

Nonstead as a Setting

I suggest there are more and more “nonsteads” in the modern world, instead of the homesteads. In worst cases, the places are ruined ecologically, or the people are uprooted and used for their market value. For now, I can only present a collection of the problematics of the nonstead, and in the end of this text, a couple of starting points of my work.

”Nonstead” - placeless places

The horror novelist Marcin Mortka has used ”nonstead” in the novel title *Miasteczko Nonstead* (2012) as a name of the town where horrors take place, but to the best of my knowledge it has no other connotation or use before that. In my native tongue, Finnish, the word ”epäseutu” has already been used by poet Väinö Kirstinä (1936–2007) in year 1967 (my translation):

"Kun mikään paikka ei enää / ole edes hyvän päivän tuttu. / On nopeita muutoksia, / paikattomia paikkoja epäseudulla; / viimeksi purettiin maamerkki tästä läheltä. / Se oli pyöreä rakennus, / suuri kaasukello"

(When no place anymore/ is even a small talk acquaintance/ Quick changes prevail/
placeless places in the nonstead;/ last they took down a landmark just nearby / It was a
round building, / a big gasometer)

Kirstinä's meaning is already the reflection of the change in the environment, although he seems to have a more nostalgic emphasis, longing after something familiar like the buildings in the past – but still reaching the issue of detachment from place. Combining the connotations of these uses, firstly the horrific and secondly the deconstruction of the relation of human being to the environment, I suggest the use of ”nonstead”.

Artistic non-sites and urban non-spaces

Land artist Robert Smithson was first to present and discuss ”non-sites” at the end of the 1960's. He conceptualized the relationship between the actual site where the artwork material was collected, the site described in a map, and the material brought in a gallery as an artwork; a metaphor of the actual site. Smithson introduced the duality and connection of two, even very distant, places.

According to anthropologist Marc Augé, ”non-spaces” are places where human beings remain anonymous, such as supermarkets, highways, roadsides or other common places where faceless contractual obligations replace human interaction (Augé 1995, 94 as cited in Moran 2005). Moran presents further, that these places are sites of cultural politics. Supermodern environments such as highways offer an experience of timeless, placeless movement, a routine of sitting in a vehicle and the practical necessity of existing while hovering between two places. Seemingly, they are not places of attachment or interaction. But as Moran's examples show, service stations that are placeless to some, can offer a place of culture and identity to others, and also the development of highways, roundabouts and new towns can have political importance (Moran 2005, 94-128).

Wastelands and -seas

The plastic that we use, has already crumbled into our nutrition. Also the collected waste is

problematic, since the problems are shipped away from sight. The culture and luxury of today will be the waste heap or plastic island of the future. (E.g. Wilson 2017). The space for growth is taken over by strange elements that do not take part in the cycles of changing energy.

Forming nonsteads: politics, wars and ruins

Many of the ruining processes start from conflicts. Traces of imperial power that keep on living, whether we try to erase the scars or not. In "Imperial Debris – On Ruins and Ruination", several authors give their account on the aftermath of colonialism and attempts "to track the uneven temporal sedimentations in which imperial formations leave their marks". The book follows the imperial processes and tries to bring forth the layers of imperial debris, both material and psychic. (Stoler et al. 2013)

In *A Biography of No Place* (2003), historian Kate Brown describes the history of current Chernobyl zone, which was also once known as "krezy"; borderland that was ethnically, religiously and linguistically more varied. The Ukranian-Polish-Jewish-German borderline was a war zone in civil war and Polish-Soviet war, and suffered also from the Second World War. The area was a place of heavy ethnic purifications carried out by states and ideologies of imperial Russia, socialist Soviet Union, fascist Nazi Germany, Parliamentary Poland and Nationalist Ukrainian parties. The modernising, standardizing "progress" of the twentieth century was carried out radically in the area. It was also about the border between different religious and also communist and capitalist ideas. Brown argues, that the histories of the peripheral places like the "krezy" have been silenced. The debris and failures of the century are also in this place. (Brown 2003,1-5)

The example of the "krezy" shows also how the area of current radioactive pollution also had a long history of conflict and vulnerability. It was a matter of decades of oppressive power structures that were harming the area before the catastrophe.

Homestead changing into nonstead

In the area I used to think of my homestead, a pristine, big Finnish cape has been given to Russian nuclear company Rosatom. It is situated at the Baltic Sea, at basin of the Bothnian Bay between Finland and Sweden, in Pyhäjoki municipality. State-governed nuclear company Rosatom operates also the infamous Maiak and is urging nuclear projects in Finland as well as in many other countries (Rosatom Newsletter, 2015, and numerous news articles documents this). Nevertheless Finnish politicians responded to Russian pressure, and gave green light to permit stages after the decision in principle, despite the fact that in every assesment there are fundamental ecological, ethical, geopolitical and economical grounds for dismissing. Writer Sofi Oksanen said in her essay that was widely spread in Finnish newspapers, about Finlandisation, silence and self-censorship: Finns learned to react instinctively to Soviet pressure, and it is still considered bold to criticise Russia publicly and so people have learned to censor themselves. (Oksanen 2017). One of the financial problems is, that private investors want to get out of the project, even through a court decision, and municipal electric companies and state-owned Fortum are keeping the project at the what some consider, artificial, "national ownership".(eg. Ainola 2015, and Nikkanen 2015)

Heavily contaminated areas

In her book "Plutopia" (2013), Brown researches two of the most heavily contaminated areas in the world, plutonium cities of Richland in the United States and Ozersk in Russia. The cities were built to put up and support Hanford and Maiak plutonium plants. Citizens were given prosperous conditions, but the workers were not told about the health risks of the operations, nor were the communities that were right outside or under the radioactive wind of the places. The areas will be

contaminated for such a long time, that we cannot even understand the biological or financial consequences yet. Brown describes, for example, how the process of creating these cities went on, how the research was conducted in secrecy and how the safety of people had no value in the pressure of creating plutonium for warfare (Brown, 2013). These two cities were similar in many ways, they were created, excluded and guarded nuclear zones, "zones of immunity", where "... plant managers were free to run up budgets, embezzle, conceal accidents, and, most ominously, pollute. Soviet engineers in the Urals followed the American experience of dumping waste quickly and cheaply underground and into local rivers and pumping radioactive gases skyward. Over the years, plant operators struggled with many accidents; some were massive, such as the 1957 blast at the Maiak plant, but most spills were routine and intentional. As operators dumped, radioactive particles joined air currents, filtered in to drinking water, and flowed down rivers." (Brown 2013,6)

Brown presents several techniques globally used by the nuclear industry: the insufficient and limited research on the radiated areas, such as has happened in Chernobyl and Japan (Brown 2013,332-333), the relativisation of the radioactive contamination, for example comparing it to background radiation (Brown 2013, 333), neutralizing by naturalising – such as saying zones like Chernobyl are full of wildlife, though in even moderately contaminated areas considerable part of birds are sterile or deformed (Brown 2013,333-334).

Total exclusion, negative space

The aesthetics of sculptor Teo Eng Seng's artworks "D Cells" were born at the end of the 1980's when the artist's sister, Teo Soh Lung, a lawyer in Singapore, was a political prisoner and the artist himself worked in England. Soh Lung was imprisoned first without a trial for four months and later kept in prison for two years for issuing a joint press statement defying the governments allegations of conspiracy and claims that the persons detained were well treated. The artworks are small plaster sculptures made referring to the detention cell that the artist's sister was confined in: the void or plan of the cell as a negative space. The absent cells do more than describe a content, they depict the anxiety, condensed and abstracted anger, an accusation of totalitarian power and suggest the absence of complete truth. The pieces are made of gypsum, brushed with silver paint and rubbed with black shoe polish, printed void lines of the cell plan. (Tan 2014,141-159)

In the works, presented ugliness for the visibly unpleasant subject grasps political force (Tan 2014,147). The rugged objects that the prison cell structure is printed on, lack the figure of justice that traditional Chinese good luck charms (Tan 2014,151-153). The cell artworks present an abstract kind of a non-space, and bring visual understanding to unimaginable conditions and injustice. Their physical form needs to be ugly, and refer rather than present, because it is also suited for what a place like that is – when a person is nothing, out of society, in the ultimate no-space to them. Teo Soh Lung did not belong to prison, nor does any political prisoner today. And everyone whose close people have been in prison, understands the pain Soh Lung's brother captivated in his works.

Plants to the rescue?

Because of the state of the environment and the history that has created our position in the world, I am turning towards the plant world to find help for the mentioned problematics. The recent interest in plants, both in artistic and scientific research, has given a lot of basis to work from. Philosopher Michael Marder has presented interested ideas based on "plant philosophy", their intelligence or appreciation of them, for example, seeing the peaceful, renewing and growing perseverance of the Occupy movement of people as something similar to plant life. (Marder 2011).

I have started to work on the depiction of plants, but how to to attune oneself with plants or nature

in general, in a way that abandons the mentioned ways that create one dead end after another? Preceding existence of gesture or action before language or image is one of the arguments to practice techniques from environmental dance. It can enable to better listen to the natural phenomena and to respond to ecosystems. It seems to be possible to find answers to current questions through different somatic practices, bodily movement and practice. Practitioners from various backgrounds (dance, yoga, nature meditation) suggest regular practice in movement, breathing and meditation (both in natural and cultural settings) and many see beneficial the active attempt to listen, to be present in nature and act in an ecologically sound manner, also including the food we consume. (See e.g. Stone, 2015)

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