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Towards a Phenomenology of Being-at-Home and Being-Exposed

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Abstract:

John Russon's new book *Sites of Exposure* investigates the distinct character of basic human experience and ponders its constitutive role in the formation of meaning. Russon argues that our experiential life and our sense of self is essentially defined by a conflictual intertwining of "home" and "exposure." Taking a phenomenological perspective, the author considers the philosophical relevance of theorizing both personal and interpersonal reality as it is embodied and lived. In doing so, Russon not only elucidates the transformative power of artistic expression, but also unfolds the ways phenomenology serves as a valuable resource and reference point for doing contemporary social and political criticism.

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Russon, John: *Sites of Exposure. Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 202 pages, 25,38 EUR. ISBN: 978-0-253-02900-3.

Abstract:

John Russon's new book *Sites of Exposure* investigates the distinct character of basic human experience and ponders its constitutive role in the formation of meaning. Russon argues that our experiential life and our sense of self is essentially defined by a conflictual intertwining of "home" and "exposure." Taking a phenomenological perspective, the author considers the philosophical relevance of theorizing both personal and interpersonal reality as it is embodied and lived. In doing so, Russon not only elucidates the transformative power of artistic expression, but also unfolds the ways phenomenology serves as a valuable resource and reference point for doing contemporary social and political criticism.

In his latest monograph, *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience*, the philosopher John Russon offers a phenomenological study of basic human experience. By describing how phenomena disclose themselves to embodied subjects in their lived reality, he attempts to develop a nuanced understanding of "who we are", "what the world that we live in is like and what it is like for us to live in it" (p. 2). Russon argues that our lived experience is fundamentally characterized by a dynamic interaction between what he terms "being-at-home" and "being-exposed." The author outlines the ways in which a phenomenology serves a valuable resource for rethinking lingering dualisms and understanding our current world and our experience of it.

The four chapters of the book – respectively titled "Portraits," "Home," "Exposure," and "Thanksgiving" – progressively explore those basic questions as they tackle the distinct characteristics of everyday experience from a broad range of different angles and thematic foci, including art, history, and politics. Russon begins his book by investigating the question of what it means to be a human subject. Drawing upon a number of selected classic portraits, most particularly, *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV* (1656) by Diego Velázquez, Russon considers the rich insights portraits can teach us about

the 'basic principles' of our human situation. He asserts that our embodied point of view provides the fundamental horizon from which meaning – including our sense of self – can appear: “*Who I am* implicitly appears in *what I perceive*” (p. 18; emphasis in the original). This point of view, he insists, is not neutral but is instead contingent and fundamentally shaped by our embodiment that is always situated within a specific culture, in a specific place, and at a specific time. Throughout his book, Russon is not concerned with tracing art history in chronological order, but instead offers an episodic approach to portraits (and works of art more generally) that helps him expound his philosophical ideas.

Russon then seeks to demonstrate how clear-cut distinctions between “subjectivity” and “objectivity” lose their presumed clarity in the ways human beings apprehend the world. Implicitly building on key phenomenological concepts such as “thrownness” (Heidegger) and “lifeworld” (Husserl), Russon shows that self-experience and the world are not two separate realms facing off against each other but are instead inherently interwoven: “‘I’ and ‘it,’ subject and object, self and world, are thus a co-happening” (p. 21). This “conflictual intertwining” – what Russon dubs the “*palintropos harmoniē* of self and world” (p. 31; emphasis in the original) – is what defines our life and constitutes meaning at every level of our experience.

Given that we are necessarily “exposed” to the world, in order to be, we have to make a home for ourselves. Homemaking, in this sense, “is not simply ‘given’ ... but is developed and accomplished through our practices” (pp. 38-39). This way of “domesticating” the world, which includes other people, things, and language, marks the constituent element of our very nature as embodied subjects: “being at home is a form of relation of self and world enacted within the determinacy of experience – the determinacy that is the body – and it is a relation that must be accomplished” (p. 40). This notion of home, however, does not amount to an enclave, but is instead inherently framed by the dialectical relation between self and world: “it is simultaneously a place of refuge and a site of exposure, a retreat from the world and a platform for the communication with the beyond” (p. 61).

Russon then considers the political relevance of his philosophical study. He points to the one-sidedness of the doctrine of universal human rights that, despite its unequivocally liberating virtue, fails to acknowledge that human beings are necessarily rooted in specificity. Here, Russon takes issue with technocratic tendencies within global capitalist networks that imagine human subjects as abstract and interchangeable individuals, “defined only by their living as ‘anyone,’ only as upholders of universal rights” (p. 97). To fully recognize the nature of human freedom, Russon invokes models of communal belonging within ancient Greek and early Islamic history that may provide a corrective to individualist presumptions of modernist democracies. As Russon puts it:

We only exist as *concrete* persons, as members of communities who *live from* that communal membership to participate in a domain *beyond* that determinacy: we cannot meaningfully or substantially exist as individuals without this rootedness in specificity. (p. 97; emphasis in the original)

Accordingly, as Russon suggests, any free society must consider the dynamic relation between autonomy and belonging that characterizes the determinate feature of our experience of being a subject.

The book closes with a wider reflection upon art's philosophical significance and the ways artistic expression renders the "conflictual intertwining of self and world" visible. Even though always enacted in a finite event, Russon claims that art's (trans-)substantive potential lies precisely in its power "to make the finite speak of something beyond itself" (p. 143). Focusing on selected works within the realm of visual arts, he accentuates the medium's potential to make visible the full breadth of our subjectivity that is entangled in an abode for the beyond to which we are always already exposed.

Russon's *Sites of Exposure* offers a compelling analysis of our experiential life that constitutes what is (and what is not) meaningful to us. The book provides an accessible and timely work on phenomenology that sheds a fresh light on the 'basic principles' that are often implied or occluded in our dominant models for interpreting the world. The author does an excellent job of showing the extent to which such a focus can be crucial for our attempts to understand the current world and our experience of it; from the personal, the interpersonal, to the political. Russon's book is for anyone interested in the topics of philosophy, art, and politics and the question of how those realms are entangled and linked to the level of our lived experience.

German Abstract:

Zur Phänomenologie des Zu-Hause- und Ausgesetzt-Seins

Das neue Buch *Sites of Exposure* von John Russon untersucht das grundlegende Wesen der menschlichen Welterfahrung und erwägt dessen konstitutive Rolle in der Sinnbildung. Russon argumentiert für die These, dass sich unsere Erfahrungswelt und unser Selbst ganz wesentlich durch eine in Konflikt stehende Verflochtenheit des „Zu-Hause-“ und „Ausgesetzt-Seins“ definiert. Einen phänomenologischen Blickwinkel einnehmend, erwägt Russon die philosophische Relevanz für eine Theoretisierung personaler und interpersonaler Wirklichkeit, wie sie verleblicht und erlebt wird. Dadurch bringt Russon nicht nur die transformative Kraft künstlerischer Formen zum Ausdruck, sondern zeigt zudem auf, inwiefern die Phänomenologie eine wichtige Quelle und einen Referenzrahmen für aktuelle gesellschaftskritische und politische Themen bilden kann.

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