

Book Review: Courting Dissolution: Adumbration, Alterity and the Dislocation of Sacrifice from Space to Image by Michael Lent

In *Courting Dissolution: Adumbration, Alterity and the Dislocation of Sacrifice from Space to Image*, US artist and researcher **Michael Lent** explores the problem of space and spatiality by focusing on the dissolution of space into materials for consumption and production. Although the communication of its dense ideas occasionally lacks clarity, this book brings together an astute and astonishing array of theoretical sources to make sense of a world increasingly defined by globalisation and capitalist over-production, finds **Lilly Markaki**.

***Courting Dissolution: Adumbration, Alterity and the Dislocation of Sacrifice from Space to Image*. Michael Lent. Columbia University Press. 2018.**

Find this book: 

In *Courting Dissolution: Adumbration, Alterity, and the Dislocation of Sacrifice from Space to Image*, American artist and researcher [Michael Lent](#) takes up the problem of space and spatiality as it emerges in the context of a world defined by globalisation and capitalist over-production.

Building on ideas of disappearance originally ascribed to objects by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, Lent describes the contemporary reality of space as one where, subsumed by a utility-oriented economy and 'system of difference' (123), space is caused to disappear into place. Enabling the author to make this distinction is the work of humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who asserts that 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (37). Unlike that of space in its pure or original state, the experience of place or the 'site' – associated often with built environments – is determined by the presence of signs and conceptions. Space therefore becomes, as Lent later writes, 'material for consumption and production, a thing disappearing into its utility' (102).

The phenomenon of disappearance that Lent takes as his subject is, of course, not specific to space. As he acknowledges, *Courting Dissolution* serves also 'as a metaphorical excavation of a larger problem by which experience is utilised towards the production of knowledge as a commodity to be exchanged into this same system, whereby all things are endowed with use-value, but ultimately disappear as well' (10). What is furthermore important to note is that Lent is not interested in exploring the problem of space for the sake of theory alone. As an artist, his investigation is motivated by a desire to position himself and his practice in relation to the dissolution that he contests, and to suggest viable pathways for art more generally. The book is, therefore, one focused on 'specifically how artists approach the world' (9).

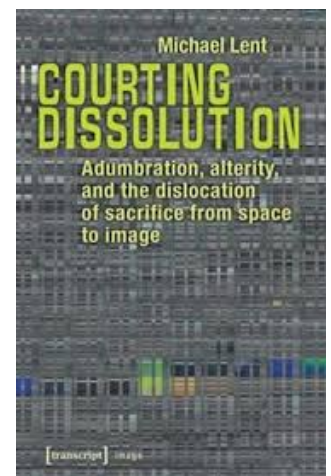




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Throughout, Lent presents the reader with an astonishing range of theoretical sources, drawing on the work of Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel de Certeau and Susan Sontag, among others. Indeed, in its attempt to bring together disparate readings and strategies to achieve a synthetic, manifold understanding of the ideas it engages, Lent's investigation is praiseworthy. What is more, the author's selection of passages to represent his sources is, from start to end, truly exceptional.

There is, however, a downside to this, as Lent's elaboration of his own thinking appears at times to lack the clarity he affords his sources. Jumping back and forth between theories and concepts, he often repeats himself, and in some cases fails to move beyond statements that announce the intentions of his thesis towards a concrete development of his position, leaving the reader wanting more. An exception is his chapter on 'Courting Dissolution', from which the book takes its title. Drawing attention to the hidden properties or potentialities of space, Lent provides a clear and engaging discussion of, among other things, *In Praise of Shadows* by Japanese novelist Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and concept of the 'adumbrational' (72) – an 'imagined quality' (74) or 'foreshadow', as Lent explains, of 'what is on the other side before the utility of space' (79). Examining the book in its entirety, however, my sense is that, although fascinating, its thesis would have been strengthened by a deeper yet more concise analysis of the ideas it presents.

What is more, certain concepts – including 'radical alterity' (11) and 'pataphysics' – are at times introduced either without any attempt at definition, or with context provided a while after their initial appearance, making the book a little uninviting for untrained readers. This is justified to an extent as Lent wishes for the writing to reflect the nature of the ideas discussed in the book. 'I propose,' he explains, 'that the form of argument itself must be presented in an unfolding method and one that is not always explicit. The text flirts with the intangibility and pataphysical nature of these ideas' (10-11).

Lent's desire to allow for a certain openness in the text might also be attributed to his intermittent tendency to define things through a negation. An example is the concept of space itself, which he describes on one occasion 'as a loose collection of the area between specific locations in the most general terms' (43-44). Space, it appears, is where the site or place is not, but its exact qualities or nature prior to its dissolution are not given – perhaps because they cannot ever be known. 'The absolute rule of thought', writes Baudrillard in a passage quoted by Lent, 'is to return the world as we receive it: unintelligible' (154).

The role that art plays within an economy of value and meaning that Lent discovers as the context of dissolution is a question pursued and expanded in his chapter 'Dis/location'. In agreement with Baudrillard's thesis in *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005), Lent suggests art today appears to be failing to fulfil its destiny. In its treatment of space specifically, art is indeed 'conforming or heading into a similar path' (10) with scientific discourse, and from which it is supposed to be distinct:

I assert that art has the ability to – was supposed to – do more, leading us into the world as explorers rather than actors of an extemporary scientific method (38).

In response to this problem, Lent aims to designate a practice whereby the ‘desire or ability to explore is made distinct from a desire to conquer’ space (46), and which engages in ‘experimentation without utility as an end-goal’ (39). The political orientation of such a practice emerges, naturally, as ‘one of an anti-commodification of art’ (33). ‘Similarly,’ he writes, ‘the politics ascribed are one of anti-capitalisation and anti-colonial in a general sense, which is perhaps an outcome of the desire to conquer, claim, and name’ (33-34).

To provide a model for practice in writing is, however, not an easy task, and at times Lent’s attempts to do so appear limited. He writes:

This research is an examination of the moment of the cusp of disappearance whereby experience merges with an imagining. This is a practice toward the potentialities and possibilities of object and space, of discovery, of what lies on the other side (of what we perceive) (38).

To achieve such a practice – one ‘grounded’, as he asserts, ‘in radical alterity’ (11) – one might employ the tools of fragmentation and mobility. But while examples are provided that can be seen as disclosing a colonising impulse – Robert Smithson is examined as a case in point – there are few instances where a clear picture is painted of what art working in the opposite direction, and which Lent promotes, might look like.

One example that Lent does present is from his own practice, titled ‘OklahomaisOK’, which documents the action of driving across the state in order to experience it as space. ‘As I drove across it, with the sun coming up behind me’, reads part of the text, ‘I saw the point where the Oklahoma sky meets its prairie-tan horizon line. The space between the sun [...] and where the sky touched the ground was filled with the kind of air that you’d only find at midnight. But here it was in the day’ (15). In his effort to capture what he describes as ‘the experience of being in transit’ (14), the author reveals a true and poetic sensibility towards aspects of landscape that are often today overlooked or taken for granted by passers-by.

At one point in the book, Lent supposes that his research ‘might hint at something about environmentalism and the failure of science and art to take a preemptive stance on space before its disappearance’ (44). It is in this that the book’s strength lies, I believe, even if the author’s main interest rests elsewhere. In ‘teasing’, as he calls it, the ‘dissolutive event’ (33), and through the many texts and images that he presents, Lent manages to inspire his reader to look around with new eyes, at a time when what is threatening to dissolve appears to be not only space, but the world itself.

Lilly Markaki is a PhD researcher in Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. In 2014, she graduated from the University of Glasgow’s ‘Art; Politics; Transgression: 20th Century Avant-Gardes’ MLitt programme, having previously received a BA in Art History from the same institution. Her research project examines French-American artist Marcel Duchamp in an attempt to renegotiate his position in relation to movements such as Dada and Surrealism and to rethink canonical understandings of the figure, arguing, finally, for an ethical and political dimension in his work.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.