



# WHERE IS OUR PLACE?

**OPENING 16 JULY, GALLERY 4 AND 5**

## Exhibition sheet

### Title

*Where is Our Place?*

### Organisers

IVAM in collaboration with MAXXi

### Date

From 16 July 2020 to 31 January 2021

### Curator

José Miguel G. Cortés

### Coordinator

Raquel Gutiérrez

*“We live somewhere: in a country, in a town in that country, in a neighbourhood in that town, in a street in that neighbourhood, in a building in that street, in an apartment in that building.*

*(...) Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.”*

**Georges Perec**

The *Where is Our Place?* project grew out of the interest of two like-minded European museums, both based in the Mediterranean, in collaborating. The hope was that a dialogue would be created between their collections, and that connections and affinities would be established. And so a group of works and installations from the MAXXi collection (by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Francis Alÿs, Jana Sterbak, Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone, Kara Walker, William Kentridge, Atelier Van Lieshout and Teddy Cruz) have now been brought together with a number of important pieces from the IVAM collection (by Bruce Nauman, Gabriele Basilico and Richard Hamilton). Their common ground is a concern with the inhabited and social space, a questioning of the city, the home, the community, or the personal sanctuary.

With this in mind, this is a project that seeks to understand how spaces mark time and are linked to a place's memory. We present a group of works and large installations that seem to be an accumulation of places with varying degrees of closeness and disconnectedness, and which draw attention to the fragmentation of the human experience, to the inability to comprehend the social whole and to the imperfection of knowledge. In parallel, the project aims to talk about those of us who feel like strangers no matter where we are, as we come to feel that our existence unfolds, somewhat anxiously, in cities that we no longer recognize and in urban spaces in which we find no place or space. We note the marked erratic and provisional element that has entered daily life, revealing an uncertainty and a heightened personal fragility, and an attendant disorientation, a feeling of not really knowing where we are.

Thus, in the exhibition *Where is Our Place?* we find a group of ideas and projects that understand architecture as a structure that condenses a physical world. As the desire to build a place (a haven, a sanctuary, a house, a home...) defined by the people that use it, as if it were a (more or less free) version of ourselves. In other words, they are spatial projects/experiences, that offer us the possibility of understanding buildings, maps, urban spaces or private places as versions of our own bodies. A kind of three-dimensional mirror of the idea that we have of human bodies and how we project them onto our most immediate environment. Projects understood as a second skin, as built versions of ourselves that may come to replace us; at the same time as they make us more aware not only of our own physicality, but of our own habits, affections, desires and dreams.

It therefore seems necessary to understand how relationships between public and private spheres are one of the key hinges of the society that shapes the fabric of daily life. Both aspects of this relationship can be better understood as an action that is completed than as a state that is possessed. The import of this is also very much spatial in nature, since they are territories that attempt to establish themselves in regimes of visibility and urban occupation. There can be no transformation of one sphere that does not mean, in tandem, the transformation of the other. For this reason, the public/private opposition should not be posed as the confrontation of two totally opposing terms, but as the setting up of a hierarchy of values that establishes an order of subordination between two aspects that are, in a sense, complementary. Consequently, rather than setting them against

each other in a binary contradiction of rigid oppositions, we should think of them as being in a dialectical relationship, in which it is possible to jump from one category to another depending on the particular sociocultural and historical circumstances.

The term *private* is habitually understood to refer to the intimate, personal and inner; it is restricted to the realm of the individual and is regarded as a sphere of intimacy that is not made public. Hence it is associated with feelings, affectivity, and intuition. The term *public*, meanwhile, refers to what is evident, common and well-known. And is associated with intelligence, with calculation, efficiency... These judgements give rise to the construction of two distinct concepts: that of feelings, linked with the private sphere, and that of efficiency and success, associated with the public sphere. In fact, what these concepts mean is generally different with respect to men and women. In other words, the public stage was for a long time regarded as out of bounds for women and as the natural domain of men, the place where they could excel and distinguish themselves. While men have been free to form a relationship with the private world, women have done so due to the impossibility of accessing the fundamental areas of society.

Yet it is precisely because of this different experience of the same space (according to the sex and/or gender of each person) that I see space not as a mere setting where a great range of situations take place, but as the result of concrete action and specific discourse. Space, whether public or private, is above all

a lived space that appears, or rather is formed, with the action of individuals and their movements; they endow it with meaning, it does not outlast them, and it disappears as the players disperse.

It can thus be said that each spatial design constructs meaning; there are no autonomous areas or neutral places. Quite the contrary. This is well illustrated by the various pieces and installations exhibited here, since all of them construct stories, experiences and narratives that provide us with a framework for sensing and discussing spaces—the very different types of spaces that are constructed every day. Thus, the works in *Where is Our Place?* help us to understand that there are multiple ways of understanding and creating our environment, both public and private. Each one of these pieces is different; each one touches on some important (sensory, ideological, political or social) question. But the route through all of them comprises a broad and evocative palimpsest that prompts us to ask: what and where is our home? If indeed we know or have one.

**José Miguel G.Cortés, curator of the exhibition**



*Faradayurt* (2001), Jana Sterbak. Fondazione MAXXI

As we approach the galleries that contain the exhibition *Where is Our Place?* we see a kind of tent like that of a nomadic people, one of the first spaces that humans built to protect themselves from the weather and from the dangers of the environment (like the classic yurts used by the Mongols). A home for travelling, for going from here to there, as lightly as possible and, at the same time, a shelter from the heat, a space of protection and retreat.

The work titled *Faradayurt* (2001) is a creation by the artist Jana Sterbak (Prague, 1955). It is a yurt made of nylon covered in copper, particularly appropriate materials for creating a physical space that isolates us in two ways from our environment: first, from any kind of electromagnetic waves produced by mobile phones, television or radio; second, a place of mental solitude propitious to dreaming and the imagination. A place protected from any kind of mechanical or physical influence that might alter the individual identity we wish to protect.

*Fun House*, an installation created in 1956 by Richard Hamilton (London, 1922-2011), John Voelcker (Preston, UK, 1927-Glasgow, 1972) and John McHale (Glasgow, 1922-Houston, 1978) for the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, is a rather more optimistic piece. That exhibition essentially consisted of ephemeral works, thus what we see here is a reproduction from 1987. The aim of the installation is to create a spatial environment that emphasizes the fundamental characteristics of a period hopeful about economic progress, the growth of the media, and the blossoming of popular culture.

The wooden structure creates a multisensory space that calls on all our senses. The visitor must move through it and come to terms with its destabilizing nature since the optical illusion, the different sounds and the striking images create a total environment. So-called high culture (Duchamp and Van Gogh) and low culture (Robot Robby, Marilyn Monroe, and various advertising images) are thrown together cheek by jowl with politics, technology and music, allowing the various architectural spaces created to be experienced in a personal and highly stimulating way.



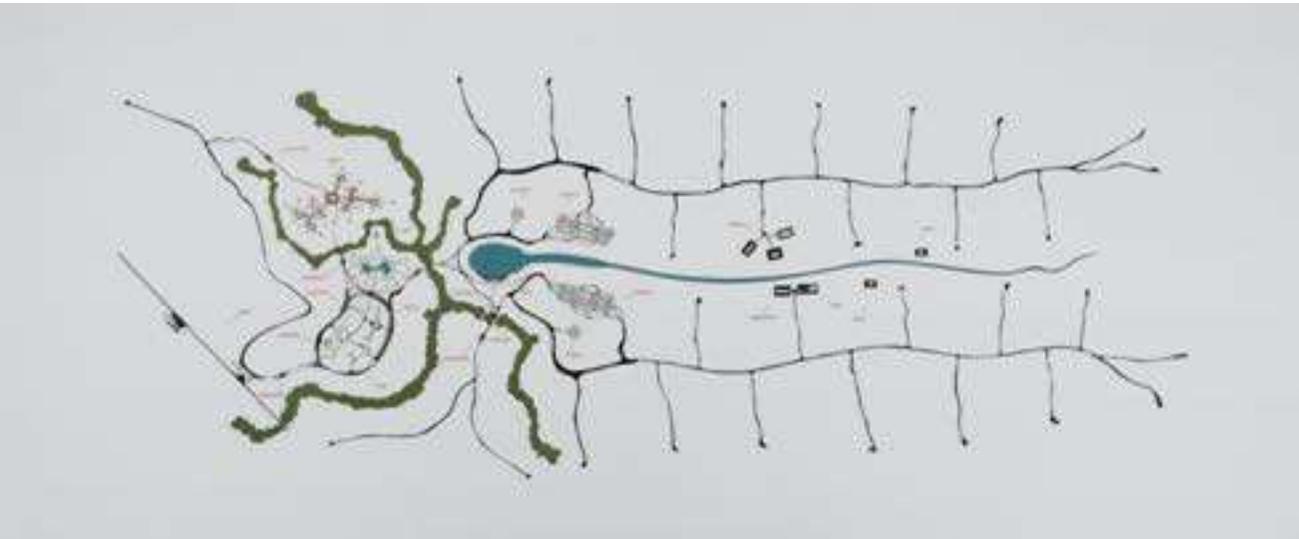
*Fun House*, 1956. Richard Hamilton, John Voelcker y John McHale. Col.IVAM



*Sleepers*, 2001. Francis Alÿs. Fondazione MAXXI

The tension and anxiety are generated by the works of Francis Alÿs (Antwerp, 1959), with his looped video projection of 80 photographs, *Sleepers* (2001). This work is part of a larger project of the Mexico City-based Belgian artist that deals with street sellers, sleepers and beggars, to which Alÿs dedicated different methodically produced photographic series, between 1992 and 2006, as if making a fairly neutral and objective record of a solidly archival nature.

Mexico City, and its historic centre in particular, is a city full of marginalized citizens, of people situated on the edges of a seemingly modern metropolis. People who expropriate the pavements, who take over the streets and make squares, park benches and metro carriages their own. Thus Alÿs creates compilations of peripheral city lives, images that could be sculptures or public installations of people who use the streets as provisional and temporary refuges. The Belgian/Mexican artist shows us these forgotten people who create a new city with their bodies that many people would prefer not to see.

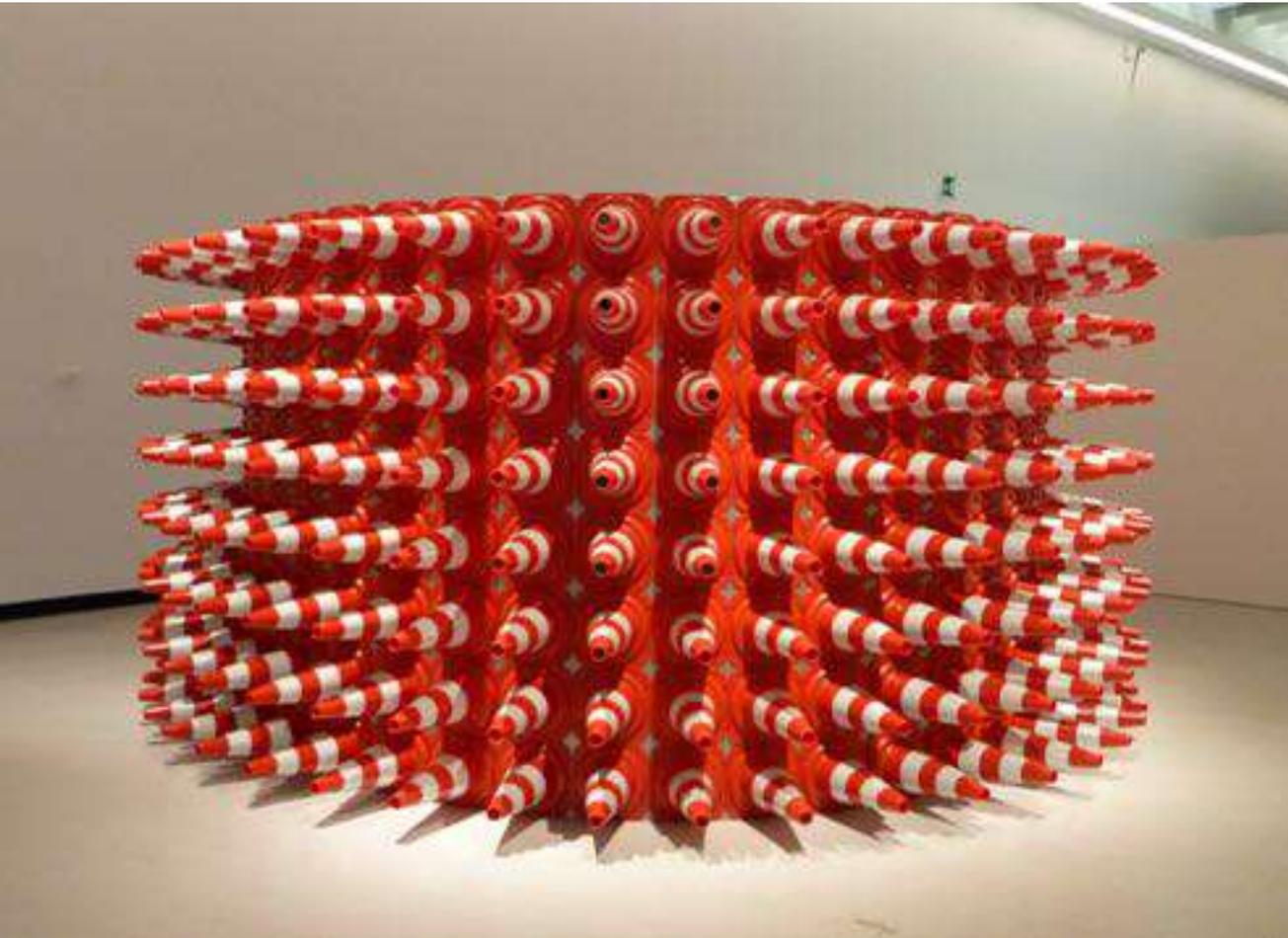


These works by Atelier Van Lieshout speak to us of not only a city but of an entire planet subject to a dystopian regime in which every action is clearly organized, controlled and structured without any possible escape route.

A society designed down to the tiniest detail, self-sufficient, isolated from others and governed by authoritarian laws that shape a city, and a planet, of slaves with no will of their own. An imaginary city in which every building, street or square is designed for a particular political end. Clearly dystopian works with no place for hope.



*Slave City*. Urban Plan, 2005 (arriba)  
*The Globe*, 2007 (abajo). Atelier Van Lieshout. Fondazione MAXXI



*Cultural Traffic: from the Global Border to the Border Neighbourhood* (2010). Teddy Cruz. Fondazione MAXXi

This uncompromising political and critical stance with respect to the creation of maps and the construction of cities can also be seen in the work of the architect Teddy Cruz (Guatemala City, 1962), who presents his installation (made specifically for MAXXi in Rome) *Cultural Traffic: from the Global Border to the Border Neighbourhood* (2010), consisting of over 300 traffic cones that form a small circular pavilion within which various videos are projected. The idea of the border, whether global or more local, as a place of separation and difference is underlined by the presence of these assembled cones that point aggressively towards the viewer, imposing a suitable distance. An object of everyday, unremarkable use, such as a red and white cone, becomes a weapon to keep us on our toes, and prevent us from getting too close. Within the somewhat friendlier interior, meanwhile, we find a screen showing various images that help us understand the deterrent, if not clearly repressive, nature of such borders.



Gabriele Basilico (Milan, 1944-2003) has based his extensive body of work around the creation of an immense archive of many different cities (Valencia, Naples, Rome, Berlin, Beirut, Buenos Aires, Paris...), of their streets, squares, buildings and wastelands, in which people rarely figure. Their presence seems to be almost avoided or prohibited; their traces can be seen and references to them are sensed, but human beings themselves are almost never visible.

The focus of Basilico's work is the representation of the urban landscape, of the space in which the daily existence of millions of people unfolds, in analysing how political and social aspects shift and transform contemporary metropolises. His empty spaces create a theatrical scene and take on a metaphysical meaning that prompts us to question the possible physical existence of people in this desolate landscape. The city is represented as a theatre in which actors are not necessary.

*Milano* (1995) y *Milano* (1996), Gabriele Basilico, Col.IVAM  
*Berlin* (2000), Gabriele Basilico, Col.IVAM  
*Valencia* (2001), Gabriele Basilico, Col.IVAM

Alfredo Jaar shows the installation *Infinite Cell*, 2004, in which (from the influence of the cell where A. Gramsci wrote his famous *Notes from prison*) the Chilean artist pays tribute to the Italian thinker by recreating a cell as a metaphor for physical barriers that the different societies put to the critical thought, as well as the limitations and the isolation to which any attempt of resistance and desire to overcome the walls that separate and divide the societies is subjected. However, it is not as pessimistic vision as it might seem, since the large mirrors of the installation want to alert us to the capacity for evasion and imagination that thought has and that no cell can lock up.



*Infinite Cell*, 2004. Alfredo Jaar. Fondazione MAXXI



*Senza titolo (Triplo igloo)*, 1984-2002. Mario Merz. Fondazione MAXXI

Mario Merz (Milan 1925-2003), in his installation *Untitled (Triple Igloo)*, 1984-2002, displays some of the most characteristic elements of his artistic activity. The architectural forms are no longer only a place or a home in which to take physical refuge, but also a mental space that functions as a metaphorical element for many of the artist's concerns. Merz carried on building igloos until the end of his life, recreating this architectural form in many different formats and with a great variety of materials and techniques. It is an unstable structure in which interior and exterior are intimately related (particularly in this example made of glass) and in which the circular form emphasizes the idea of wandering, of walking, through a conjunction of dialectical opposites (physical or mental, organic or inorganic...) that, according to the artist, shape human existence. Thus, in this triple igloo, the viewer is invited to move around the circular structure, to note the sequence of neon numbers on the glass (Italian mathematician Fibonacci's famous sequence) and to question how architectural forms and their materials shape our most everyday acts.

The piece by Bruce Nauman (Fort Wayne, USA, 1941), *Model for Tunnels* (1981), is also circular in form, yet its characteristics are quite different to those of Merz's installation. From a rather quiet and harmonious environment we have moved into a more aggressive space that provokes a singular sense of insecurity and unease. The materials here are raw (plaster, iron and rough wood) and crudely unfinished. The artist calls it a "model", yet it is a solid architectural structure that, rather than generating calm, shelter and comfort, recalls subterranean city tunnels and hidden, unknown places that seem to be symbols of the psychological depths of the human mind.

The work consists of two heavy structures placed in a fragile equilibrium that seems liable to collapse or fall at any moment. This very precariousness raises questions about its meaning and the possibility of passage since the two structures seem to be open, creating the sense that they are easy to access and yet, if we were to enter them, we become aware of a sense of physical risk, tension and anxiety. With this work (with its circular and square forms), Bruce Nauman has created a disturbing and ominous spatial experience that provokes surprise and creates a significant emotional impact in the viewer.



*Model for Tunnels* (1981), Bruce Nauman. Col.IVAM



The multimedia installation *Preparing the Flute*, 2004-2005, by William Kentridge (Johannesburg, 1955). The work is a scale representation of the sets for Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. A performative installation that blends theatre and opera, in which a hybrid of the languages and forms of its scenery is created, resulting in a polyphony of shadows, drawings and music, with which he attempts to dismantle some of the clichés established by colonialism.

This is because the libretto to *The Magic Flute*, composed shortly before Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns and the great expansion of western power, is an expression of the distorted European vision of Africa at that time. Kentridge created a wooden structure as the setting for a small theatre with various panels placed in perspective and a great variety of video sequences that become not only a view of colonialism but also a reflection on the history of humanity. All his work is a deconstruction of the mental image that white men formed of the African continent, of the clichés and fears they created about what they didn't understand, but which frightened them.

The references in Kentridge's work to the policy of racial segregation or apartheid are echoed by the work of the North American artist Kara Walker (Stockton, USA, 1969), represented in the exhibition by the installation *For the Benefit of All the Races of Mankind*, 2002. The work is a sequence, around the walls of the room, of black life-sized silhouettes, coloured by light from projectors, that recreate moments from the history of slavery in the United States.

Inspired by real events in American history, Walker creates a pictorial narrative that invades the walls and forms new relational spaces. Poetic, political, personal and perverse spaces that make us question history through the lens of race and sexuality. Her juxtaposition of racial stereotypes (such as Uncle Tom, the "Mammy" figure or confederate soldiers) with psychosexual dynamics (pleasure-pain, desire-disgust) in seemingly pleasant environments, are clear allusions to the hidden racism and sexism that prevails within social behaviour. This is clearly exemplified by the installation shown here, which depicts two young black slave girls walking calmly through the countryside but who carry a kind of yoke around their necks with a small bell on the end that constantly gives away their position. The idyllic place cannot conceal the situation of control and slavery they are subjected to.



*For the Benefit of All the Races of Mankind*, 1999. Kara Walker. Fondazione MAXXI



*Where is our place?*, 2003. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Fondazione MAXXI

The installation by the duo Ilya and Emilia Kabakov (Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, 1933 and 1945), *Where is Our Place?*, 2003, brings three different periods together in the same space of the work. The first shows a nineteenth-century art salon inhabited by giant figures (only their legs are visible) trying to look at the paintings, with large gilded frames, positioned in the upper section and cut off by the ceiling. The second, which refers to the present day, takes the form of small black and white photos placed alongside poetic texts placed at visitors' eye level. The third, situated beneath the floor, can be viewed through perspex panels and are maquettes of coastal landscapes in reference to the art of the future.

Through the combination of these three ages, or historical periods (in which there is a manipulation of relationships and scale) the Kabakovs invite visitors on an unusual journey, through time and space (from the gilded frames of the salon to unadorned nature), encouraging a collective reflection on the relativity of beliefs and of the role and value of art. This route, this experience, takes us back to the title of their work and of the exhibition itself, *Where/What is our Place/Home?* and suggests to us that there are always other places that generate different illusions and expectations. Installations such as the Kabakovs' demonstrate how architecture and art enable us to think about the potential for constructing multiple fictional spaces. All we need to do is find our own.



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