

Place

RENÉE GREEN

These writings on the theme of turbulence grew out of reflections on recent daily encounters, as well as out of encounters with texts I've been engaging. This text includes journal-style entries and a listing of reflections on textual references.

1. April 2006

Unité d'Habitation? is the title of the exhibition I'm developing to present in Paris in June 2006. Literally, in English, it can be thought of as *Unity of Habitation?* or, obliquely, as *United (in)Habitation?* It refers to the name of Le Corbusier's building project *Unités d'Habitation*, his proposal for collective living. These structures were built in and imagined for different locations, including Marseilles (1946-1952), Rezé-lès-Nantes (1953), Berlin (1956), Briey-en-Forêt (1957), Strasbourg (projected 1951), Marseilles-Sud (projected 1951) and Meaux (projected 1956). I inhabited one of these structures, Firminy-Vert (1968) in 1993, but the title (Le Corbusier's term) more broadly refers to the possibility to inhabit, as a material condition, in addition to inhabiting as a state of being. The title is also meant to raise questions concerning the profundity of how to inhabit places with others, living and dead, and what form of social and historical circumstance is related to who can inhabit, where and how.



This morning I've been reading Czeslaw Milosz's *The Land of Ulro*, published in 1985. I find it describes different states I feel, especially while here in this region of the US, the

Bay Area of Northern California, as well as in relation to being an artist and working as an academic, somehow.

2. April 2006

Questions about the privileging of pain. Why should histories of suffering from any region be viewed as exemplary, when all suffering in its many dimensions is horrible? Even the dominance of media diffusion and saturation that the US and Western Europe have achieved can still be acknowledged as presenting only very partial views of any form of claimed or described suffering. Beyond that, why can't it be understood that no form of suffering is exemplary, as the human condition itself is predicated upon suffering? Why perpetuate suffering?

These questions grew out of a dinner conversation. A disturbing incident was described by friends. The location of this incident was a dinner they'd attended in the Bay Area. They were requested to verbally prove their ownership of, or allegiance to, identity-based culturally designated territories within the international art terrain. Who's the exemplary suffering representative of suffering peoples? Rights for legitimacy were claimed by others present. Who most authentically could represent the projected disenfranchised sector from an artist's perspective? It seemed like an absurd premise. As if that were a goal anyone would want to achieve, rather than one of freedom from even those classificatory restraints. During this occasion, these friends were put on the spot to represent their legitimacy: they were being perceived to be responsible for representing oppression since they hailed from New Delhi; the terms for evaluation, however, were inadequate and inappropriate. Yet another gap amongst those espousing progressive stances, willfully ignorant of more complex phenomena and history, undermining the possibility of coming to terms with a more profound understanding of the contemporary world, because of a narrow territorialism. Why perpetuate suffering?

3. April 2006

Back in New York^a

Now I'm thinking about the theme of turbulence. I may write about the turbulence involved in the struggle to represent history, all that is 'partially buried', the intentional deletions, 'some chance operations', my Sisyphean attempts at creating an 'index of oblivion', the confrontations while one still lives to write dismissed histories back into what will be recognised as History. Many people's annotations. Many people's sense of ownership. The difficulty in accepting complexity. The emphasis on superficial responses, especially popular in the US, but not only here.

4. April 2006

Strangely, 'identity' is the space sometimes allotted to 'her', here in the US. The inadequacy of this category propelled 'her' to leave the US, her country of designated origin, many years before. Even with the passage of years and so many works of 'hers' made about 'import/export' and translation and transnational existence, writings about 'negotiations in contact zones', the prevalence in the US for this category as a means for labelling, then

mistaking that labelling as knowledge, and then dismissing any further obligation for more profound investigation, is not uncommon. Identity. It is an odd designation. An empty signifier. In the US 'she' feels compelled to read more of the late science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, who in her *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (xenogenesis defined as 'the birth of something new - and foreign') far exceeds anything known as 'identity', or even human categories.

'She' left the country to find a space to create beyond rigid identity definitions.

When an exhibition historicising the art milieu in Cologne during the 1990s ; in which 'she' had been an active participant and to which 'she'd' steadily contributed ; came to the US, her contribution, beyond being a marker of identity, was erased. To her surprise, prevalent historical data, of the kind usually used to research a past time, was ignored by the US curator. 'She'd' heard the composer-musician and computer/installation artist George Lewis make a similar claim regarding the lack of acknowledgment of his participation with IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) in the 1970s. No space seems possible to be assigned for 'her', beyond that one, in the current rush to write histories of the past decade, the *fin de siècle*. Many of the valiant witnesses from those times are dead. 'She' is left to make her own claims. This is why 'she' continues to endorse and rely on archives and the many documents they house. And indices of oblivion.

5. April 2006

The challenges encountered when attempting to both inhabit and to shift representation^a This creates forms of turbulence for the author, for example, in terms of where the words can be encountered, read or heard, and the force with which territories are protected and words censored.

Describe why it's necessary, in her case, to live in several places, even if she once thought she'd like only to continue to live in New York. That the attempt and effort to continue working and being connected to sources that provide intellectual, spiritual and emotional sustenance, as well as which relate to her deep history and genealogy, are all a part of these movements and relocations, as well as attempted inhabitations. The wish to inhabit in a way one chooses. That which can encompass the breadth of living, rather than a flattened stereotype or shallow half-life.

6. April 2006

But what is the relationship between these wishes and efforts to what can be described as turbulence?

turbulence: n. the quality or state of being turbulent.
turbulent: adj. 1. Causing violence or disturbance.
 2. Marked by agitation or tumult; tempestuous.



Below the apparently calm veneer: tensions and tempests. The struggle to claim more than limited access. Why is the access limited? Based on what criteria, and decided upon by whom? The contestation for representation and rights continues to be turbulent. Again, this relates to who is narrating history and how it is being done. Who is narrating the present and how is it being described? Again and again the question arises: why is this included and that excluded?

The continual and driving question for me: what else could be possible?

Think about forms of dispossession and violence ; physical, intellectual, historical.

Think about the relativity of privilege. There are serious reckonings yet to be made in what I'd describe as cultures of avoidance such as the US, in which the history and cultural forms of the country are based on suppressing the violence committed to found the nation. The avoidance to which I allude is the avoidance of coming to terms with historical acts that are repressed, rather than acknowledging these to be part of a contiguous history. What would it mean to acknowledge the violent ancestral acts that continue in altered and cruel forms today? Instead, what is attempted in cultures of avoidance is to live amidst a policed 'calm', based upon a deluded sense of entitlement and invincibility. In this consumption-laden and fear-saturated atmosphere, the fear

of punishment from those who've been lied to, robbed and abused, is a prevalent element and resides just under the surface of many encounters, suppressed and avoided. How to begin to describe the gross limitations of what I've encountered in the public and private cultural spheres that are affected by these forms of avoidance? I've observed attempts to exorcise critical, political and historical perspectives, and observed what is presented in their place as 'critical', 'political' and 'historical', to a broader public.

What could it mean to seriously engage with living in the world amidst the varieties of turbulence? Or amidst the varieties of experience possible, but without threatening or killing anyone? Examine the energy that turbulence requires. How to shift to a different way of being? The desire to shift would be necessary; I'm not convinced that many share this desire, as there are so many conflicting desires.

A drop of water in an ocean. In Paris I'll present films I've made that refer to turbulence: *Elsewhere? Here* and *Climates and Paradoxes*.

The question remains: What can each of us do?

7. April 2006

I'm glad the 'art world' is not the only subculture in which I've been interested. It's odd, but gradually in New York I've found less and less that interests me. New York is a magnet for many people from around the world, yet the conditions for living seem to dominate people's lives to such a great extent that other modes of engagement, that could be more interesting than drinking and going to art openings, seem less possible. Or maybe it is because I've experienced other ways of living and being in which time wasn't primarily devoted to working, fighting bad housing conditions, struggling for funding, etc.; these other ways allow me to think of better ways to live.



Humans. I saw the movie *4*, a first feature by Ilya Khrzhanovsky and directed from a script by Russian avant-garde novelist Vladimir Sorokin, last night. A view from contemporary Russia.

8. April 2006

Thinking and producing in turbulent times. F.A.M. (Free Agent Media, my dream label and production company), artist, media practitioner, writer, filmmaker, educator, space creator and enabler, activist, citizen. How to apply these terms now? Waking words. Sunrise in San Francisco.

Thinking and producing and living amidst many dislocations and forms of violence in economically privileged places, where tenuous relations to wealth and access exist. The components of that create the semblance of 'the good life'. The surface view. The supporting structures and genealogies differ. An immigrant protest and school boycott are scheduled for 1 May. Urban mirages: California and New York provide case studies.

9. April 2006

To create a place to return to, again and again, not only as a refuge, but as a place to receive sustenance that can renew one's motivation to continue to engage with life and the world, both internal and external worlds, both inner and public life. It continues to amaze me that the work of scholar and public intellectual Cornel West is not cited more often in broader contexts of intellectual discourse, beyond topical media debates. He definitely provides an interesting model of how to cope and live amidst the complexities of life today. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989), as well as in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (2004), West provides a searing analysis of intellectual histories as they've been constructed in the US and that can be traced from an Emersonian genealogy. For example, West's statement:

American pragmatism emerges with profound insights and myopic blindneses, enabling strengths and debilitating weaknesses, all resulting from distinctive features of American civilisation: its revolutionary beginning combined with an entrenched business-dominated status quo; its hybrid culture in combination with a collective self-definition as homogenously Anglo-American; its obsession with mobility, contingency, and pecuniary liquidity combined with a deep moralistic impulse; its impatience with theories and philosophies alongside ingenious technological innovation, political strategies of compromise, and personal devices for comfort and convenience. This hotel civilisation (to use Henry James' apt phrase), with its fusion of the uncertainty of the capitalist market with the quest for security of the home, yielded an indigenous mode of thought that subordinates knowledge to power, tradition to invention, instruction to provocation, community to personality, and immediate problems to utopian possibilities...¹

The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centred philosophy ; from Emerson to Rorty ; results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western conversation initiated by Plato, and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.

West's writings have been helping me to think about 'home' and its complexities, as well as what I've sought beyond.

10. April 2006

Mobility?

What informs my point of view? List different contexts and experiences that have had an effect. I'm thinking again of how to describe the position from which I speak about turbulence.

Having choices? This is a big question. A student at the Whitney Museum independent study programme asked me whether the movements I've made to inhabit different places came from privilege or necessity, or both. I answered that necessity loomed large, if one considers a quest for freedom of thought and for freedom to create, as important possibilities that everyone should have; as these were also linked to my livelihood, it seemed necessary to move to fulfil these quests. Everyone can ask themselves these questions in relation to their own lives: Have you remained in the place you were born? Could you have stayed? Why did you leave? How were you able to leave? Will you return? What enables you to live, wherever you are?



Contested claims:

Land claims? Language claims? Citizenship claims?

Sociologist Saskia Sassen writes of new claims:

If place, that is, a certain type of place, is central in the global economy, we can posit a transnational economic and political opening in the formation of new claims and hence in the constitution of entitlements, notably rights to place, and more radically, in the constitution of 'citizenship'. The city has indeed emerged as a site for new claims: by global capital which uses the city as an 'organisational commodity', but also by disadvantaged sectors of the urban population, which in large cities are frequently as internationalised a presence as is capital. The denationalising of urban space and the formation of new claims by transnational actors and involving contestation, raise the question ; whose city is it? ^a

^aThe space constituted by the global grid of cities, a space with new economic and political potentialities, is perhaps one of the most strategic spaces for the formation of transnational identities and communities. This is a space that is both place-centred in that it is embedded in particular and strategic locations; and it is trans-territorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other... [I]t is not only the transmigration of capital that takes place in this global grid, but also that of people, both rich (i.e., the new transnational professional workforce) and poor (i.e., most migrant workers) and it is a space for the transmigration of cultural forms, for the reterritorialisation of 'local' subcultures. An important question is whether it is also a space for a new politics, one going beyond the politics of culture and identity, though at least partly likely to be embedded in it.²

Place and Turbulence: Notes for Further Investigation and Ruminations from A to T

A. Place: What Places Can We Inhabit and Act In?

- B.** Tenuous Residency, Stranger Status Worldwide
- C.** Place, Claims, Contentions, Networks
- D.** Where Do You Belong?
- E.** "I Am Here".
- F.** Revisiting Globalisation and Its Discontents
- G.** Encountering Cities without Citizens
- H.** Musing over *The Manifesta Decade*
- I.** Since Negotiations in the Contact Zone
- J.** 'Between and Including' as a Description of Ongoing Conditions
- K.** Le Corbusier's Stake, or The Dream of Unity in Modern Urbanism and the Blindness to Complicity in the Obliteration of Specific Histories or Other Desires via a Totalising View
- L.** Learning via Buildings (When They're Proposed, When They're Built, after They've Been Built, as They've Been Abandoned, as They Decay, as They're Refurbished)
Case Study: *Unité l'Habitacion*
Case Study: Einstein's summer house in Caputh
- M.** Practiced Places and Buried Histories
- N.** Temporal Dimensions
 - Inhabitation
 - Removal and Loss
 - Selected Life Indexes: Time Streams and Layered Remnants
(How are the Indices Composed?)
- O.** Respecting Ghosts: Memorial as a Portable and Intangible State of Recognition: Memorial As a Consciousness Carried within Us That Reminds Us of an Ethical Dimension of Our Existence.
- P.** Strategic and Involuntary Absences

Q. The Continual Returns of What's Repressed, or Acknowledging Contiguity

R. In the Rough-and-Tumble World of Global Cultural Production^a

S. From the Frontlines (a Survivor of the 'Culture Wars')

T. To Linger and to Tell.³

NOTES

1. Cornel West. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, Madison), p. 5.
2. Saskia Sassen. *Globalisation and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (The New Press, 1998, New York), xx, xxxii.
3. After having written these 'Notes', I read "The Guano of History", an essay that resonated with much of what I'd been thinking. It appears in *Cities Without Citizens*, (eds.) Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy (Slought Foundation, 2003, Philadelphia), pp. 137-65. The different strands of Cadava's documentation and analysis are woven into a powerful reminder that "in order to speak in the name of freedom, in the name of justice, we must speak of the past we inherit and for which we remain answerable, we must speak of ghosts, of generations of ghosts; of those who are not presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born". He opens his essay with a quote that I wish to borrow as an ending, as it has many reverberations for our ongoing turbulent times. The quote, from a letter by the Black Panther Party's charismatic incarcerated leader George Jackson, begins Cadava's explications (which later become intertwined with an analysis of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Fate" (1860), and also the circuitous history of Peruvian *guano* (a commodity used to fertilise soil, that the US was as desperate for in the 19th century as it is now desperate for oil).

"My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing", Jackson wrote on 4 April 1970. "I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilised the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, 'unto the third and fourth generation', the tenth, the hundredth". See George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Lawrence Hill Books, 1994, Chicago), pp. 233-34.