

***Reflections on some old topologies:  
Itziar Barrio's "Welcome to the New Paradise"***

**by Norman Douglas**

Basking in the meteor-tinged night heat that follows another of midsummer's dog days, I rest my well-traveled, hard worked bones on a rickety deck dappled in star-dulling moonlight while listening to the disparate musics of coyote harmonies howled west of the Berkshires across the Hudson River hills and the staccato-fingered beeps of text entered into the palm-held techno-phonic light screen my partner wields so deftly. The waxing moon looms over this entire megalopolis—over an empire at its ebb—a secret opening burnt into the sky forgotten by urban planners and robots indifferent to why their name means worker, ignorant of how its own history first dubbed a select cadre of women with the machinic title, "computers." The simplest of written passages describing the landscape upon which human histories fortify a society implies a hidden paradise of unbridled promise; paradise—its unseen motif informing fortune's script with perfect silences throughout—may well be the most subjective object extant. We seek it like an oracle, not fully knowing what we seek, yet confident that it will reveal itself and all its splendid story. Paradise performs as life's fabled tabula rasa, an open system molding malleable images, galvanizing like a billboard's perspective angles: erect diagonals that block the view from rooftop water towers, woody rain collectors overlooking the din of busy roads—"our major architectural form," in H. Marshall McLuhan's reckoning; roads cobbled out of potholes that go on forever; relentless hungry cracks carefully surrounded by old brick and brownstone, concrete, steel, and flesh, glass, wood, bones. A road going nowhere, paradise contains castles like Oz and Camelot as incidentals, populated by a liberating magic that absorbs all reflected light in quantum disarray that needs no map. Thus reads a partial list that names the stuff we're made of, a compendium of goals that toughen our resolve to support the blue of noon.

Itziar Barrio reckons with the elemental process that makes us. In Barrio's handling of the creative, the path to her realization of a work entails the mapping of her inspiration; she engineers what amounts to an integral machinery in action, each act instilling breath. True, the gallery stands for her—like it does for countless others before and yet to

come—as the white boxed-in crossroads, the blank threshold of perception that delimits the market's rational itch for production against a process determined by design to eschew cause and effect. Loosely borrowing from the methodology of Michel Foucault, where history enriches theories tied to a disappointing fear of power, we may find it tempting to consider this alternative intersection a heterotopia.

But Foucault's fundamental premise—that just as the "nineteenth century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics, so the present epoch will [be] the epoch of space"—whereby he relegates "Bachelard's monumental work and the descriptions of phenomenologists" to the confines of internal space, site of cognition or contemplation—remains flawed. His heterotopias define external space: the "space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which ... our time and our history occurs, ...is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space." Barrio creates a space that one may easily confuse with this Foucauldian brew, but "the new paradise" of the old gallery she alters to welcome the viewer cannot abide this liberal attempt at containment. Foucault's example of the mirror as heterotopia—a "virtual space that opens up behind the surface"—has its appeal, but fails to reflect the reality of space that Henri Lefebvre introduced during the selfsame period of Foucault's inventive constraint.

Lefebvre calls on the language of science—as opposed to the language of thought relied on by Foucault and others (e.g., Jean Baudrillard, Lefebvre's student and teaching assistant)—to assert the obvious: the only limits to the unlimited space of universal integrity arise via the imposition of economics. From the unknown infinity of outer space to the rarely seen depths of a corporeal inner space, one encounters no border, no delimitation, no beginning or end. Whatever boundary one may name exists only in name, and the naming of things serves no order other than that which abides the value judgments of base materialism and its economic dictates.

Barrio welcomes the viewer-participant to The New Paradise that employs the subjective discourse of space—of site and situation—to parody the super-imposition of capitalism's promise to hand out ersatz rewards that ultimately aid only the self that obediently disappears before the force of symbol and language that inform the business of publicity.

In our urban world, on the streets where we walk, the buses we take, in the magazines we read, on walls, on screens, we are surrounded by images of an alternative way

of life... and for a moment they stimulate our imagination, either by way of memory or anticipation. But where is this other way of life? It's a language of words and images which calls out to us wherever we go... Where do they exist? Here? There? Or nowhere? They come with us; we take them away in our minds...

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 4

Paradise embodies a variety of personalized, quasi-mythomaniacal utopia; while utopia, for its part, mayhap exists at an extreme site that lies opposite the sociopathic shell surrounding our forbearers' expulsion from the garden of an early, monotheist myth. Publicity borrows from both versions, while Barrio engineers a reversal that reconstitutes publicity's fraudulent schemes.

The impossible fantasy found everywhere, paradise must appropriate forms to outline even what it cannot comprise. Thus, inasmuch as life's paradise outstrips capital's inexorable urban renewal of an excessive market bearing scant resemblance to the real, any and all available forms need almost disguise themselves, remaining hidden lest their beauty or weight or texture obscure the edifying light reflected thereon. Such a fantastically fabulous endeavor would require a veritably systemic type of cloaking device. Barring a trip to the property storehouse of the United States Starship Enterprise, the artist (puny humans heed few caveats) forges on; amassing a fabric of cloth fragments and digital video details whose scope consciously defies either accurate mapping or linear documentation.

Itziar Barrio, 21st century explorer of the Americas, pursues a creative praxis in this domain of the unclassifiable. Not that what she creates is rife with impermeable theses or unknowable tidbits for digestion like so many aestheticized bar snacks. Barrio circumnavigates a multitude of media; true to the process-oriented approach, her imperial scope carries a simplified lightness of being, albeit clear with the demand that you find your own gesture to add, share.

As her supple dancer freestyles to the pulsing of a familiar and enduring dance hit, a gyrating torso hints at the acephalic icon devised by surrealists Andre Masson and Georges Bataille to refute the rumors of Nietzsche as fascist on the eve of Europe's penultimate war. Barrio teases us with the successive removal of t-shirts that reveal not the body, but the dictum (one word after another) "you have to know your customer." Paradoxically rephrasing the platitude that "the customer is always right," the spectator uneasily adopts the gaze of a peep show

client. Suddenly cast into the part of voyeur, a customer of the image-body, Barrio's slogan compounds the challenge; obliges the voyeur-customer to know his or her customer as one may attempt the unremitting work of the alchemist (the ultimate prospector for paradise embodied in the philosophers' stone) summed up in Aleister Crowley's "Know thyself." One cannot "know" one's customer in any way approaching the absolutism of the phrase. What's more, the implicit suggestion that "knowing" others unknown to one will only be met by failure is further substantiated by Bataille's response to Masson's illustration of the Acephale:

Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of innocence and crime... He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.

John Berger argues in his documentary classic, "Ways of Seeing," that publicity addresses "a man's ability to consume [such that this ability] is directly related to his sexual virility. Those who do not have this power... become faceless... [Publicity] plays on the fear of not being desirable, of being unenviable... it [also] consoles you with the promise of a dream." Rendered monstrous—a fantastical assessment—one is saved through the similarly fantastical adornment of the self with publicity's forms. These forms are not only the objects for sale, they comprise the surrounding environment—almost always an exotic topography (tropics to the south, ancient castles to the north)—and its beautiful inhabitants: viz., paradise and the citizens thereof.

All things—actions, ideas, histories, entities—point to paradise, whether the promise of a future that unfolds in the immanent acceptance of the here and now, or in the sadness and longing epitomized by the platitude known as "paradise lost," as if contemporary life had experienced this exile firsthand. Barrio takes publicity's renditions of paradise as idyll of ideal relations and exposes them.

The t-shirt slogan, like the off-site billboard advert that announces the artist's process, is cut up and reconfigured as the statement that returns us our identity as another vendor of the customer. Both identities (seller and buyer) have been configured by the dictates of capitalist competition—a competition of knowledge and knowing that pretends to innovation, despite its reduction to the Lowest Common Denominator: to consumption, an act that promises gain through loss;

a powerful loss by virtue of the fact that it secretly drags along the shadow of the once unknowable death defined by the word "consumption" long ago—a last breath.

The notion that there is a paradise is equally the assumption of artist and viewer. Paradise—never enjoyed in reality, ever enjoyed in our belief systems—is the "incredible" fact that informs our credulity; the unbelievable gives rise to our belief in the "impossible" underpinning everything, a belief defying belief. Addressing this lack in a forum dedicated to contemporary art poses a great challenge to any artist. Critique of the vacation as free time outside the constraints of work falls short of Guy Debord's argument that "There can be no free use of time until we possess the modern tools for the construction of everyday life. The use of such tools will mark the leap from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art." (Guy Debord, "Theses sur la revolution culturelle," *Internationale Situationniste* #1) Though criticism necessarily seeds the ground for "a utopian revolutionary art," perhaps a playground furnished with "modern tools for the construction of everyday life," participatory elements that transform the role of the spectator into collaborator will raise the bar of such investigations, extending the process beyond the closure into which an artist often feels forced to develop a product. This is not said to detract from Barrio's effort, but to offer a thought concerning the transformation of the work toward "an experimental revolutionary art."

The exhibit, "Welcome to the New Paradise," put on display by Itziar Barrio collects and presents the artifacts of our fixation for a pre-formulated future, documents an illogical archaeological discovery still underway, equates this expanding catalog of the sublime with the creative process. Scrounging over signs, we place our belief in an idea, a moment rife with the possibility of grasping the impossible—be it the exploitation of new publicity or the extension of new technology. With this amorphous brainchild now coined, we mint the idea into a medium cum idiom—a drawing, a word, a photo, or combine thereof. From this minted model follows the construction; maintained as a construct, or abandoned in ruin, the imaginary completes its form as image. Conscious of our resistance to rest upon either construct or ruin, twin engines of the shifting system of hierarchic use-value, Paradise endures, albeit unrecognizable.

Barrio effectively welcomes us into this unseeable endpoint, delineating for us, like the late, great media pundit H.M. McLuhan, the "process rather than the completed product of discovery; my purpose is to employ facts as tentative probes, as means of insight, of pattern recognition, rather than to use them in the traditional and sterile sense

of classified data, categories, containers. I want to map new terrain rather than chart old landmarks." [From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, *Playboy* Magazine (March 1969 ©, 1994 by Playboy. All rights reserved)] Behind each and every process thus attempted lurks the premise for change, the promise of a paradise not only created, but re-created anew. Welcome to the new paradise.

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