawing on the feminist and ethical thoughts of the French writer and intellectual Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), I reflect upon the content and contribution of these exhibitions via a detour around historic and concurrent discourse on gender bias in the art world.

Species of Spaces

Conceived Space: The Epoch of Space

In the art world, the ubiquity of the term 'space' requires contextualisation. In his 2015 *Frieze* essay 'Space is the Place', Norwegian-based cultural theorist Timotheus Vermeulen declares "'Place' and 'space' are terms that have recently made a comeback in art-speak" (2015). This declaration is exemplified by the ways in which contemporary artists are making works that engage with a variety of conceptual ideas about space. Vermeulen lists creative inspiration as traversing areas such as "the space of semio-capitalism to the place of the body, from the virtual studio to the non-place of the museum, from sites of critical exchange to the spatial logic of our current Anthropocene" (2015). This current engagement with space that Vermeulen notes echoes observations Foucault first made in a lecture he gave in 1967 and later published under the title 'Of Other Spaces'. In this essay, Foucault predicts that the twentieth century would be defined as "an Epoch of Space". He describes the preceding nineteenth century as a period obsessed with history, "with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of men and the menacing glaciation of the world". He observes that he himself is experiencing a time of simultaneity: living at a point in existence that he considers a period of juxtaposition. He imagines that the experience of people living in the future twentieth century would no longer be the straight road of a long life developing over time, but conceived rather as a "network that connects points and intersects with its own skein".

Vermeulen's *Freize* article cites Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, as providing the basis for much of the current discourse on space occurring within the art world today. As a painter, I have been thinking about the spaces that I occupy, from the Western university I attend to my background of Nordic European culture that has shaped me, as well as in terms of the different ideas of space that I try to imbue on the two-dimensional canvas. Understanding how space is defined in this Western tradition was of particular focus during the 1960s and 1970s for the group of thinkers that I have researched for this essay. I have chosen thinkers from this era in particular because of the attention given to conceptualising space at this time. This preoccupation with space can be seen as a response to the many

'isms' that where born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, urbanism, rationalism and secularism. The development of these systems and ideologies coincided with the birth of a new academic discipline called sociology, the study of which informed the philosophical ideas of both Lefebvre and Foucault. Vermeulen illustrates the breadth of Lefebvre's study of space in his essay with a quote taken from the philosopher. "Our environment… may resemble a language, a sign system, but cannot, and should not, be reduced to it. Semiology may therefore be drawn upon when studying space but should always be applied in relation to other models of analysis, foremost among them phenomenology and social theory" (2015). Foucault also contextualised his study of space within the disciplines of both phenomenology and sociology: "Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites… the phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with qualities and perhaps thoroughly phantasmatic as well" (p. 23). In this essay, Foucault describes 'the space in which we live' as relational and time-based. He defines space as the experience of being drawn out of ourselves and into space as our journey through life occurs. The space in which we find ourselves is composed of many different parts all having widely dissimilar elements. This heterogeneity of space is the fundamental basis of Lefebvre's previously mentioned trialectic model of space creation.

Lefebvre's three categories of space – conceived, lived and perceived – help us to consider the different rhetorical spaces within which space is being socially produced. It is also important to realise that the forces are not mutually exclusive and, when thinking about space, you can enter through any one of these categories and end up looking through the lens of all three. For Lefebvre, the motivation of this study was a search for a way to create more egalitarian societies. Vermeulen explains how Lefebvre's model borrows the triad from Marxist use of dialectics: 'synthesis' being the reaction of 'antithesis' to 'thesis', with space-creation being the area that is produced by a continuous negotiation of 'top-down plans' and 'bottom-up experience' (2015). As an example, if you enter through 'lived space', you can begin by looking at the social practices out of which different spatial arrangements emerge, say apartment layouts with bedrooms, dining rooms or kitchens. Moving into 'perceived space', you see how those

different spatial arrangements shape human lives and cultures. Or you could choose to enter through a 'conceived space', with plans and theoretical descriptions of space, like a blueprint of an apartment. Space is continuously negotiated by the interplay of these three forces. Lefebvre saw space as a social phenomenon, arguing that space is socially produced, differently at different times, and differently by different cultures.

Foucault also produced concepts of space that engaged with aspects of the sociological discourse of this time; specifically, the emergence of the modern nation state, its constituent institutions, its units of socialisation, and its means of surveillance (Harriss, 2020). It was art critic and curator Lynne Cooke's (b. 1952) 2002 essay 'Neo Rauch', which describes how the contemporary German artist Neo Rauch (b. 1960) uses the content and construction of his paintings to discuss his worldview, that first introduced me to Foucault's concept of heterotopias (a term Foucault uses to describe 'spaces of otherness'). With heterotopias, the philosopher is proposing an 'alternative space' to the spatial concept demarcated in classical philosophy and physics. In her essay, Cooke suggests Rauch creates heterotopias on his canvas that navigate a "precarious path between the twin dangers of nostalgia for a lost idyll, an Edenic world of social unity and communality, and a blanket condemnation of present conditions as riddled by anomie and despair, moral, social and psychological" (Cooke, 2002). Cooke's identification of the 'worlds within worlds' constructed in Rauch's pictorial space immediately opened the possibilities that the abstraction of space could offer my artistic practice. Exploring and understanding the ways that Rauch links the social creation of spaces with the material, and imbues the complexities of how humans and spaces interact in his painterly language, has informed the body of paintings I have completed alongside this thesis.

Cooke shapes her discussion on Rauch's paintings with an epigraph from Foucault's essay 'Of Other Spaces' that defines space as relational: "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space" (Foucault, 1984). Foucault begins this essay with commentary on the relational forces he sees at play, describing how he believes the social practices, institutional forces and material complexity of humans and spaces interact. His research in these areas –

particularly prisons and mental health institutions, combined with his interest in knowledge and power structures – led to his work on the 'normalising' power of spaces and his conception of heterotopias. In the essay, Foucault develops the idea of heterotopias as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted". (p. 24) Unlike utopias, which are unrealised representations of a perfect society and have no location, heterotopias are a physically existing space. They have a shadowy existence, somewhere between fully recognised socially and non-being that require the help of the imagination to be comprehended. For Foucault, heterotopias are spaces that are 'neither here nor there', such as the moment you see yourself in a mirror, or designed gardens for example in the Persian tradition, which represent a juxtaposition of spaces and time that cannot coexist and yet also form 'real' sites. Heterotopias are ambiguous and contradictory spaces; they are often hidden away, on the outskirts of town or the underbelly of society.

Foucault concurs with Lefebvre that, just as societies produce their own kinds of spaces, every society also produces its own heterotopias. This concept is interesting to painters and can be seen in the resurgence of contemporised genre painting. The Swedish artist Mamma Andersson's (b. 1962) oeuvre is one example of this. Her dreamlike picturing of Scandinavia through a dialectical figuration of domestic interiors or snowy landscapes, with indexical Nordic art motifs and imagery from old films, are a portrait of heterotopian space. Andersson's practice concerns the construction of the self by questioning the influences one absorbs. Foucault writes that to describe a heterotopia, and to understand what meaning they have, "we might imagine a sort of systematic description… that would, in a given society take, as its object the study, analysis, description and 'reading' of these different spaces, of these other places" (p. 24). In my paintings, I think about constructing heterotopia through a melding together of old black-and-white family snapshots, referencing flashes of coloured textile and decorative motifs that are in my memory-banks or imagined spaces from novels that I have read. The first paintings in this present series included people, but with blank faces. This caused me to question who I was painting, and, in my most

recent works, I began to think more about how we form identity. What influences do we absorb? How are we influenced in understanding what space we occupy in the world?

These questions lead me to ideas about the societal construction of personhood that Foucault discusses in his critique of scientific knowledge in *The Order of Things*. Foucault credits an amusing essay by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) for helping him to rethink the customary ways of dividing up the world in order to make sense of it (Kuorinki, 2012). Borges' inspiring passage included an absurd list of animal classifications that could be found in an imaginary Chinese Encyclopaedia. Borges's taxonomy is in the form of a bestiary (an anachronistic source of scientific knowledge for medieval society) and was the catalyst for Foucault's concept of epistemes (his analyses of the history of science). According to Foucault, an 'epistemic interpretation' of understanding includes the assumptions we have which are so deeply ingrained in our thinking that we are not even aware of them.

For Foucault, knowledge is about factoring in these unconscious rules that govern our cultural behaviour, as well as the conscious ones of which we are aware (Foucault, 2010). He introduces the concept of an episteme with an analysis of Diego Velázquez's (1599-1660) 1656 painting *Las Meninas*. By studying this painting, Foucault illustrates the underlying cultural codes of the classical period (1660-1899), which is also considered the 'age of representation' (Johnson, 2015). Going beyond simple stylistic, contextual and iconographic elements, Foucault illustrates how paintings not only *show* us things but can also challenge us to *think* about them. With his identification of heterotopian moments within the portrait of King Philip IV and his wife Mariana in *Las Meninas*, for example, we wonder why the royal models are only seen as a reflection in a small mirror on the back wall of the room. Why, also, has the painter chosen to show himself, the back of the canvas and the spectators in his representation? All clues lead us, Foucault shows, to the space created on Velázquez's canvas: "[it] hovers at the threshold of modernity, where for the first time 'man' will become the complex and profound subject and object of knowledge". This is an epistemic shift (p.8). This illustration of how a representational painting can offer a new episteme or way of thinking is important to what I am trying to achieve in my own painting practice. The best way to explain how I incorporate an 'epistemic interpretation' to my painting practice

comes from my enjoyment of reading novels. The different details and stylistic flavour of representations that I as a reader unconsciously create in my mind's eye, from what the author has described and from how I understand the world, is an epistemic interpretation.

The French novelist Georges Perec (1936-1982) published *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* in 1974. In this poetic work, organised in a Cartesian extension, Perec opens infinite ways to contemplate how space is occupied. Perec's book excites me with the other-dimension-ness he creates in absolute flatness. He produces socio-spatial dimensions on the flat page by crafting together words with grammatical structures and semantic shading. Perec begins by stating that the subject of his book is "not the void exactly, but rather what is round about or inside it. To start with, then, there isn't very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us".

This opening paragraph describes 'nothing' so beautifully and, for me, sounds like a literary representation of an episteme. It asks you the reader to visualise all of your complex ideas about space, both conscious and unconscious. *Species of Spaces* is a book that imagines different systematic descriptions for spaces. Picturing an apartment layout based on the functioning of the senses, Perec suggests you would label the spaces a 'gustatorium' and an 'auditory'. You might also have a 'seeery', a 'smellery' and a 'feelery', although he wonders what these might look like (Perec, p.31, 1974). There is a passage in the middle that references Borges's writing and appears placed there by Perec to reference Foucault's forensic analyses undertaken in *The Order Of Things*. It seemed to me to be an Oulipian riddle embedded in the text, with Foucault's notion of heterotopia as the key to accessing the book.

> All the rooms, except one, were used for something. The whole point was to find this last room. It was no harder when all's said and done, than for the readers in Borges's story of the 'Library of Babel' to find the book that held the key to all the others (p.34, 1974).

Like Perec, I love to make lists. I work in series and my practice tends towards a catalogue, always searching for an order of things. Reading this book informed my painterly practice to such an extent that it felt right to give the paintings produced alongside this thesis the same title as Perec's novel.

In a parody of scientific intention, my *Species Of Spaces* is organised in sections taken from the structure of Perec's book: an odd data set of exponentially increasing categories of space. The page, the bed, the bedroom, the apartment, the apartment building, the street, the neighbourhood, the town, the countryside, the country, the world, space. Perec's unexpected categories of space challenge our modern way of dividing up the world in order to rationalise and understand it.

Lived Space: Brush History Against the Grain

My strongest memory is not actually a memory but, rather, something created from my imagination. In fact, I have quite a few memories I imagined and then came to remember as if they had really happened. These memories were originally my father's, transferred to me as a child through the stories he told me about his life growing up in Norway and the hours we spent together looking at his old childhood photo albums. His recollections were like magical stories to me, and I would happily listen to him often repeat them. He recounted these tales with a sense of longing and in such detail that, at some point, I conjured up my own cinematic version of this brilliant life. My version a heterotopia that I imagined has now become a core strategy that I employ in my painting practice. There was the one about the famous Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen picking my grandfather up from school. The one about my grandfather taking the German surrender at the end of World War II, and my favourites – the ones about my great-grandmother's love affairs. Having moved to New Zealand from Norway in 1968, my father's sense of displacement and alienation from his family resulted in him suffering from a severe affliction of nostalgia. Once deemed a medical condition, a form of homesickness, nostalgia is now considered to serve an existential function. It gives the afflicted and those around them the benefit of the positive emotions that they experience during a bout of nostalgic recollection. Reverie, for my father, served a healing function. As he carried those around him along for the ride on his fantastic trips down memory lane, he experienced a sense of social support and connectedness to the new life and family that he created in New Zealand. These shared journeys formed meaning and constructed a sense of identity for him to carry around in his new home of Aotearoa.

For me, my father's verbal sketches of a Scandinavian utopia opened a world of grand possibilities quite out of step with my surroundings. This provoked a delicious sense of disorientation, like the early explorers such as Amundsen might have felt: "Always lost because they'd never been to these places before," happy to simply be a "wanderer in a terrain where even the most familiar places aren't quite themselves and are open to the impossible" (Solnit, pp. 14-25, 2006). The result of sharing my 'lived space' with my father, the consummate storyteller brimming with phantasmata, is a nostalgic lens on my representation of the world. This is expressed in my painting practice by the visual language of reference I employ to activate ideas of nostalgia. These represent both personal and shared histories that capture notions of fashion and style that refer to another time.

Exploring reflection and longing as a guide lead me to Boym's 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia*. The dichotomy of this title brings to mind the White Queen's comment to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871): "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards". The value of nostalgic recall for envisioning and planning a future are ideas explored by Boym in her book and in her article 'The Off-Modern Mirror', published in the journal *e-flux* in 2010. Boym slows down our immediate response to the idea of nostalgia by modifying the concept with two possible prefixes: restorative or reflective. She describes restorative nostalgia as a "wish to resurrect the times before the recent past, to restore things to their former glory, a rebirth of the old as the new nation" (Boym, Intro xviii, 2016). We see this manifesting in groups of people who try to restore their own cultural practices that have been lost through displacement, as in my father's case, or more traumatically taken from them in conquest, colonisation and/or persecution. It is a toxic mutation of Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia that is at the core of the recent revivals of nationalism we have seen round the world. This deviation has created the conditions that made Brexit and Donald Trump's US presidency possible, and Le Pen a near thing for France. This version of restorative nostalgia has been intensified by a disenchantment with globalism, specifically global capitalism. The recollections of those suffering from this form know two main plots, the return to origins and the conspiracy (Intro xiii-xix). Restorative nostalgics, such as Brexit voters, take themselves very seriously. They are willing to fight and die for an

'us', though they fail to comprehend that within the melting pot that is our global economy, the nationalistic 'us' that they wish to restore no longer exists. Their desire to retro-activate borders and focus on national solutions for the problems humanity faces today is misguided and dangerous.

Our epoch to date is experiencing a deadly pandemic, systemic racial human rights injustices, profound environmental damage to our planet, multiple refugee crises, and devastating poverty with the failure of modern capitalism. For each of these individual catastrophes, allowing nostalgia for the Empire to create an identity politics of nationalism and an intolerance of racial and cultural difference is not the solution. Boym does point out, however, that some forms of nostalgia can be positive. It can be the catalyst for taking action to restore cultural practices and can create cultural spaces that give voice to the desires and concerns of modern nations in flux. Nostalgia is a useful prompt for creativity as it can provide a way for human culture to process trauma. Perhaps it is not surprising that we are seeing artwork engaging with issues of time, memory, histories, nostalgia, antiquity and the past dominating the contemporary art scene, both locally and internationally (Dornauf, 2020). The second prefix Boym uses to modify the word nostalgia is reflective, an affliction in which one is more critically aware. As an artist, I find this variation a particularly useful lens through which to look. Boym explains that, for a reflective nostalgic, critical thinking and the longing they feel are not opposed to one another. Affective memories do not absolve the sufferer's responsibility for compassion, judgment or critical reflection (Intro xiii-xix).

Reflective nostalgics are fully aware that the place they long for is irretrievably lost, perhaps because it only ever existed as a tangible yet unrealised possibility (Intro xviii). Reflective nostalgia becomes an art of intimation, of speaking about the most personal and intimate pain and pleasures through 'cryptic disguise' (p. 252). Boym describes it as playing a game of hide-and-seek with your hopes and memories in a way that allows for reflection on the past without succumbing to rose-tinted longing. The nostalgia Boym is describing here might be seen in my father's longing for the fjords of Norway but needs to be reflected upon more broadly as a symptom of the current epoch. In an interview she did for the 'Thinking Aloud' YouTube channel, called 'Slow Thinking in Modernity', Boym stresses the interconnectedness of nostalgia and modernity. She uses the term 'modernity' here as Baudelaire

understood it in his 1864 essay 'The Painter of Modern Life', as not only referring to the modern era, but also containing ideas and opinions that critique it, too: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (Baudelaire & Mayne, p. 13, 1970). For Boym (and Baudelaire), the term 'modernity' encapsulates more than just the transitory and ephemeral. It is a dialectical concept that also considers what is persistent to change in the complex and contradictory energies at play in the modern world. Boym explains that she selected the term modernity to encourage more reflection, asking us to slow down our thinking and to critically consider our progress in the modern era and perceive the problems that have arisen from the rapid rate of change experienced during this period. We have gained much, particularly in technology, but our losses have been significant, too; cultural traditions and belief systems, to name a few. Boym advocates for a 'slow thinking movement' to counteract the fast tempo of contemporary life that has produced a new rhythm of time that prevents critical thinking.

Verwoert's essay 'Historic Desire Unbound: On the work of Paulina Olowska' links Boym's ideas on the future of nostalgia with Baudelaire's concept of modernity. At the centre of Polish artist Olowska's (b. 1976) multi-disciplinary art practice is the rediscovery of things and their meanings inspired by nostalgia. This rediscovery of things, be it an object, a piece of art history or a woman in history, causes Olowska to zigzag around her reference points and find stories that others might have overlooked as being unimportant. Yet, these "dumb stories or leftovers", as Olowska puts it, hold important or hidden meanings that bring the artist's attention into focus (Frieze Studio Productions, 2019). Verwoert identifies the narratives within Olowska's oeuvre as the female inheritance of the modernist cause. By locating and re-examining the contributions women have made to the modern era, Olowska changes historic narratives; she finds inspiration in literature, biography and archival imagery. Consequently, her muses have been wide reaching, from early twentieth-century avant-garde women who contributed to art's history but still remain marginalised, such as her portrait of English painter *Vanessa Bell* (2004), to the anonymous muse for the *Alchemist* (2015), who was discovered in a secret collection of erotic Polaroids once owned by Italian architect Carlo Mollino. Olowska lets her nostalgic sensibility

guide her image selection, from modernist magazines to old knitting patterns. Her practice asks viewers to both reappraise the women she chooses to paint and scrutinise the West's consumer capitalism and its associated objectification of women (Mullins, 2019). By Olowska selecting muses from people with whom she has particular 'affinities and solidarities', she gives focus through her art practice to the previously marginalised female effort and thoughtfulness that goes into the daily tasks to create happy lives. Modern capitalist society puts virtually no value on these domestic contributions; in fact, it barely even notices them. However, in his essay, Verwoert suggests that it is these overlooked narratives that have shaped our modern world, not only the male-gendered grand master plans that get routinely documented. Verwoert sees Olowska as an artist whose work poses ways of correcting this significant omission. He explains that her re-presentation of the past is a certain kind of political statement; a call for us to appreciate her rediscoveries via Boym's idea of reflective nostalgia and for them to be re-mediated and re-valued. This kind of critical reflection – on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia – led Boym to publish her musings online in her 'Notes for an Off-Modern Manifesto' project and to sketch out her views in the *e-flux* article 'The Off-Modern Mirror' (2010).

Off-Modern is a contemporary worldview that took shape in the first decade of the twenty-first century. At the heart of it is the idea of a detour, which suggests unexpected exploration and encourages us to venture into unchartered territory to recover unforeseen pasts. Rather than the fast-changing prefixes that attach implacable forward movement, such as 'post', 'pre', 'anti' or 'neo', Boym inserts the adverb 'off', as in 'off kilter', 'off the wall' or 'off course', which confuses our sense of direction (2010). Her proposition is to send us on a detour, forcing us to explore side-shadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress that has been blindly followed. We are to "explore interstices and disjuncture, and gaps in the present order to co-create the future" (2010). As an artist, the creed of off-modernism offers much, for the movement is not an 'ism' but "a prism of vision and a mode of acting and creating in the world that tries to remap the contemporary landscape filled with the ruins" – ruins that draw from the past (2010). Thwarting the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history, "Off-modernism offers a critique of both the modern fascination with newness, and the no less modern reinvention of tradition". In

the off-modern tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together (Boym, Intro xvii, 2016).

Perceived Space: Representation of the World

In *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir declares, "The Representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with absolute truth" (2010, p. 196). De Beauvoir is pointing out the folly of believing in the authenticity of representations, reminding us that a representation is not objective or unmediated but, rather, a societal construction that stands instead of the thing to which it refers (Hall et al., 2013). I have situated this discussion under Lefebvre's concept of perceived space because it is within spaces of representation, such as art galleries, that one can observe the continuous negotiation of how different decisions about spatial arrangements have shaped human lives and cultures. Lefebvre considers the perceived space of our contemporary art sites as a 'synthesis' of the buildings that define the spaces (top-down plans) and the shortcomings of earlier conceptions about them (bottom-up experiences). Our art sites are therefore socially produced by a continuous negotiation of complex symbolisations and ideations.

Looking at some of the cultural practices and gender perceptions of the contemporary art world, and how this space has been socially produced differently, at different times, lead me to American art historian Linda Nochlin (1931-2017) and her 1971 essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. Like de Beauvoir, Nochlin perceived that a correction to the historical discourse on representation needed to occur and so she embarked on the construction of a feminist art history. An anecdote told by the authors of *An Illustrated Guide to Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"* tells how Nochlin's essay was a response to a conversation she had with the art dealer Richard Feigen. Feigen turned to Nochlin and said, "Linda, I would love to show women artists, but I can't find any good ones. Why are there no great women artists?" (Morgan & Purje, 2017). The assumptions Feigen must have held to ask this question, and all that they implied, haunted Nochlin and were the catalyst for the "canonical essay [which] precipitated a paradigm shift within the discipline of art

history" (Nochlin & Reilly, 2015). The profound change Reilly credits Nochlin with achieving is that instead of accepting a superimposed correction done by bolstering the reputations of critically neglected or forgotten women artists, her model allowed analysis of women artists according to the values by which artists are historicised and discussed (Morgan & Purje, 2017). She gave art historians a rubric that took into consideration the social and institutional structures that underpin artistic production, the art world and art history.

Nochlin understood that feminist art history is not just a necessary corrective afterthought "grafted on to a serious, established discipline", but an on-going project to redress the art historical and critical neglect of female contributions to culture (2017). By addressing the economic constraints and social stigma women in the art world have historically faced, Nochlin questions how we define success and the signification of being labelled a genius. De Beauvoir also addressed this in *The Second Sex*, pointing out that it is the patriarchal restrictions that surround women that deprive them of engaging with the world as men engage with it. She looks back at the history of humanity and suggests that it is the lessons men have had in violence and freedom that make the men we have historicised as 'great' and 'genius' take on the weight of the world. De Beauvoir believed that female subjugation meant woman had historically lacked the same sense of responsibility and engagement with the world, and it is this that is the profound reason for 'herstory' mediocrity (Beauvoir, p. 85, 2010). We recognise the issues de Beauvoir identifies as the focus of first-wave feminism, which achieved emancipation for most females in the Western world. It is important to note that de Beauvoir believed that patriarchy would not simply end with changes to our legal and economic systems. She believed that 'the rule of the father' has multiple dimensions, including the moral, social and cultural.

In her 2017 book *A New Dawn for the Second Sex*, Dutch philosopher Karen Vintges (b. 1953) mirrors de Beauvoir's view that the challenges feminists face today are not simply legal and economic. Vintges confirms what we have all observed: women around the world hold influential positions; however, she stops us from concluding that women's liberation has been completed. She presents statistics that show inequality is standard between men and women in 'influential positions' of power and

she demonstrates the resultant power asymmetries that manifest in women's lives. Vintges likens patriarchy to the multi-headed mythological Hydra, wherein the improved gender parity we have observed are the legal and economic heads of patriarchy that have been cut off – and yet more heads grow back in different domains. In Greek mythology, for Heracles to defeat Hydra, he needs to distinguish the immortal head of the monster from the new heads that rear-up again after they had been cut off. Vintges proposes that the immortal head of patriarchy still needs to be slain to achieve gender parity. This she identifies as "the 'presentational' realm of rite, art, and myth that conveys ideas not in a grammatical scheme of expression, but in the shape of 'forms', i.e. holistic 'pictures' or patterns" (p. 129). Vintges' immortal head is a personification of American philosopher Susanne Langer's (1895-1985) concept of art as the "creation of symbolic forms of human feeling", presented in Langer's 1942 book *Philosophy in a New Key, a study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art.* Langer saw art's role in culture as one that provides clarity, helping us to understand the experience of humanity by presenting holistic pictures and patterns or symbolic forms of human feeling (Correia, 2019). What Vintges suggests is that art, which is a representation of the order of reality mediated through the human mind, is the truest reflection of society. Therefore, it is the presentational realm of art that holds the key to perceiving persistent patriarchal constructs.

Assessing the art world in 2020 we see it full of diversity, and many women artists have achieved important breakthroughs. For example, Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) finally saw recognition with an extraordinary retrospective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, titled *Paintings for the Future* and held from October 2018 to April 2019. How we define a 'great artist' has evolved sufficiently that af Klint who, had previously not been thought to measure up to standard, has now been designated this moniker. Yet, the ideas presented in Nochlin's essay still resonate today.

In September 2019, *The New York Times* culture reporter Julia Jacobs published 'Female Artists Made Little Progress in Museums Since 2008, Survey Finds'. Her article revealed that "in the past decade, only eleven percent of all work acquired by the country's top museums was by women". Closer to home, the art activist group The Guerrilla Girls' exhibition at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in

2019, titled *Reinventing the 'F' Word – Feminism!*, spurred Wellington-based journalist Anna Knox to quantify the representation of female artists. Knox published 'Gender Bias and Art in Aotearoa: A Spinoff Survey Reveals the Harsh Reality' (Sept. 2019), which presented data that indicated public galleries in Aotearoa are starting to approach parity in their representation of male and female solo shows, but unfortunately there is still disparity here, as this notion of parity does not nearly reflect the ratio of female-to-male art school graduates (Knox, 2019). At Art Basel Switzerland in 2019, an all-women panel discussion, titled 'Mind the (Price) Gap – It is a Gender Thing', was held to discuss why it is that work by women artists continues to be undervalued. Their talk revealed that the kinds of external limitations identified by Nochlin and experienced by earlier generations of women artists are still prevalent today. They noted the responses of several institutions and galleries to organise women-only shows to redress the under-representation of female artists. Is there so much to redress that women-only shows are needed to re-balance the art world? Or is it that the measurements for value analysis need to become 'other' because the producers of the artworks being assessed are 'other' (that is, by women and not by the 'commonplace')? These 'other' aesthetics concern narratives that need to be perceived as worthwhile before we can see gender parity in the art world. Nochlin's robust analysis considers this assumption as well declaring:

> Another attempt to answer the question involves shifting the ground slightly and asserting, as some contemporary feminists do, that there is a different kind of "greatness" for women's art than for men's, thereby postulating the existence of a distinctive and recognizable feminine style, different both in its formal and its expressive qualities and based on the special character of women's situation and experience. (Nochlin, p.3, 1971)

Nochlin concludes that although female and male artists experience society differently, there is no easily specified or commonly defined quality of 'femininity' to link the styles of women artists generally. She does, however, leave the door open slightly on this point with the qualification that although it has not happened yet (1971), it remains within the realm of possibility that "art produced by a group of

consciously united and purposefully articulate women intent on bodying forth a group consciousness of feminine experience might indeed be stylistically identifiable as feminist, if not feminine, art" (p. 3).

Since 1971, many such exhibitions have been organised; a recent example is one organised by Polish art historian and curator Natalia Sielewicz, titled *Paint Also Known as Blood: Women Affect and Desire in Contemporary Painting*, held at The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw from 7 June to 11 August 2019. Sielewicz describes the curatorial idea for the show as an interest in what we can learn from representation by and of women. She invited fifty women to be part of this project, briefing the artists for a response, using paint, to two major challenges. First, she asked what tensions are provoked when asking a woman if there is a way that she should be depicted, and also how a woman wants to depict herself. Overarching these first enquires was a second question regarding gestures of self-creation: can women be fully autonomous? Can they be detached from subconsciously internalised clichés and cultural codes? Olowska contributed two paintings to this project, *Ewa Wawrzoń in the outfit from the play "The Rhinoceros" (1961)* (2013) and *I danced in front of the Opera Ballet (Krystyna Mazurówna)*, (2015).

In Olowska's practice, the artist confronts the multitude of female representations presented to us in today's oversaturated visual reality. With her two paintings, she sets up a discourse about the identity and image of women in visual culture, or the 'presentational realms' that Vintges tells us holds the key to perceiving persistent patriarchal constructs. The artist explores what can be seen on a canvas that we cannot see in the published image; she forces us to perceive dominant 'presentational forms' in our cultural codes. Olowska's practice could be described as a re-picturing of a 'relational order of things' as her paintings inspire us to unpack the arrangement of elements in images. She achieves this in two ways. First, she selects images from the past to paint that resurrect collective memory and indexically reference social and cultural norms of those times. Second, with her muse selection, she chooses to depict the supporting actress instead of the historically acknowledged 'star' of the show.

The 'project' type nature of Sielewicz's *Paint Also Known as Blood* exhibition also engages with de Beauvoir's ideas, contemporising them through the prism of Vintges' notion of 'feminism in a new key'. Vintges proposes that contemporary women's movements critically create new models of self and

society in their own contexts. She calls these 'feminist freedom practices', a concept she bases on de Beauvoir's ethical freedom projects as outlined in her essay 'The Ethics of Ambiguity' (1948). De Beauvoir states that to "will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision" (p. 24). The famous existentialist argued that one's own life has value so long as one attributes value to the lives of others by willing the freedom of others, and by means of friendship, indignation and compassion. Vintges explains that achieving a self-authorising, self-determining and self-governing life still also requires us to act according to the impositions of reason and universal laws (Vintges, p.60, 2017). Therefore, autonomy or freedom is only realised in an ethical project and 'feminist freedom practices' are solidarity projects for women with affinities to ethically choose their own way of life. These projects allow for global diversity of feminisms, framed as ethical projects to stop feminists from making the same errors of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and ageism that haunt the patriarchy.

With its implications of support and its potential to redress 'normalised' power structures in our art spaces, this notion is particularly exciting. An example of such a project is a discussion that occurred alongside the exhibition *Paulina Olowska: Destroyed Woman*, curated by art historian and critic Clément Dirié and held from 11 October to 16 November 2019 at Simon Lee Gallery, London. Comprising Sielewicz, Olowska and the French art historian and culture writer Elisabeth Lebovici (b. 1953), the discussion had an agenda of progressing discourse on gender power asymmetries in the art world. It covered the content of both *Destroyed Woman* and *Paint Also Known as Blood*, as well as these three speakers' own personal experiences and professional research of female representation. The exhibition title, *Destroyed Woman,* provided the main context for the discussion. The title was taken from a collection of three short stories written by de Beauvoir that philosophically questioned the representation of the 'Super Woman' type (p. 24 Vintges, 2017). In the stories, De Beauvoir describes three women who at a certain age feel destroyed or tired. Lebovici pointed out that de Beauvoir had written characters with no hope, and explained that this is both a state of being and a state of representation. This state of representation is also the central premise in Olowska's show. The artist explained she was asking, "Once you have grown into womanhood, how do you defend or preserve your freedom to be the woman you

want to be?" (Dirié, 2019). By asking this essential question, Olowska contemporises de Beauvoir's characters, offering new perspectives on female representation.

Olowska and Sielewicz's exhibitions are not unusual in the art world today; it is 'normal' for women to support other women. Vintges theories have helped me recognise these as a type of de Beauvoirian 'ethical project' and a powerful way to challenge the normalising power within our contemporary art spaces. For de Beauvoir, the key to a 'feminist conversion' is to 'assume' responsibility for it and realise that you are embarking on a lifelong trip rather than something that will be over soon or quickly achieved and 'surpassed', like escaping from prison (pp. 26-27). I see reflective nostalgia as an important artistic tool for implementing this kind of discussion into our cultural spaces. The detours and reflections used to connect points along the historical continuum of feminist art history provide inspiration for the creation of new feminist freedom practices projects to challenge these spaces that represent society.

Conclusion

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two… in 1969 did they say 'one' or 'blast-off'? It was not long after blast-off that Perec completed his *Species Of Spaces* – a time when the world was mad with space fever. This is one probable explanation for the focused engagement with conceptual ideas about space at this time. Like Lefebvre, Foucault and Perec, I see that "the conception of space has always been intertwined in the dimension between human beings and our existence on earth" (Bourque, 2014). For me, these readings have opened interesting links between social theory and crafts of the imagination, such as creative writing and painting. I am now conscious of my body taking up a certain amount of space and that all aspects of my life in and through space are also connected to the social spaces I have, do and will occupy. In my practice, the reworking or representing of found images of social spaces speaks to an engagement with the places where human interactions occur. Our daily activities can all be organised into these social spaces. Where we sleep, where we eat, where we work and where we choose to live.

I see reflective nostalgia as the catalyst that inspires my creative journey, a desire to remap my spaces with off-modern parameters. I am hopeful that, viewed through a reflective lens this time round, it might be possible to recapture different aspects of earlier modernities, to 'brush history against the grain' – to use German philosopher Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) expression – and to assign meaning to many of the preposterous aspects of our contemporary world. The Norway imagined in my *Species Of Spaces* is a heterotopia of nostalgic affliction, and a response to notions of displacement and migration. Boym believes that the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future. I believe this, too. For me, the canvas offers a space to re-negotiate history by connecting different locations in a heterotopian dimension. By examining the forces at play in the representation of an interior space as I relocate historical images to construct an imaginary space, I am asking how re-imagining our past could re-configure the present and, perhaps, re-kindle hope for the future.

Lefebvre modelled space as a dimension synthesised in a dialectic between human beings and our existence in the world, located at the juncture of our her/history, our subjectivity and the theoretical explanations of space. Appropriating Lefebvre's trialectic model for my painting practice is the closest I have come to adequately identify what it is I am trying to create on my canvas; that is, my ideas, notions and depictions of spaces.

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