

2013

Introduction: Arts, Spaces, Identities

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Recommended Citation

Dossin, Catherine and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel. "Introduction: Arts, Spaces, Identities." *Artl@s Bulletin* 2, no. 1 (2013): Article 1.

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Arts, Spaces, Identities

This issue of the *ARTL@S Bulletin* explores the interaction between space and national identity in the history of art. Space is, of course, at the core of ARTL@S' preoccupations. Our way of approaching space owes much to Henri Lefebvre and his insistence on considering space as more than just an abstract operative concept, i.e. as a concrete reality that is physical, mental, and social, that is to say lived, conceived, and perceived. We also embrace Lefebvre's idea that space is produced so that each society produces its own (physical, mental, and social) space.¹ Such a notion brings to the fore the idea of national identity and pushes us to investigate the complex relationship between space and identity as witnessed through the history of art.

Beyond the stimulating diversity of the papers gathered in this issue, three main ideas emerge that enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between space and identities:

1. The construction of what Benedict Anderson called "imagined communities" always involves the development of an imaginary space.²

The visual arts are commonly regarded as being privileged sites for the display of national identity, yet the relationship between space, art and identity begs further investigation, beyond the realm of mere representation. Through her meticulous research on 17th century Dutch

cartography, Elizabeth Sutton, for instance, examines how maps participate in the production of a national identity by not only recording, but also by performing the space lived, conceived, and perceived by the Netherlands as they expanded their territories to the North American continent.

The question of the representation of the *Other*, be it visual or discursive, is the counterpart of these "imagined communities." Imagining the *Other* thus involves imagining the physical, mental, and social space of the *Other*. This leads scholars to investigate those imagined other communities and those who imagined them. Taking on Moroccan travel writing of the 19th century, Ahmed Idrissi Alami shows how Moroccan thinkers shaped their understanding and critiques of French society through an analysis of "French" space such as railroads and zoological gardens. Conversely, Nikoo Paydar explains how the Parisian public who attended Diaghilev's *Schéhérazaïde* in 1910 came to identify the Russian identity of the Ballets Russes with the Orient, while in fact the Oriental space Diaghilev was offering them on stage was Russian.

2. In this interaction between space and identity, the spaces where art is displayed take on a strategic dimension. Museums, as a space where art is physically presented and experienced, can construct, reinforce, and deconstruct imagined identities.

Rosemary O'Neill's analysis of the exhibition *A Propos de Nice* illustrates this dynamic. By the late 1970s, Paris had not only lost its position as

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991).

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New ed. (London and New York: Verso Books, 2006).

the major international art center, but its position as the central artistic hub of France was threatened by the politics of decentralization. When the Centre Georges Pompidou opened in 1977, it showcased *À propos de Nice*, an exhibition which featured artists from the South of France that had acquired an international reputation in the 1960s, and promoted the provincial Occitan culture. As O'Neill demonstrates, the choice of this exhibition actually permitted to reconnect Paris with the international art market through the École de Nice, while presenting it as the center of decentralized France.

In order to understand the place of Turkish immigrants in today's German society, Courtney Dorroll turns to German museums. She considers the role played by German museums in curating a vision of multiculturalism that does not reflect the reality of daily-life but offers a discursive site where the identity struggle of Turkish minorities is rendered visible. Similarly Malgorzata Lisiewicz reflects on the role of museums as spaces where national identity is reproduced and produced. Using the National Gallery in Warsaw as a case study, she retraces the evolution of the concept of national identity in curating practices. She highlights the dilemma faced by contemporary Polish curators, who are trying to insert themselves on the international circuit of contemporary art, while displaying artists they claim as *the* representatives of Polish contemporary art.

3. In the visual or discursive construction of those spaces and identities, individuals, groups, and institutions are continuously taking positions.

As the essays demonstrate, the agents of this concrete, symbolic, and imaginary process of construction have to continuously negotiate between spatial hierarchies: from the local to the global or from the regional to the transnational. They manipulate the established hierarchies by opposing one spatial scale to the other in order to achieve their ambitions—whether those ambitions

or manipulations are conscious or not. Robert Jensen's essay on the identity of the School of Paris illustrates the shifting logics at work in the art world between the local, national and international. The label "École de Paris" effectively masked the sociological fact that the School of Paris was not French.

Likewise, as Lisiewicz shows, the creation of a global national identity for Polish contemporary art was considered as an answer to the dilemma of the National Art Gallery's endeavor to exhibit contemporary art in a national museum in a global context. Similarly, Ben Vautier's critique of maps of the "Côte d'Azur" offers a sharp comment on the hierarchies at work in France, and of its imagined national space and identity.

The complex relationships between regional, national, and international scales represent a major challenge for today's art historians and the ambition to write a global art history. Considering that our notion of what contemporary art was produced in and for 19th century Europe, Anna Brzyski argues that it cannot be used to discuss current Chinese artistic production because it fails at grasping Chinese art and culture. In other words, the physical, mental and social space of Chinese art is too different from the European space for its value system to apply. Brzyski thus calls on art historians to rethink their methods in order to better grasp the identity of Chinese art.

Beyond the individual conclusions each of the essays gathered in this issue reaches, as a whole they ultimately invite us to consider art as an intermediary site between space and identity. If art can feed nationalism and frame identities, it can also be the prism of a distant yet critical look on spaces and identities. As this issue of the *ARTL@S Bulletin* demonstrates, art allows us to deconstruct the symbolic production of spaces and the identities they translate by revealing the ideologies that underline them.