

# Deadspace

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*Deadspace* is a suite of paintings that has been conceived collaboratively and made individually by Nathan Brooker and Ian Williams. The artists had worked in parallel before this collaboration. Brooker was examining the alienated and alienating social spaces of the built environment, rendering them in abstracted planes of colour and texture that evoked an ambivalent, anxiously generic architectural space. Williams was investigating the virtual representation of space in video games in a painterly style that blurred the boundaries between abstraction and realism, exposing the absurd mechanisms of pictorial realism.

This current project involves the artists supplementing their practice by adopting each other's previous artistic concerns and including them in as part of their own. The collaboration lies in the shared conceptual framework and subject matter. So, Brooker is now additionally painting the spaces in video games, spaces that lie outside the parameters of the game, but which populate the virtual space of the game that allow the player to mooch aimlessly around the game's sealed world; Williams is including into his painting the nooks and crannies of urban blight, the poorly conceived, crudely made and disempowering social spaces created as an afterthought by a disinterested capitalism.

Having expanded their concerns conceptually, in terms of form the making of the works has been limited by each painting having only one hue. This prevents a slide into a bland, normative representational style, adds to the effect of distancing the viewer from the spaces depicted (what Brooker calls, using Marc Augé's term, *non-spaces*) and ultimately increases the possibilities of an emotional reading of the spaces once they are revealed in all their pathos on the canvas. By embellishing their previous pictorial concerns Brooker and Williams' intention was to extend the reach of their previous aesthetic investigation into spaces that are both simultaneously incoherent and yet potent markers of social dysfunction. In sharing their own familiar practices and concerns with one another they have enriched their individual concerns and have created a tense dialogue between the safe havens of their previous creative practices and the problems of engaging with the aesthetic concerns of someone else.

The idea of space, place and how it is emotionally and psychologically encountered is central to the cultural discourses of late capitalism/second modernity/ liquid modernity/supermodernity/the end times (1). Most sociologists identify the conditions of 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized consumer culture as dis-embedding, alienating, a-historical, high risk and terminal. A quick run through some of these ideas will help us locate the context of the dead space examined in this exhibition.

In framing the emerging world of capitalist production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where economic relationships began to replace and destroy social ones and human

interaction slid into confusion, Marx observed, “all that is solid melts into the air”. He lamented that the industrialisation of production and the ‘success’ of consumerism had created circumstances where culture and man made things increasingly replaced nature as the primary realm in which human emotional and intellectual relationships were formed and acted out. In doing so he identified the origins of the current artists' *deadspace*. For instance, the edge of the forest, the pre industrial (European) liminal space between the civil order of the town and the savagery of wolves, bandits and wild boars deep within the woods, has in part been substituted with the urban car park – more often than not an interface between the safe haven of the shopping centre and the wilderness of suburban life. In a globalised, industrial, consumer economy these in-between spaces increase, sometimes intentionally like Australia’s refugee detention camps; sometimes simply accidentally, as in the badly fabricated residue of poorly conceptualised urban design. Curiously, as Williams discovered, these latter spaces are also recreated within video games, redundant in terms of the game’s unfolding, they are nevertheless included within virtual worlds as a marker of the depicted world’s realism.

Dead spaces are not spaces without meaning though, for while they appear to operate outside the realm of what is healthy, or practical or empowering they are active in a terrifying way. They mould our perception of who we are and how we engage with the world. The idea of a risk culture – where we gamble on the likelihood of success, such as the aeroplane we are travelling on not being the one in five million that crashes; or much more dangerously relying on burning carbon for energy – is so ingrained in our culture that being dis-embedded from stable emotional and physical contexts is more the norm than we might care to acknowledge. So the dysfunctional physiological spaces we create or encounter culturally (for whatever reason) impact upon our psychological circumstances, in turn framing our approach to the material world. The space that remains after a house and garden have been razed, which is then left empty to slowly accrue value, isn’t just an unused space, a space that has ceased to be socially dynamic, it is a space brimming with significance, a marker of how economic relationships have been substituted for social ones.

Dis-embedded as we may be from productive social relationships in our culture, and retreating as we may do into an illusory perpetual present of endless goods for consolation, it can make individuals unable or unwilling to see the reasons for the generation of dead spaces. If individuals are also dis-embedded from an understanding of history, an a-historical culture is created that permits individuals to respond in the moment to spaces that they are either unable, too lazy, or too cynical to conceptualise beyond an immediate apprehension of them. Yet, such spaces existed before any encounter with them, have material origins and will continue to exist after they have been left.

For the sociologist the agency of the individual is rooted in the dynamic between being acted upon, acting, and then returning and remaking the original formative experience. This is why these paintings have a resonance beyond the aesthetic experience of the makers. The artists are exploring dead spaces, not so that we don't have to, but in order to create maps so that we can enter these spaces and

engage constructively with them, understand the circumstances of their construction and understand their nature so better to navigate them.

In his struggle for aesthetic redemption, Nathan Brooker uses the *dérive* as a tool, drifting through the urban landscape (and now also through the sealed world of a video game) to try and stumble upon revelations in neglected or previously unobserved detail that reflect upon the bigger whole. Guy Debord, the theorist of the *dérive*, quoted Marx in explaining the purpose of the drift; “Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves”, and it is the *dérive* that ruptures that uncritical reflection. Agency then, artistic or otherwise is about spotting those moments of acting/being acted upon and using those moments as pivots for emancipation. Ian Williams' emancipatory revelation is literally through illumination. By throwing light onto dark dead spaces through car headlights or torches, he recreates these spaces, remaking them, reconstituting them as places that can be given meaning.

What might these paintings tell us about the world and about ourselves? Firstly, that dialogue and cooperation is the key to understanding the world in its material and immaterial forms. Secondly, that metaphor and simile have a role in understanding the world and its circumstances, and that metaphor and simile have the power even to erode the authority of even that which at first glance appears to be immutable. Thirdly, if Žižek's assertion that we are living in the end times is the case, then even if these images are only “a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions” (3), knowing that capitalism's *Deadspace* can be decorative will at least be some consolation.

1. In order of concept; Fredric Jameson, Ulrich Beck & Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Marc Augé, Slavoj Žižek.
2. Debord, G. (1958) 'The theory of the *dérive*'. In Knabb, K. (ed) (2006) *Situationist International Anthology*. Chicago: Bureau of Public Secrets.
3. Žižek, S. (2006). *Living in the end times*. London: Verso. p.25.