

*Originally published in Issue 15 of Modern Matter, written to accompany a visual essay by Olu Odukoya*

It is difficult to begin to define or to consider “space,” because it is so many things: the words can be used to mean something vast (“outer space”) or something non-existent (“empty space”), and it can be used to refer to an ideological territory, inextricably tied to identity. When it does refer to territory, *then* it has a definition, because we can assign it edges, and begin to feel tribal about it. Space can be ceded, lost or fought for; and we give up those defined edges again when our space begins to expand and contract, becomes mobile and not fixed. We can simplify the meaning of it by considering ourselves inside of it, and imagining that it has translucent walls.

We re-contextualise the items in a space, according to our understanding of it, as props in our own play. It can be whittled down, until it most resembles what we want or need from it. In a war zone, this might mean a safe place a “safe” space is, too, a refuge from a trigger. In a home, this might mean space for personalities to grow larger: who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf? When we decide that space is the glue with which we hold together a situation, we can begin to play with it. (As a concept, we can only really start to manipulate “space” by teasing out its possibilities.) We can consider it to be an architectural form that can be moulded to fit any number of briefs: inside spaces, outside spaces, open spaces, crowded spaces, urban spaces, suburban spaces, shopping and commercial spaces.

When we look at the meanings and mechanisms of a space, we take something beautiful, and we make it into something complicated. For Tatiana Trouvé, this links to transforming the studio space, which she sees as a physical and psychic meeting place, and convergence of ideas and things conjured up by the mind. “I have always worked where I lived. I

would perhaps do better to say that I have always slept where I work. [The studio] is connected to a whole array of living beings and things that make it up, but it is always a place where ideas and things connect (a place where ideas become things and things become ideas), brought to life by the mind, by consciousness and unconsciousness.” These points of conversion can be architectural, and they can be deeply emotional: Renzo Piano connects humanism to structural forms, incorporating site-specific materials to show how buildings can mimic the life around and inside them.

The narrative associations of a space rely on the viewer looking at the image, and drawing a line between its components as if they were not objects or subjects, but evidence. For example, an urban space entirely without people draws the eye because we would expect it to be populated. We determine space, and demarcate it, via action and reaction, conspicuous presence or conspicuous absence. In such spaces, an artist can physically or psychically converge ideas with concrete things. They can do this in a fixed, aggressive way; and they can do it in such a way that creates something like a blank, clean conceptual canvas, onto which others can do the work-or-game of the assigning, the projection. It’s an imaginative art. Without it we’re faced with blank as in bleak, empty space, lost to the intangibilities of the word.