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Shobeiri, S.A.

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Photographic Emplacement: Entanglement of Materiality and Place in Photography

ALI SHOBEIRI

Since its conception, photography has been probing into the material, social and emotional characters of places. While some photographs make us reflect on existing places, others feature how some places are inherently constructed through photographic means. The nexus between photography and place becomes more complex when photos are not merely representational means but constitutive parts of photo installations. In such cases, the materiality and spatiality of photographs become indispensable features in their signifying practices. By discussing the photographs used in *Men in Bathtub* (2017), a photo installation created by visual artist Vita Buivid as part of a group exhibition called *Too Much as Not Enough*, this essay examines the intersection of materiality and place through the notion of 'photographic emplacement': the putting-into position of the subject matter, both in front of the lens and within the photograph. To do this, it draws on three constitutive elements of place: location, locale, and sense of place.

Photographic emplacement, Place, Sense of place, Location, Locale, Vita Buivid, Photography

The medium of photography has been probing into the material, social and emotional characters of places since the early nineteenth century. While some photographs make us reflect on existing places (e.g., landscapes and cityscapes), others feature how some places are inherently constructed through photographic means (e.g., staged photos).¹ The nexus between photography and place becomes more complex when photographs are not merely representational means but constitutive parts of photo installations.² In such cases, the materiality and spatiality of photographs become indispensable features in their signifying practices. By discussing the photographs used in *Men in Bathtub* (2017), a photo installation created by visual artist Vita Buivid as part of a group exhibition called *Too Much as Not Enough*, I will examine the intersection of materiality and place through the notion of ‘photographic emplacement’: the putting-into position of the subject matter in front of the lens as well as within the representational space of the photograph. To do this, I draw on three constitutive elements of place: location, locale, and finally, sense of place.

WHAT IS (PHOTOGRAPHIC) EMPLACEMENT?

The term ‘emplacement’ refers to the “location of something” and the action of “putting into position”.³ Put differently, emplacement refers to the position of something/somebody in space as well as the very action by which the thing/person has been posited in space. Regarding photography, the most frequent practice of emplacement is the putting-into-position of a model in front of

the lens. Not only does this act momentarily impose the location of the subject matter, but it also determines its subsequent putting-into-position within the frame. In some cases, this trivial instruction seals the fate of photographic signification. An unconventional example of such emplacement is *Men in Bathtub* (1995-1998): a photo series in which artist Vita Buivid instructs her models to lay naked and submerge in water. Aspiring to undo the male gaze through her photos, Buivid, a radical feminist artist, captures her male models during vulnerable and eccentric positions—a pose that has traditionally been assumed by female models. The models are free to strike any pose as far as they remain inside the bathtub. One model decides to cover his eyes with a pair of swimming goggles while covering his genitals with a magazine (see Fig. 1), another one flamboyantly stares back at the camera while lying behind medicinal boxes (see Fig. 2). The *Men in Bathtub* photo series is a ludic example of photographic emplacement, not only because of the nakedness of the figures but also for the idiosyncratic choice of using the bathtub as a photoshoot location. Looking at these photos we are granted permission to gaze into the domestic, as well as the emotional, space of the

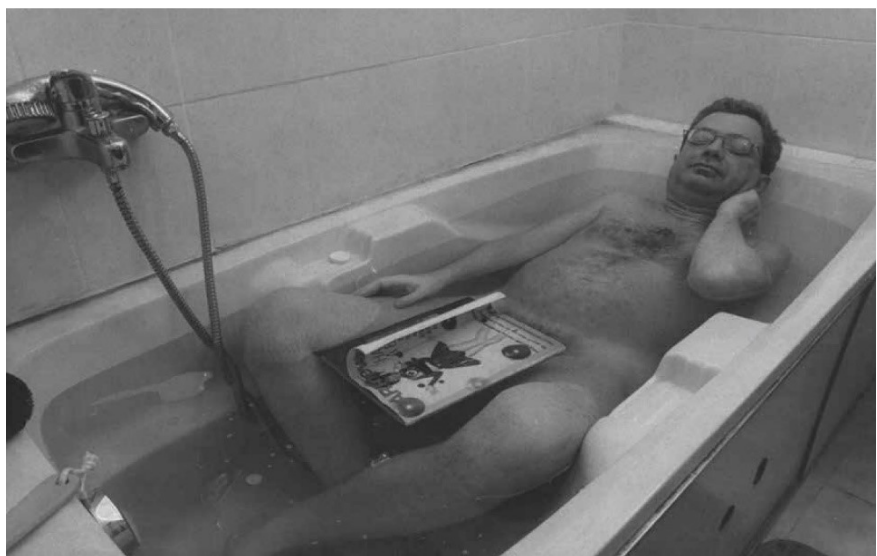


Figure 1. Vita Buivid, from the photo series *Men in a Bathtub*, Alexander Borovsky. St. Petersburg, 1996 (courtesy of the artist, Vita Buivid ©).

photographed models; it is their putting-into-position that projects a mixture of proximity and distancing onto the photographs. The link between photography and place, however, takes a more complex turn when later Buivid uses these photographs as construction materials in her photo installation.

In 2017, Buivid created a mini installation also named *Men in Bathtub* for a group exhibition called *Too Much as Not Enough* at the Shtager Gallery in London. Curated by Denis Maksimov, a curator and writer of contemporary art, the exhibition only included portable installations based on the artists' previous artworks. For this purpose, Buivid designed a small room based on the bathroom where she had taken the photographs of *Men in Bathtub*. Her installation was made of three 20x20 centimetre bathroom tiles, similar to the tiles used in the physical locations of her bathtub photographs. The white tiles, which have now become the walls of the installation, were covered with the contact sheets of *Men in Bathtub* photo series (1995-1998). Finally, to furnish the bathroom she also placed a miniaturized bathtub and wash basin in the installation (see Fig. 3). By materializing the visual setting of her photographs with the photographs themselves, Buivid has created a place whose entire existential fabric is photographic. On the one hand, her installation foregrounds the photographic nature of the entire scene, and on the other, it questions the very idea of place through photography.

PLACE: A GEOGRAPHIC DETOUR

Geographically speaking, places consist of three main components: location, locale,



Figure 2. Vita Buivid, from the photo series *Men in a Bathtub*, Andrew Solomon, New York, 1998 (courtesy of the artist, Vita Buivid ©).

and sense of place. It is through the conflation of these three aspects that a place, to use an adjective coined by philosopher Edward S. Casey, gains its 'placial' status.⁴ According to geographer Tim Cresswell, the term location "refers to an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations. Location refers to 'where' of place."⁵ Concerning Buivid's photographic installation, location refers to the specific latitude and longitude at which her installation was seen by the viewers; it is the *where* of the installation at the gallery in London. The term 'locale', however, "refers to the material setting" of a place that constitutes its appearances: it is "the way a place looks", states Cresswell.⁶ That is to say, while the term location addresses the exact point at which a place is situated, the term locale describes the material assembly that gives a particular look to that place. Regarding Buivid's photographic installation, its locale contains the 75 contact sheet photos (5x5 on each wall), the three white tiles, and the miniaturized washing basin and bathtub. It includes all the material components that both constitute and ornament this photographic installation. The last element of place is the 'sense of place', which, according to geographer Edward Relph, refers to the "unselfconscious intentionality" that



Figure 3. Vita Buivid. *Men in Bathtub*, part of the group exhibition *Too Much as Not Enough*, London, 2017, photo installation, 20 x 20 x 20 cm (photo taken by the author).

situates places at the “centers of human existence”.⁷ By drawing on philosopher Gaston Bachelard, I will now turn to this most intimate and intricate element of place to further examine Buivid’s photo installation.

TRAVERSING THE SENSE OF PLACE THROUGH DAYDREAMS

To gain their full potential, locations need to be replete with a sense of place. In a broad sense, sense of place refers to the “feelings and emotions a place evokes”.⁸ It is this subjective aspect of places that makes them unique to individuals, for how one attunes to a place is rooted in the exclusive sentiments that one has experienced therein. It is through such an affective feature that a place becomes distinctive and thus indelibly registered in one’s mind. To explore this subjective element, Bachelard developed the method of ‘topo-analysis’. Drawing on geography, psychology, and poetry, he defined ‘topo-analysis’ as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives”, of which the most profound example is one’s room.⁹ To grasp the feelings and emotions that are sedimented in one’s room, Bachelard writes: “The topo-

analyst starts to ask questions: Was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? Was the nook warm? How was it lighted? How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence?”¹⁰ It is through asking these seemingly banal questions that one can traverse the inmost sentiments of places.

Stepping into the role of a topo-analyst, Buivid, too, had to ask: was the bathroom spacious? Was the bathtub near the washing basin? Was the water warm? Did the photographed person feel emotionally ensconced in the bathroom? For Bachelard, one can better grasp the sense of place when one imagines daydreaming therein, for “day-dream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity”.¹¹ Unarguably, when lying alone in a bathtub, we are typically impelled to daydream; not only to distract our attention from the present, but also to transport ourselves onto the outside world. For Bachelard, it is this projective mental state of daydreaming that allows a solitary person to feel the ‘immensity’ of the entire existence in a room. While daydreaming, he writes:

“Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, *immensity is the movement of motionless man*.”¹²

It is precisely through daydreaming in solitude that, according to Bachelard, the intimate inner space and the infinite outer space find their convergence. In other words, within the conceptual framework of

'daydreaming', a solitary person feels the grandeur of the universe within the intimate depth of inner experience.

Returning to the sense of place in Buivid's photo installation, while being submerged in water, the photographed models must have been immersed in solitary daydreaming. Being motionless in the bathtub, they could thus expand their domestic space onto the external world through the oneiric opening of the sense of place; that is: via daydreams. Even though the miniature versions of the models are absent in the installation, their contact-sheet photographs have infused the work with a sense of place; it is through these wallpapered

photographs that the intimacy and intricacy of their daydreams permeate through this photo installation. In other words, by adorning her work with the thumbnail photographs, Buivid has created a *mise-en-place* in which location, locale, and sense of place have all been summoned photographically. It is how the medium of photography entangles place and materiality via the conduit of daydreams. To use Bachelard's words, in Buivid's photo installation "immensity is the movement of motionless man", his daydreams: once experienced in the bathtub and now embodied in its photographic emplacement.

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 12. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 202. (Emphasis added).

