In-Between: The Spaces of Modernity

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IN-BETWEEN : THE SPACES OF MODERNITY

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

In

The School of Art

by
Elisa Fabris Valenti
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Abstract

During the past three years as a graduate student, I have experienced loneliness. Having recently emigrated from Italy, I have often asked myself why I am experiencing such hard times adjusting to a different country. My thesis explores this question. Referring to Marc Augé’s idea of non-place, I have chosen a geographical and spatial starting point to approach my work. Italian cities are built around the central piazza where social, political, and economic life revolves. In my thesis, I depict American spaces that lack specific location and create solitude within the urban corridors. Private feelings, such as loneliness, are paradoxes that we all share, no matter where we come from. I attempt to engage with people, breaking the cultural barriers of speaking a different language. In my videos, I wander “in-between spaces,” to symbolize my experience of loneliness as a foreigner.
Introduction

This thesis addresses my personal experience in American society, within anonymous spaces of circulation and consumption. I am intrigued by ethnologist Marc Augé’s idea of non-place. In his book, “Places and Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,” he discusses the idea of transitory spaces associated with modernism. Examples of non-places would be roads, hotel rooms, airports and shopping malls. His idea states that “supermodernity” creates interchangeable places of circulation. Peter Harrell and Schmitz argue, “people move in and through these places without leaving any traces of themselves and without finding traces of former users [...] no interaction takes place.”¹ In my video performances and photographs, I am attempting to create a visual manifesto of In-Between Spaces.

The first time I learned about in-between spaces, it was when Daniel Libeskind designed a link building to connect the Jewish Museum Berlin to other structures around it. The visitor then enters into a transitional space. I apply this same concept to my works. I emphasize those anonymous spaces which are links to somewhere else, and lack of specific locations — such as high-speed roads, airports, stairs, parking lots, and passageways. People inattentively move through these spaces every day; even though they are full of people, they do not promote community building or foster individual identity. Thus, they create solitude within the urban corridors and the illusion of being part of some bigger global scheme in the utopian city-world.² We all are driven by larger impersonal forces such as commercial corporations and massive buildings, which are the visible agencies of power. My limited time in American society has often demonstrated strong individualism and the constant desire of human perfection have introduced me to the feelings of alienation and loneliness. Within the in-between spaces, “people tend to ignore other people and

² Ibit.
develop a calculated indifference to the bodies with which one shares public transportation and the street.”

C.R. Rogers wrote the following about solitude, “This very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many people.” Therefore, my feelings of loneliness, so personal for me, are actually an inescapable paradox that we all share. Through my lens I show the loneliness that those urban realms promote.


Process

*In-Between: The Spaces of Modernity* began as a desire to understand my discomfort adjusting to a new country. When I decided to move to the United States to pursue my studies my self-confidence fell apart. I felt intimidated by a new language, and by another culture socially structured very differently from the culture I was used to, Italian. I spent a lot of time with myself, trying to find comfort. I grew up believing in the importance of relying on and relating to others. I think Italian culture is more collectivistic than individualistic—as I have found the American culture could be characterized. In my experience, I have noticed many people sitting alone at a bar, a coffee shop, or a restaurant; some Italians like me would consider this odd. Relative to Italian culture, I have come across aspects of American society where the single individual is often emphasized more, in its competitiveness and self-importance, which could lead to one being surrounded by impersonal relationships. In Italy, I grew up in a small family and a few friends from my childhood. I tried to re-create relationships I had with family and friends. However, I found myself with nobody. I was trying to create a space for myself in others’ lives. Finding my place in another culture has been difficult, and it has made me feel alone, waiting for warmth. During my second year in the United States, I decided to explore more about these feelings. My installation *Do not look at me I am shy* is about creating something familiar that could remind me of home. This piece was an important beginning to the subject matter I explore in my most recent thesis work. I do not really get homesick, but I have noticed there is something I miss that at first, I could not explain. I thought to have found my first answer in nature, as an organic and complete form of connection between my native country and this foreign one. Flowers are still flowers, leaves are still leaves, and even though I am far from everything I grow up with, we still share the same sky.

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Don’t look at me, I’m shy is an interactive kinetic installation made of paper and hardware components. I focused my work on physical computing, experimenting with Arduino and motion sensors. To relate this new knowledge with my personal work, I designed flowers created from moving parts, giving the illusion of the flower petals opening. To make the installation interactive, a motion sensor was placed strategically on the piece to activate it. The installation is about expressing feelings, memories and personal thoughts of my journey. Moving alone in another country gave me the opportunity to maintain and defend a cause close to my heart: preserving my affections. My work was already addressing the feeling of being in-between, and lonely. I expressed memories and emotions through the metaphor of a flower opening up in response to the presence of others. Similar to my past work, I witness the emotional repercussions of displacement in Don’t Look at Me, I’m Shy manifested in gestures, colors, and content.

I continued exploring concepts of loneliness, believing that my discomfort was caused only by not being able to relate with other people. I created another installation that combined video performances, a handmade plastic blanket, and an interactive handmade mask. The videos addressed the phases of my cultural adjustment. The blanket was the symbol of my inner struggle to find peace and comfort, emphasized by the materiality of the blanket, made of plastic, and not the soft and comfortable fiber that characterizes a common blanket. The mask represented the close relation with the viewers, who can interact with the piece seeing their own face projected on the mask. The viewer became my censored ego, witnessing my
experience. The video performance in particular represented my discomfort and my constant striving of inner peace. Like in my current work, the videos are played side by side, to create communication between the two videos. I found security and confidence when, finally, I shed my discomfort, and I was ready to let go of hostile thoughts about a foreign culture. I began to find myself through navigating a multitude of emotions. Piece by piece, I discovered more aspects related to my experience that helped me to build my current thesis work. My works, through different mediums and contents illustrate the emotional complexity related to relocation.
The Work

My process and the artistic journey have explored who I thought I was; my experience, and my perception of the United States. I am willing to give to viewers an intimate window into my experience. My video performances attempt to revive my journey. I bring the viewer to feel my loneliness as the product of a geographical and cultural reality I am experiencing. With my thesis, I want to communicate my belief that large roads, parking lots, and massive building complexes inflate one’s personal space, discouraging interaction and involvement with other people.\(^7\) The American lifestyle I am living does not make it easy to create relationships. Paul Tillich, who has written extensively on solitude, stated that loneliness can be conquered only by those who can bear solitude.\(^8\) Psychologist CR Rogers reaffirms this when he writes that what is most personal and unique in each of us is probably the very element, which would, if it were shared and expressed, speak most deeply to others.\(^9\) Being able to communicate such feelings, through the visual arts, means to me having the capacity to engage with people in a sincere way. Art breaks through the verbal barriers of speaking a different language.

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Performances

During my performances, I explore the relationship between my body and in-between spaces — areas that link different destinations. The body becomes both object and subject of the video. Through the camera, I am able to bring myself into an intimate relationship with the viewer. Challenging the established understanding around live performance — requiring a physical presence, from the artist seen through a screen. Bill Viola, who has always influenced my works and ideas, shows a sensibility in the relationship between the viewer and the work observed. He invites the viewer to meditate on what he is watching. Viola explains that after “fifty minutes of quiet stillness in a room of solitary individuals […] time opens up in an unbelievable way.”

The viewer contemplates details, movements, and any changes in the work. His works are means of connection among different cultures. He is able to cover themes considered universal: birth, death, love, sex, grief, and redemption. He is often influenced by spiritualism, such as Buddhist elements, Islam, and Christian mysticism.

Figure 2. Bill Viola, Room for St. John of the Cross (1983)

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Experiencing the installation *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983), with its evocative images, sounds, and objects, speaks to others even if it is deeply private. In my videos, I perform actions that I do not normally do such as stand motionless on roadsides or in American malls. Viola, describing his work *The Vapor* (1975) writes, "Inside becomes outside."\(^{11}\)

![Figure 3. Bill Viola, The Vapor (1975)](image)

What becomes the subject in my video performances is, in fact, a representation of my inner life, where I wander within different spaces. In the video *Il Teatro*, I am embodying my thoughts, tracing the evidence of my personal experience and feelings, slowly contemplating my emotions.

![Figure 4. Il Teatro](image)

I want my audience to follow this path with me, and to show them that there is another side of their everyday lives. I use video as the medium of expression because it allows me to fix the irrevocable passage of time. My performances exist beyond past and present, tearing apart the veil that separates the actual reality from memories. Thanks to my work, I have learned much about my surroundings and myself. Video has been the real investigative tool to communicate my state of mind to others.

Experiencing loneliness serves as a moment of *exploratio*, to explore my creativity, and enhances my imagination. The video installation is composed of a two-channel video composition. The videos are filmed using one-point perspective, and symmetry among the composition. I organized the layout to emphasize my figure—precisely positioned in the middle, to capture the audience’s focus. I decided to use symmetry to deprive the scene of dynamism. The scene flows smoothly, allowing the viewer to easily follow the interaction between the two videos. My figure is not only emphasized by the symmetry of the scene but also by using contrast through color, shape, movement, and space.

The space between the elements within the frame is detailed organized. Even if the video has one-point perspective and the camera is not moving, I created movement through the figure, and the other elements in the videos, which in some of the videos is the only element that is moving in the composition. The moving figure captures the attention of the viewer that follows the character as it walks. For example, in the videos Il Teatro (fig. 4), and *Il Ponte* she always walks perpendicular to the composition, moving forward the background until it became a small dot in the frame.
Although the size of the figure in the scene is very important, at the beginning of the video, you can clearly see the shape of the figure, but when it starts walking towards the background, it almost disappears. Colors have been carefully chosen as well. First, to create a contrast between the background and the figure itself. Second, to make the figure visible to the audience the whole time—even when it is very far and small. And last, as a link element throughout the entire video. In Il Teatro (fig.4), the composition can be divided into two parts, the upper side with houses equally divided between the left and right side, and the bottom side, which it looks like an amphitheater with empty steps and chairs. The empty chairs combined with the only human figure enforces the feeling of loneliness and alienation I have been experiencing. The video Il Ponte (fig. 5), is approaching an urban energetic environment. In fact, the figure is not surrounded by a large, empty space but there are cars in movement around her, her space is limited, and the frenzy of modern life is shown. The alignment of the entire composition goes towards the point where the figure stops walking and it mixes with the chaotic movement of the urban background. The eyes of the spectator follow the imagery line drown by the elements of the composition — like cars, roads, lights or the bridge. Even if the scene might result in chaos, it draws attention right to the figure walking, providing balance in the final perception of the video. Balance is not only gained through symmetrical composition; it is achieved through the cars in movement that links the two videos on the sides of the screen. My compositions are strongly influenced by film directors, like Wes Anderson, Stanley Kubrick, and Yasujiro Ozu. What these artists have in common is placing the spectator in the middle of the scene.
Yasujirō Ozu, aims to display visual essays about elements rarely explored in the modern cinema, such in-between spaces. His movies often present shots of long corridors, and the characters walking by horizontally or vertically. I relate with his style, for his ability to film private moments, always experienced in a stage of transit.

From Wes Anderson and Stanley Kubrick I used highly symmetrical elements. In the composition of my video performances, I feel close to Anderson and Kubrick’s obsession to carefully organize the elements within the frame.

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12 Kogonada, Yasujirō Ozu, “Passageways”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-R4pnVFgufA
Even though perfect symmetry deprives the scene of visual dynamism, they have developed their own undeniable visual style. Anderson’s movies show a more photographic style than a commercial cinematographic one. His scenes are static, which is uncommon for modern cinema, his colors are deeper, and his movements cautious by the way he connects humor and pain, which bring the spectator into laughing

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at central emotional events. On Kubrick’s work, Welsh writes that, “The satire of A Clockwork Orange was [...] allegorical, brutal, and deadly serious.” Kubrick’s narrative and composition create an extension of his characters mind, beyond time, space, and actual reality. For example, in the movie Shining, we see Jack’s insanity in his multiple metamorphoses in the forbidden room 237. Though his content is very different, Kubrick uses one-point perspective to guide the audience inside the action — instead of looking at from the outside. This technique, allows the viewer to psychologically react to the scene. My attempt to create dynamism is expressed, at the beginning of the performances, in the video Le Scale.

![Figure 9. Le Scale](image)

The figure appears and disappears simultaneously from one side of the screen to the other, increasing the visual impact between the two videos shown next to each other. To emphasize my message, I associate symmetry with the desire to build in the viewers expectations for what might break the uniformity of the composition. In the video Il Teatro (fig. 4) for example, even if nothing is happening, the audience tends to expect something to happen.

The Korean artist Kimsooja addresses issues of displacement, combining performances, video, and installations. Same as Kimsooja, I attempt to investigate my feelings through performances –using my body as predominant object. Kimsooja appears motionless in her work A Needle Woman (1999-2001) (fig. 10).

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The installation consists in eight simultaneously projected videos. In each video, Kimsooja stands still in crowded streets of different cities like Tokyo, London, and New York. Differently from my video performances, she puts herself into a crowd. If in my video, the viewer is always focused on my figure, in *A Needle Woman*, the viewer will eventually look at the other people around her. In her works, she is contrasting the frenzy of the crowded streets. Through her stillness, she is transcending any cultural identity. She uses her body as a needle, to sew together, what seems to be irreconcilable cultural differences.\(^{18}\)

![Figure 10. Kimsooja, A Needle Woman, 1999](image)

I use these artists as a model for style and artistic expressivity. My videos depict a symbolic walking path where my figure gradually crosses in-between spaces, remaining just a small dot in the background. I position the viewer in the middle of the frame with the same perspective as myself on the screen. The goal of my performances is to place the viewer alongside myself and allow them to walkthrough my “in-between spaces.”

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Photographs

My pictures are the photographic documentation of my experience. Through my eyes, the viewer can experience the loneliness that those urban realms promote. I attempt to create a picture that captures a moment in time, beyond past and future, communicating the feeling of alienation caused by a world in constant change. I use anything to depict spaces without life: building facades, parking lots, stairs, airports, and stores. My images focus on ordinary and isolated realms belonging to commuters. I divided my pictures into three groups of four pictures each, for twelve pictures. I depict images that evoke inner restlessness, where all the spaces become similar, almost interchangeable with each other, and contain no single identity. The German artist Andreas Gursky is often associated with large architectural and landscape photographs. He relates to those aspects of contemporary culture, I am interested in capturing this essence of globalization. In his photographs *Shanghai* (2000), and *Atlanta* (1996) for example, he depicts anonymous landscapes.

![Image of interior architectural space](image)

Figure 11 . Andreas Gursky, Shanghai, 2000
He first draws the attention primarily to the architectural division, fully modernized, and then carefully framed in its repetition system. In fact, Gursky absorbs the medium, breaking the rules of architectural photography. The large format of his photographs helps the viewer to identify the single element that creates the matrix of the repetition among the composition. One of his most recent picture is *Utah*, (2017) inspired by a picture taken on a mobile phone. The variety of details in his pictures effectively drown you in an impersonal reality.
These pictures are to me, his acknowledgement of our relationship with consumption today. We are now living a moment of globalization, where the mobile phone photograph, for example, is a major cultural artifact.

With my photographs, I show *Metamondi*, where the human being is present only through what he has built. The heart of my photographs is to explore the phenomenon of transition, both psychological and spatial. In my photographs *Altrove* (fig. 14), *Exelsior* (fig 15), *Per I Favori, e Per le Benevolenze* (fig. 16), *Hic and Nunc* (fig. 17), *All’Infinito* (fig. 18), *Memento* (fig. 19), *Senza Cura (delle anime)* (fig. 20), and *Al Di’ La* (fig. 21), I examine the importance of space in relation to urban structure and social interactions. The concept of in-between space is expressed in terms of “buffer zone”, for example *Per I Favori, e Per le Benevolenze* (fig. 16), is a parking spot for “visitor only”. Henry Bergson defines in-between spaces as a “space of becoming and movement”, like I attempt to depict in the photograph *Al Di’ La* (fig. 21). They are transient and lack opportunity for connecting with people. In-between spaces are therefore, intermediate spaces that have no “identity of its own being.” Like I portray in the photograph *Memento* (fig. 19).

19 *Metamondi*: from greek μεταμόσχευση, A world beyond reality.
Figure 14. Altrove
Figure 15. Exelsior
Figure 16. Per i Favori, e per le Benevolenze
Figure 17. Hic and Nunc
Figure 19: Memento
Figure 20. Senza Cura (delle anime)
Figure 21. Al Di Là (non più oltre)
These spaces of circulation and consumption drastically affect us, causing a loss of warmth and community. In contemporary society, dominated by velocity and frenzy, the feeling of disorientation and dissonance is constantly repeated. The space around us influences our way of thinking and how people relate with each other. I dedicate my last group of photographs to the sense of disorientation I felt in some places. Small locally owned Italian business communicate in my opinion a sense of belonging and community identity, reflecting the local culture. In my experience, I found this rare in the United States, so far. When I find myself in a large space, I tend to feel lost and confused.

Figure 22. Errata Corrige
Figure 23. Excursus
Figure 24. Memorandum
Figure 25. La Bellezza è un Bene Fragile
Figure 26. Corsa Verso l'Esterno
Conclusion

In Between: The Spaces of Modernity is not only about my personal experience as foreign student; but it is also about bringing the audience into my perspective, in order to provide a new understanding of their surroundings. The typical Italian city built its social, economic, and political interactions around the central piazza.\(^1\) The sense of belonging becomes a local construct, like the small local owned business around the corner from your parents’ house. This contrasts with giant American franchising, stores that look the same everywhere else in the country. My surroundings in the United States influenced my emotions. I have felt disoriented by a dispersive city, like Baton Rouge, that misses a central piazza. I have spent more time reaching a destination --by walking or driving-- rather than actually being where I was going. I felt alone and small compared to the large parking lots and massive buildings, as if nobody was around me.

My thesis project evolved from three years of success and failures. Leading up to this body of work, I created videos and performances that depicted discord between my surroundings and myself including. I have used the term in-between space to describe a transitory space without identity. Its only mean is to link different destinations. This research provided me a different perspective, allowing me to explore deeply my experience of loneliness and alienation in the United States.

It is my hope that others will empathize with my experience and use it as cause of discussion to question life perspectives. Questioning our surroundings allow us to better understand our reality and ourselves.

\(^1\) Piazza, Italian word for square.
Bibliography


Kogonada, Yasujirō Ozu, “Passageways”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-R4pnVFgufA


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