Place of Negotiation
About walking, discovering and thickening knowledge

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Abstract
The paper reflects on the place of creation and the connection between comprehension and construction of culture. It seeks to define a malleable form of analysis and understanding capable of approaching a complex liquid world. The aim is to establish a multi-viewpoint theoretical approach based on the dynamic concept of the Flâneur as introduced by Baudelaire, replacing single viewpoint categorization. This concept is re-appropriated for its capacity to connect with the different formulations of change, to indicate a common ground or effect of moving, as an area for creation or discovery of the new. Providing a framework of understanding in conditions of liquidity and change.

Keywords: laboratory, liquid, multi-viewpoint, thickening

Today the art production and the context and location of its creation and evaluation are in a constant debate, academic research as opposed to artistic mastery seems to be the new paradigm. This paper explores these place(s) of action, the ‘laboratory’ in its most experimental form, where art is realized next to the trusted atelier or the public space. Next to exploring the apparent newness of bringing research into the art context we simultaneously ask what it means to practice art and where that action takes place. As a result the research speaks to present concerns about the arts as much as to the field of academic research. What has changed exactly and how and when has this influenced our perspective of art and art production and consequently our being in this globalized, digitized world? In short, what has become culture today?

According Bruno Latour (2003) the role and context of modern research has changed considerably: “The 20th century was the golden age of the laboratory. Answers to the great research questions were sought within cloistered chambers, where small groups of specialised experts scaled down (or up) phenomena in blissful isolation. Call it the era of trickle-down science: Knowledge emerged from a confined centre of rational enlightenment, then slowly diffused out to the rest of society.” This meant that the community was free to accept or ignore these results, but it was impossible to add to them or question them. “Science was
what was made inside the walls where white coats were at work.” Outside, experience—not experiment—was the prevailing standard. Today, however, all of this is in flux. “First, the laboratory has extended its walls to the whole planet. [...] Second, you no longer need a white coat or a PhD to research specific questions. [...] A crucial part of doing science is formulating the questions to be solved; it is clear that scientists are no longer alone in this endeavour. [...] Third, there is the question of scale. The size and complexity of scientific phenomena under scrutiny has grown to the point that scaling them down to fit in a laboratory is becoming increasingly difficult.” (2003, p. 147).

Bruno Latour shows us how the ‘laboratory’ of yesteryear can be found all over the world, given the prevalence of all sorts of instruments, in hospitals, factories, even in common households. Experimenting, measuring can now easily be taken outside of the classical structures, without losing any form of detail or precision. A next point to be made is the scaling down of many scientific phenomena is becoming more and more challenging, due to the fact of their size and complexity. Some of these problems can be amended by creating computer models of the phenomenon to be studied, and running extensive simulations to generate measurements. However, the complexity required of these computer models makes the analysis of its components increasingly harder, especially when many factors can influence the results. Global warming for instance is influenced by the oceans and atmosphere, but also by all living creatures on the planet. This manifold of factors is hard to condense into a model, if any kind of scientific precision is required of the generated results. Also, because humanity is considered to play a crucial role in the warming of the earth and is also influenced by this increase in temperature, how can one take humanity out the equation to study the effects of the other factors involved?

This illustrates the realization that the boundary between the inside world of the researcher and the outside world of non-experts is disappearing. It can be said that nature is represented/analyzed/referenced by the practice of science, whereas society is represented/served by/has power over politics, culture and art. These two representations are merging into a hybrid form where “The matters of fact of science become matters of concern of politics” (2003, p. 147), an example being that the scientific observation ‘The earth is warming up’ has now also become political. Because these representations are becoming parts of the same, larger representation, Latour suggests in his ‘Political Ecology’, that a framework of non-competing disciplines - amongst which are science and politics but also the arts - should be constructed, so that the agglomerate of these disciplines can be used to suggest new research strategies, offering new and different viewing points from which our world can be scrutinized. Each discipline should bring its own competence to the framework, rather than competing with the other disciplines.

Following Latour's lead, the concept of this ‘Place of Negotiation’ can be seen as a new framework or field of inquiry where the practices, methods and strategies of artistic and scientific research can be placed and understood. Latour’s remarks confirm that the locus of research can be seen as no longer the small room but the entire planet. The instruments to accomplish this are present everywhere. Houses, factories and hospitals constitute the primary ‘outposts’ for laboratory research. A worldwide network of environmental
sensors scans the planet in real time. Information-gathering satellites observe the earth from above, as if under a microscope. Genetics, with its scientific origins in Gregor Mendel, examines populations as frequently as it does the individual. Whether in the area of science or art, the significance of the research act and its representation in society has changed. Rather than revealing exact outcomes, these new research strategies offer different viewing positions through which our world can be observed.

This movement towards a more general, universal and at the same time individual activity is further developed by Helga Nowotny (2004, p. 23): “Today we are surrounded by a plethora of strategic options which have never existed before. However, in the process of increasing the scope of individual creativity and social innovation, a subtle and momentous shift in their balance has occurred. Innovation is the social side of individual human creativity. It relies on human communication systems, on language, memory, and the use of symbols in mathematics, music and aesthetic-artistic systems of representation. It is oriented toward communicating modes of seeing and thinking or producing artefacts which, through their applications in a range of different and local contexts, allow the creativity embodied within them to continue exerting an effect. [...] It is now distributed throughout society. The local contexts in which individual creativity operates and from which it originates have multiplied. They have become an integrated element in the ensemble which makes up a machinery of innovation constructed by modern society.”

In this context, the introduction of a ‘Place of Negotiation’ could prove to be an alternative model of interpretation, not focussing on direct outcomes but rather describing the processes which trigger and are responsible for change in terms of artworks and its affiliated theories, models and maps. This could be an in-between place, a place within and responsible for action. If we refer to Deleuze’s rhizome with no beginning or end, then, we are able to extract a third element of this rhizomatic structure, being the middle or in-between. Also for Deleuze questions regarding ‘the where we are going or where we are coming from’ are irrelevant as they foster a false idea of movement or change. It is this middle (the coming and going) that allows for change and movement where the action takes place and new ideas are born. For Deleuze: “The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.” (1988a, p. 28). In the classical interpretation of logics an articulation however can only be false or true, dismissing the middle beforehand. In other words interpretation becomes an all or nothing evaluation leaving little ground for interpretation. Seen in this way it denies any possible re-positioning or a transversal movement as proclaimed by Deleuze and in doing so installs a static system of interpretation.

In an article entitled ‘The Flaw of the Excluded Middle’ Paul G. Hiebert investigates why the Western world view (in a theological sense) excluded this middle level. According to him, our belief in this middle area vanished during the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of the Platonic dualism and a science based on
materialistic naturalism: “The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion. Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on the certitudes of sense experience, experimentation and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws.” (1982, p. 43). Today however, this notion seems to be in flux. In his book ‘Liquid Times (2007), sociologist Zygmunt Bauman remarks that our society recently has moved from a ‘solid’ phase into a ‘liquid’ phase, referring to the fact that our social forms (structures, institutions, ...) are no longer able (or in a situation) to “keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set.” (2007, p. 1). Systems do not have the time to settle down and become established and therefore can no longer serve as frames of reference or long-term strategies. In other words society in itself and with it all possible models or frameworks for interpretation have become liquid, in a constant stage of change in a constant middle or in-betweenness.

Whether we are considering these social or cultural relations of modern society as previously described, we argue that we also need to start thinking in terms of this ‘liquidity’ or ‘ever-changing’ phase. Although many of these views on the importance of a fluid and transparent world space are verified by studies in art, architecture, geography and science, these studies do not always reveal the complete picture. On closer examination the ‘fluid’ or ‘liquid’ inherent in these studies seems to vanish. Stefano Boeri (2003) sharply remarks: “These are disciplines that should keep their finger on the pulse of living conditions in the urban context, but that often seem more interested in studying the flux and flow, rather than the locally felt friction that influences them.” (2003, p. 53). In doing so, our awareness of this ‘global’ fluid model of our world paradoxically has increased the specificity of the ‘local’ and the ‘solid’.

Also Zygmunt Bauman is thinking in the same direction, for him ‘society’ is increasingly becoming a network rather than a structure, meaning people perceive and treat it as a set of random actions (connections and disconnections) and as an infinite volume of ‘possible permutations’ making long-term planning, predictions, models and actions collapse. As a result we move into a series of short finite projects, which in a way can also form a new system of infinite series of finite sets but where it becomes impossible to apply enduring concepts such as development, maturation or progress. He concludes: “A life so fragmented stimulates ‘lateral’ rather than ‘vertical’ orientations. Each next step needs to be a response to a different set of opportunities and a different distribution of odds, and so it calls for a different set of skills and a different arrangement of assets.” (2007, p. 3). In other words, the risks of such a system is that in order to make the entire system work one will need to transcend the comprehension of the individual, local or finite projects. One of the lessons to be drawn from these contradictory forces is that the greater the exchange, the more aware we become of the subtle and sometimes deep differences. This type of ‘undertow’ of thoughts and associations constitutes the building blocks for the ‘Places of Negotiation’ framework. In drawing up 'maps', ‘models’ and ‘theories’, this underlying power of the undertows generates paradoxical
results: it redefines not only numerous local insights but also gradually installs itself as the new frame of interpretation taking into account at once the local and the global, the solid and the liquid, the beginning and the end, and as the key concept the ‘in-between’ with its ‘Place of Negotiation’ to allow for change, innovation, the new.

This term was chosen for its capacity to connect with these different formulations to indicate a common ground or effect of moving, as an area for creation of the new, in the various topics discussed (media theory, mapping, art, science and the model). In other words, as a creative potential or concept on a par with the Deleuzian middle or the concept of the in-betweenness and the ‘Third Space’ from Homi Bhabha amongst others.

“I think, Sancho, there is no proverb that is not true, all being maxims drawn from experience itself, the mother of all the sciences, especially that one that says, ‘Where one door shuts, another opens.’ I say so because if last night fortune shut the door of the adventure we were looking for against us, cheating us with the fulling mills, it now opens wide another one for another better and more certain adventure, and if I do not contrive to enter it, it will be my own fault, and I cannot lay it to my ignorance of fulling mills, or the darkness of the night. Cervantes, ‘Don Quixote de la Mancha’, 1605

What is on offer here then is a collection of fragments, glances, hunches and even presumptions, collected and gathered together in a reflective association and based on research and long discussions with different authors in the field, as well as practical examples where we aim to construct a critical cartography of the concept of ‘Place of Negotiation’ as the engine for change. Realizing that the research is by definition incomplete and to a certain extend ambiguous, it is our optimism and prospect that the defined goal remains evident and legible: that is about the ways artists and scientists deal with and endure new meaning and how they comprehend and construct the world. Creating, modelling, mirroring, mapping implies (creating) a (subjective) worldview and a map for orientation. We argue that the best methodology to do this is walking - walking is here understood as a metaphor and a method or a practice to generate meaning that is informed by the concept of thickening as proposed by Geertz, ‘Negotiation’ is then seen as a method, map or model, a mechanism providing a framework in conditions of change. In this respect this research is not an experimental science trying to identify and construct a strict (or rigid) set of laws but rather an approach to interpretation, guided by artistic practice, in exploring and checking out explanation, significance and meaning.

Just as in cooking a thickener is used to thicken (or increase the viscosity) of fluids, the concept of thickening as described by Clifford Geertz will be used in an attempt to thicken our liquid knowledge society as discussed by Bauman. This act of thickening can be reformulated in the context of accumulating, becoming more intense or intensifying, deepening. Seen in this way the act of thickening becomes a means to deepen the concepts discussed in the research by a strategy of revisiting the postulated ‘Place of Negotiation’ framework. In this respect we use the word ‘means’ instead of ‘method’ as for Geertz focus
should not be on techniques or procedures but on a specific intellectual effort or an elaborated activity or
endeavour. How do artists, theorists, scientists deal with this notion of new and how this is reflected in their
work in particular in the context of the powerful introduction of the digital?

In ‘The Interpretation of Cultures’ published in 1973, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz elaborates on this
concept of ‘thick description’. For Geertz what a researcher is faced with (except the automated routine of
data collection) “is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or
knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive
somehow first to grasp and then to render.” (1973, p. 10). Furthermore, understanding (of a culture for
instance) for Geertz exposes a certain normalness without reducing the particularities. It renders
information accessible and dissolves its possible opacity. However, he also warns that this approach,
sometimes referred to as ‘seeing from the actor’s point of view’ or ‘the verstehen approach’, often may lead
to a notion of fantasy or speculation and must therefore be approached with great care. As a result, a thick
description is needed where case studies, events and theories can be studied in detail, by building layer after
layer, so one is able to assess and evaluate the degree in which the conclusions made are also valid or
convertible to other systems or situations or time frames. One must not only study the phenomena but also
the context in which they take place in order for them to become understandable for a third party. This
thick or multilayered description has a double function: “Such a view of how theory functions in an
interpretive science suggests that the distinction, relative in any case, that appears in the experimental or
observational sciences between ‘description’ and ‘explanation’ appears here as one, even more relative,
between ‘inscription’ (‘thick description’) and ‘specification’ (‘diagnosis’) - between setting down the
meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we
can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and,
beyond that, about social life as such. Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform
our subjects' acts, the ‘said’ of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what
is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against
the other determinants of human behaviour. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary
in which what symbolic action has to say about itself - that is, about the role of culture in human life - can
be expressed.” (1973, p. 27). In other words, Geertz is well aware that meaning is always changing, always
in flux and rooted in a specific culture, therefore he suggests the thick description as a means to describe
the phenomena together with their context through a multilayered approach.

In order to access these (multiple) local realities embedded in and part of a (possible) larger or global
worldview we will reintroduce the stroller or wanderer or flâneur as a device to unravel and present
evidence for understanding the increasingly complex ways in which artists (and scientists) develop, model
and mirror our world. This paper will argue that theorizing, modelling and mapping implies (creating) a
(series of) local world views in relation to (or even opposed to) a larger global world view and that the
concept of ‘negotiation’ is central to the discourses and artworks that shape these world views. In doing so
a map, model and/or theory for orientation is needed, which will be called the ‘Place of Negotiation’ framework.

In literature and philosophy many authors have addressed the character of the wanderer or walker as a tool (or even theoretical construct) for articulating local realities. The best studied example is the ‘flâneur’ as introduced by Baudelaire in many of his poems as part of ‘Les Fleurs du Mal’ (The Flowers of Evil) first published in 1857. The idea of the flâneur was inspired for Baudrillard by Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’ first published in 1840, where a nameless man (the narrator) follows another person through London. This work as well as the idea of the flâneur by Baudelaire are extensively discussed by Walter Benjamin in his book ‘Illuminations’ (1969). The flâneur feels at home in the city and dwells the streets (anonymously) to look at and register local habits and facts within a multilayered, global entity. Both the characters of Baudelaire and Poe feel comfortable in a fluid, liquid surrounding and their trajectory or path is mainly guided by the interest in seeing, discovering new things, a search for novelty in an active way by walking. As such, the walking becomes an allegory for the intellectual endeavour or processes during the search. For James V. Werne this active process differentiates the walker from the observer and creates a fluid and observational viewpoint rather than a static one, that “allows (indeed compels) him almost completely to ‘read’ his environment, nearly to transcend the boundary between interpretation and experience […]” (2004, p. 154). Also for Burton (2010), the flâneur ‘strives to be both all-seeing and invisible’ and unlike the observer he will do this in an active manner. Just as in the London or Paris city settings as described by Poe, Dickens (Night Walks) and Baudelaire, a ‘Place of Negotiation’ is constructed as a map or city maze where the reader or walker can walk through actively in search of those connections which interest or trigger him/her most. Or, in a Deleuzian sense a nomadic travel generating a series of ‘close-range’ visions in a multiple, variegated environment (1988a, p. 543). Well aware of the multiple and subtle differences between the flâneur, observer or walker as discussed by Deleuze, Benjamin, De Certau or the ‘dérive’ by Debord amongst others or in the literature by Dickens, Poe, Rousseau or Baudelaire, the concept of walking here is introduced in the simple construct of accessing (and understanding) information on different levels, in different contexts and in different connections. This research does not focus on the flâneur but rather adopts the metaphor of walking as a means to access information in a gradual (local) way in the hope to understand or unravel the total (global). However, one element proper to the flâneur proves to be relevant to the content of the research, mapping or modelling involves a viewing position. Are we in or outside a given system, do we take part or simply observe, do we look from within or above?

This is equally at work in the concept of Deleuze and Guattari regarding nomadology, where processes matter over outcome, allowing us to focus more on the dynamics of the possible connections rather than to install a new unifying truth, a single static perspective. This possible approach to nomadology is confirmed by the British sociologist Nick J. Fox who comments in an article in ‘Health’ (2002): “In a narrower sense, nomadology is about replacing monolithic definitions of reality with a multiplicity of narratives. This
enables an uninterrupted flow of deterritorialization that establishes a line of flight away from territories, grand designs and monolithic institutions. Needless to say, this is not something which is achieved once and for all, there is always another and another deterritorialization ahead. Thus nomadology must be thought of not as an outcome but as a process, as a line of flight which continually resists the sedentary, the single fixed perspective.” (2002, p. 354). As such it further enables us, in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari, to understand these current developments in media, art, science and the lived-in world, their intermingling and their relation with the past (and past theories) as an assemblage that by default will change, will increase insight when new elements are added, when new connections are made.

With the construction of the ‘Negotiation’ framework, it has become apparent that this notion of ‘in-between’, defined as a hybrid position, plays an important role in the generation of novelty, that is, to generate new insights and meanings. It is this hybrid position, shifting between two or more viewing positions, that should allow us to reveal a more complete picture. By rapidly moving from one model to another the boundaries between the two become blurred, they become permeable, transferring characteristics from one model into the other and vice versa. This feature of shifting perspective is one characteristic of this framework and enables us to enhance meaning by transferring concepts and ideas from one system to another and additionally allows us to discover new connections and relations between them. The framework displays the importance of this hybrid positioning, that is the added value of shifting perspective by reconfiguring, transferring into another historical context, or repositioning concepts.

The second feature refers to the location of action (or generation of novelty) itself. We have seen that this shifting position (thickening, by studying different knowledge systems) allows us to retrieve meaning not only within the different systems but also between these systems. In other words, a result of the change of perspective is that not only new relations are becoming visible, relations that from within the system are invisible (not perceived) but also that the location of this information is situated in-between the installed systems of knowledge (maps, models, or theories). They become locations of meaning and action on their own, or we can say, on their own terms they become ‘Places of Negotiation’. This we could argue is a result of what Zygmunt Bauman (2007, 2011) has called the liquid modern world. Social forms and systems are no longer able to settle down and become established. As a result overall structure makes way for an infinite network of short, small projects and structures which continuously tend to permutate each other. In order to understand the entire system we need to understand the series of infinite smaller structures and their in-betweens. For Homi Bhabha in his book ‘The Location of Culture’, it is at the boundaries of cultures, at their interfaces that meanings and values are (mis)read. However, he notices that this interface or limit is seldom addressed and often even disavowed.

Not only are new locations discovered, locations that exist between installed systems of knowledge and that have become visible through a change of perspective. Here we can argue that these spaces are a space for negotiation. This space is a place that allows for the re-location and re-configuring of concepts that as a result of this process of shifting perspective no longer belong to any one system and it is also a place for the
new insights and concepts that were made visible or that were generated in-between locations. This location of action bears some similarities with the sociological and anthropological concept of the ‘Third Space’ as expressed by Homi Bhabha and which refers to a place of negotiation where cultural differences as expressed through (mis)reading meanings and (mis)appropriations can be negotiated. This place is not representable in itself but it is a place where signs and symbols can be appropriated, or even translated, re-historicized and have become regenerated into something new. Accordingly, this new space or ‘Third Space’ is “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.” (1994, p. 56).

The framework from which we have undertaken this research is possibly reflected by Bauman by saying: “The best among the contemporary arts are ultimately so many steps in an unending process of reinterpreting shared experience, and offer standing invitations to a dialogue - or, for that matter, a perpetually widening polylogue.” (2011, p. 116). We might therefore conclude that the only thing that thickens or becomes more solid in this liquid structure, liquid world, is the interaction, an active encounter between people and ideas.

What needs (needed) to be mapped then is this space of negotiation, a space signifying the concepts and ideas that are inherent to these in-betweens. ‘Walking’ offers such a space of negotiation where the new, the change is made visible through reconfiguration or translation giving substance to the ‘something in-between’. New realities are constructed, each relevant in a local (or partial) context but sharing the same underlying principle, that of a place of discourse and shifting perspective.

“Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea. When the camel-driver sees, at the horizon of the tableland, the pinnacles of the skyscrapers come into view, the radar antennae, the white and red windsocks flapping, the chimneys belching smoke, he thinks of a ship; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a vessel that will take him away from the desert (...) In the coastline’s haze, the sailor discerns the form of a camel’s withers, an embroidered saddle with glittering fringe between two spotted humps, advancing and swaying; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a camel from whose pack hang wineskins and bags of candied fruit, date wine, tobacco leaves, and already he sees himself at the head of a long caravan taking him away from the desert of the sea (...) Each city receives its form from the dessert it opposes; and so the camel-driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.”

*Italo Calvino, Invisible cities 1972, p. 17*


