

In the former area of World Trade Center, thousands of unknown people used to cross paths everyday. There is a sort of weird enchantment in such a place where individual itineraries are anonymous, in the same as surrounds empty plots, waste lands, buildings under construction, platforms of trains, waiting rooms. Marc Augé calls such places "no places."

After all the tragedy, Ground Zero is a holy place because there is not only debris and ruins but also the blood of the victims. An "anthropological place" is marked by the presence of the past in the present. Past and present struggle to place and reinstall their power. The "anthropological place" is filled with experiences and relationships with different ideas about what is Reality. It is not a place of anonymous paths crossing each other without memory and legacy, but a meeting point of paths and encounters, a wedding of shared feelings, ideas and memories. A place to rebuild the way we build our idea about reality.

A "sociological place," after Maus, is associated with a culture place in space and time. To the contrary, a "no-place" is not located to either space or time. Ground Zero is not only a physical holy place but also a place in the minds of many people. First are the relatives and friends of the victims, second the close neighbors of the area, but more unique and special are the millions of people that have the place in mind. The tragedy, the fact, was beyond that of the physical collapse of towers, buildings and human lives. It was the collapse of a symbol, the symbol of Western Culture. Human beings have a symbolic mind, we have personal and private symbols but we also need



Places and No Places

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public, collective ones. If the symbol is strong enough there is a temptation not to rethink its meaning. By losing self-consciousness of what we are we lose the opportunity to change and improve our ideas of what reality is. Our Western Culture is active and brilliant, but living inside, moving with the fast and rich flow, one can lose this self-consciousness.

Ground Zero is now a place to think about our identity, our relationship with time (history) and the world (space). WTC was a no-place because it represented such a strong established idea of our symbols that it was not a place to rethink, but one to walk to and walk through just looking at the next day. Of course WTC had a calendar and a place to be, but now it can be a "place for memory." It does not mean to convert the place into a memorial, frozen in time, losing little by little its appeal. The Western world is full with memorials of past wars, past tragedies, that once were full with the tears of contemporary people. Little by little their contemporaries disappeared until they became empty places. Places maybe just inhabited by ghosts. Dramatic statues of warriors that look now a bit theatrical were once an intense appeal for their contemporaries. Like places that they are just become tourist ones. Stones and ruins with the click of cameras, souvenirs shops, with eyes devoted to looking and buying, just quickly, only a moment to catch in a video an immortal memory for the endurance of relatives and friends forced to watch the tokens of the tourist trip. But the spell can be broken. Life is not a cheap movie, a rushed Monday morning or a boring Sunday evening with the bitter taste of "tomorrow is a day of work." Life can be a journey where we watch different landscapes that precisely redress our life. Ground Zero can be a new landscape where we can rethink our collective and personal big questions: why, what for, where.

Foucault wrote about "neutral places" as one characteristic of our culture. Places for fiction because we only talk about them instead of thinking about them. With such an attitude we conspire to feel secure, certainty with no doubts about our life. This process makes us feel secure, having a mechanical life of functioning but living in an empty meaning just because one never thinks about it. Louis Marin described Disneyland as a "degenerate utopia" and Umberto Eco explains this concept as "an ideology developed in a way of a myth."

A true work of art comes from the feelings and a thoughts of an artist who is able to represent his time and his social group. The so called magic of art, the places that if we are attentive can have a strong "magic" appeal, are such because they are able to be a door into another reality. In such a case the attitude of the individual connects with the one of the artist and the one of other people who once shared that process. Robert Smithson created non-sites just to point out how we hide the meaning of art under the busy veil of commerce and trade. Of course, to sell and buy art is good for the freedom and survival of art but the process can distract from the true meaning of art. It is art as a cultural artifact that is able to be a door into another reality, a source for new landscapes for our lives. Smithson was very intelligent to propose spaces breaking the peaceful order of nature to point out concepts of no-place, no-time, and no-object. When the place is not a place we are in no-where, condemned to live without meanings, like galley slaves in the dark under deck of a ship. Working and rowing, in a rush, crossing thousands of paths of unknown people everyday. Ground Zero can be more than a place, but a symbol, where to rethink ourselves, in the same way as a sad new Holocaust. Maybe, because of it, the suffering and the death of the victims will have a meaning and a purpose. □

Wolfgang Staehle,
(from top)
Untitled, 2001.
live video projection
(diptych)
unique
Courtesy Postmasters
Gallery.

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