Moving Toward an Experiential Art

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Artist Statement

My practice has recently moved toward articulating the relations between art object/experience and viewer/maker through evaluating the way a constructed environment can be activated by a presence in the space. For a viewer to fully experience a conditional architecture it is pertinent that they act as an equal partner in relation to the art; thus the space would not exist without a viewer. The thoughts manifested by someone in the space are the intended ideas communicated in the interaction. The purpose of the artwork is to act as a vessel for this medium of exchange.

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I have found that through the development of human experiences many modes of communication are used to articulate thoughts and perceptions, but through the different mediums of communication our transmissions are obscured. One of the reasons I choose to abstract my thoughts through my artistic process is to address this problem. I am particularly interested in the way art can shift perception of intangible concepts through its focused interaction with a viewer. The way that I have interpreted this is through developing a vocabulary of imagery and processes which aim to be formal investigations into contemplative relations between art object/experience and viewer/maker. My practice has recently moved toward articulating this through evaluating the way a constructed environment can be activated by a presence in the space. For a viewer to fully experience a conditional architecture it is pertinent that they act as an equal partner in relation to the art; thus the space would not exist without a viewer. This reflection on human nature and perception drives my process of creating an experiential engagement with a constructed environment, highlighting a sense of place and presence.

The difficulty of a pursuit in this kind of exploration is built into the same issue it is trying to address, which is expressing abstract concepts through tangible means. I chose to manifest the aforementioned conceptual framework in this way because I think art is the only language capable of enveloping a viewer in a conditional conceptual context, and it can do it in a highly concentrated gesture. The specificity lies in how art ideas are communicated and what exactly their forms are saying. Along with visual art comes a series of conditions and associations that people have with it. For that reason I chose to depart from painting in my recent studies because of the history a painting carries with it – from its creation it contains an entire historical evolution before I ever imprint anything on its surface. While that in itself contains

many interesting possibilities which are worth examining, my current process begs for further query into different forms and media. Departing this line of questioning is a means to embark on achieving a more direct relationship between viewer and art experience. By building an environment for someone to move through the art becomes the way one experiences the space.

When I begin to deconstruct spaces that influence the consciousness and consideration of my artistic process I recall a complex set of sensory associations and spatial relationships I have with different environments. The understanding of my existence is always in reference to the spaces that I operate in and similarly, human activity is directly reliant on the world we physically inhabit. Our consciousness of space and basic survival relies heavily on constructed environments. The different kinds of architectures that we operate in on a daily basis are both unnoticed and immediately understood at the same time. This balance makes spatial relationships fragile but also an intriguing subject to study – however, the difficulty in this endeavor, in an aesthetic sense, lies in the immediacy of spatial reasoning. An interesting challenge would be to shift the way people perceive their spatial understanding.

One of my main interests is the way that people move through spaces or rather how structures allow people to move through them. Certain architectures articulate this relationship better than others, but generally allow people to take the paths of least resistance to get to their destination, within and without a building. These paths range from openings, wide hangars, atriums, rooms with doors, tight corridors, hallways, sidewalks, moving walkways, roads, stairs, elevators, and many more. There are infinite permutations to the structural possibilities of pathways which can range from slow and confined to fast and open – the two important distinctions here being speed, and referential size in comparison to a human experience. For example I think of this phenomenon in the way that if you are in a room with open doors and

large windows it feels much larger than when its doors are closed and windows covered, and even smaller so if there were no doors or windows. Architects such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe have used this phenomenon by creating confined entrances and walkways leading to open exteriors evoking a grandiose release and opening in space – breathing in, and out once again. The evocation of movement breathing through a building challenges the immediacy of spatial reasoning and slows down the speed of the passage.

In this way I think about the idea of speed through the act of limitation. If you limit the things that are available in reference to a space it slows down the way people interact with it. James Turrell's *Pleiades* (fig. 1) handles the concept of time in a similar way.

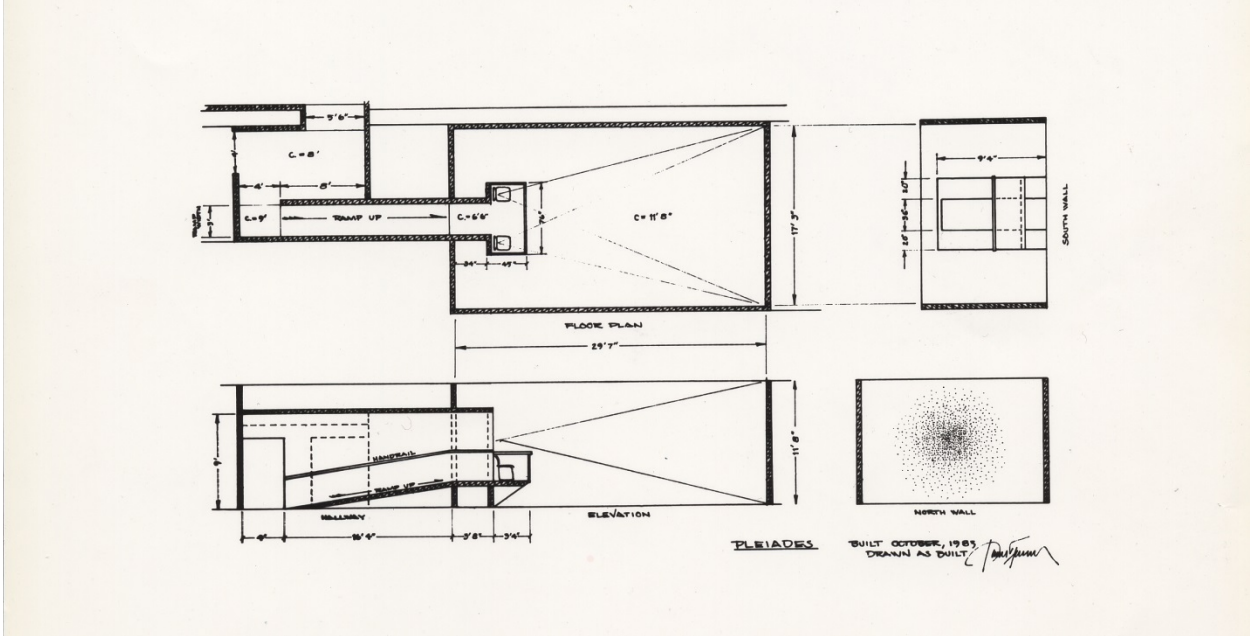


Fig 1. James Turrell, *Pleiades,* 1983, Drywall, Paint and Incandescent Light. Mattress Factory.

In his piece the long pitch black incline and viewing platform invite viewers to stay and watch the work unfold while their eyes adjust to the space – by taking away people's sight the work becomes more about absence rather than what it is or what is physically there. Once he begins to limit sight the outer space confines and slows down, but the mind begins to widen and breathe in

new light. Antony Gormley speaks of this phenomenon in his TED talk when recalling required nap time as a child –

> I was, lying there in this tiny space, hot, dark, claustrophobic, matchbox-sized, behind my eyes, but it was really weird … after this went on for days, weeks, months, that space would get bigger and darker and cooler until I really looked forward to that half an hour of enforced immobility and rest, and I really looked forward to going to that place of darkness. (Gormley)

This widening of space harkens to possibilities much greater than the sole digestion of our immediate surroundings. Gormley utilizes the tension between inner and outer space most successfully with his installation *Blind Light* (fig. 2).

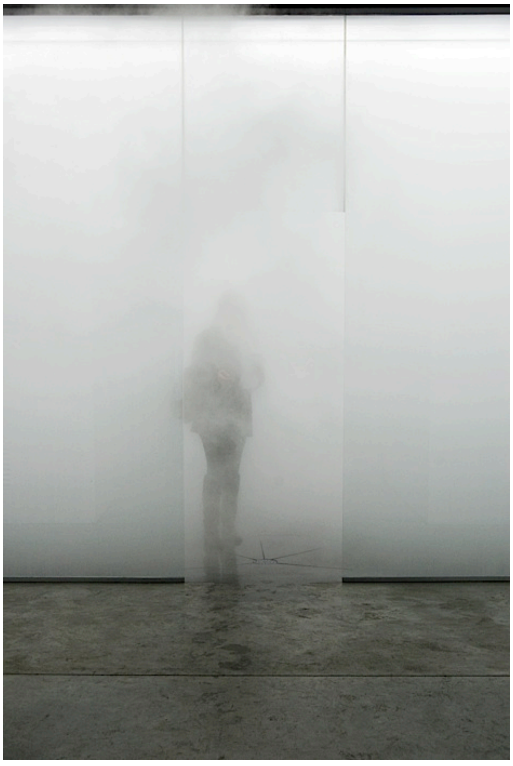


Fig 2. Antony Gormley, *Blind Light,* 2007, Fluorescent light, water, ultrasonic humidifiers, toughened low iron glass, aluminium, 3200 x 8500 x 8500 mm, Sean Kelly Gallery.

A glass room pumped with thick fog and intense light forces viewers to wander through the space with the only reference being hazy ghosts and the voices of people moving blindly in a

container. The way these artists address limitations speak to the open ended conversations that lay within this realm – to limit sight is not to limit what is seen.

The acts of confinement and pressure can push people even further inward. If darkness is a way to get rid of sight and without sight we are slowed down, will restricting space stop people? It is interesting to think about the limitations of a mind and how each of us has different fears and restraints on our position in the world. Artists who deal with limitations often tackle the idea of a threshold. Anne Truitt's *Arundel* paintings (fig. 3) are a good example of what evokes a visual threshold. With the use of white lines on white paper these drawings create rich expanses which hover in a seemingly distant and intangible place.



Fig 3. Anne Truitt, *Arundel XVII*, 1975, Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 59 x 82 cm. Matthew Marks Gallery.

These paintings force me to push myself in terms of what I am seeing versus what I am imagining or what is implied by the space – it is certainly a fine balance. James Turrell also takes that idea further with *Pleiades,* and by pushing people's inner threshold and levels of comfort it changes their relationship with a work of art to be one of an inner deliberation. If you take away sight, take away space, take away spatial reasoning, shift perceptions of sounds and movement, and push an inner threshold it challenges a sense of stability and self. In the presence of nothingness, all we are left to is our mind.

One important distinction with my pursuit is that I am not aiming to make a null environment nor do I intend to embark in a creating a practical or functional installation, rather the use value lies in the articulations and implications of a constructed environment. In developing these ideas and thought processes my goal is to lead to a series of investigations which communicate through physical manifestation. In these terms, I aim to build a room and a passageway. This room acts in two parts, in journey through the space and in an inner dialogue. What will physically *be* in the space is rather simple – walls, a corridor in darkness, a dimly lit opening, and ambient sound.

To expound on this I will describe a conceptual interaction with the work, beginning with the entrance. The aperture for stepping into the work is set to a height of 6 feet to reflect my height or that of a typical viewer. On the inner wall of the opening there will be details for the work and a sign suggesting for one viewer at a time. The corridor begins at a sharp angle giving no conception of the space or how far it goes. This presentation evokes a veil in terms of the fact that before entering someone cannot expect how to interact with the space besides addressing its apparent confinement. This does not suggest a neutral introduction; the viewer will be expected

to make a choice of whether or not to engage with something more or less unknown. The entrance is the first of a series of challenges presented to the viewer.

Followed by the decision to enter, the primary interaction with the corridor is perhaps the most crucial part of the journey. The space around the viewer will quickly diminish after the first 6 foot run of wall, afterward lays complete darkness and a continuation of walls which are only just wide and tall enough to stand in. Here the second confrontation will happen. To continue through the space one must now decide how comfortable they are operating in complete darkness and confinement. The absence of light will force the viewer to rely on senses other than vision and the loss will cause disorientation and adaptation. The viewer will be left with the space of their mind. They will be confronted with a representation of their personal space which is both in and out. This gesture is meant to be a physical mapping of personal space. The walls touch the viewer on all sides and are the only point of reference for someone to work with.

Moving further through the span of the corridor the viewer will be confronted with more corners and a tightening of the space which will constrict the situation further. Over the measure of 50 feet the space compresses by 12 inches, meaning an exit aperture of five feet instead of six. The forced compression will make people assess their situation rather than be passive to what is happening. If there is more pressure downward in space the inward pressure will feel that much more highlighted. The slow incline will be illusory in terms of where the change in height actually comes from. By now, the space will also be enveloped by the ambient sound in the room. The sound adds to this stage of compression by acting as a slow breath in the periphery of the viewer's perception. The sound consists of four low wave frequencies and four high wave frequencies which are binaural tones that shift at an almost unnoticeable speed. The sound evokes two different phenomena; which represent catalysts. The most prominent of the tones are

the high wave frequencies. I akin these sounds to two different situations, the ringing in a single ear which unknowingly happens and then goes away quickly. The second sensation happens when my selective hearing tunes out all white sounds and focuses on inner thought – the tone starts in and shifts away refocusing on surrounding noise and conversation. The low frequencies remind me of industrial humming and movement. These tones will be felt as well as heard due to having longer sound waves. The combined effect is disorienting rather than constant, highlighting the ambiguity of the space.

At the end of the corridor there will be a dimly lit opening that leads to the inner chamber. The first thing that people will notice besides the dim lighting in the room, which evokes the presence of something, is the step leading downward into the room. The realization that they have been climbing throughout the run of corridor will again throw off the perception of the size and span of the installation. After reorienting in the room there will be nothing to see in the space. The nine by nine foot room is black, as the prior space was, and the only noticeable difference will be the high gloss shimmer on the ceiling in contrast to the floor and walls which remain matte. This choice implies a space larger than what is physically there. The opening is a deep breath after coming out of such a previously small situation. Other than that the room will be empty, save the inclusion of a small parametric speaker creating a column of sound masked in the ceiling. If the viewer continues to walk through the space they will be penetrated by harmonic tones. This acts as a centering, a contemplation point where the viewer can rest. Although this contemplation may be seen as an end or a goal it merely represents somewhat of a beginning. The breath serves as a catalyst for review – now one must challenge their perception and relationship to art and their direct inner and outer spaces. Once someone serves their time meditating they have to begin leaving the room.

The viewer must now embark back through the darkness to once again emerge into the gallery. This return journey will be marked by having hindsight into what is really happening in the space. What was real and what was merely part of the imagination will be put into question and the entire experience will become suspect. The imagination of each viewer allows for many levels of perception of the installation. The space of the gallery is perceptually limited but the realm of the mind is unlimited. When arriving at the exit the light of the gallery will be sharp and the high frequency tones will be left ringing in the ear of the viewer. At this point the experience must be ruminated rather than understood. It is unimportant what actually happens to someone while they are in the space, the importance lies in how they digest the implications of what happened to them.

The process of abstraction and disorientation the space goes through augments the situational context of the work. Due to the work's ambiguous nature there is no frame of reference for what the space encompasses. Roland Barthes discusses this concept in his book *Mythologies* where he argues that all forms of language and information have associations, or myths, which take on significance through their context. When referring to visual myths he states that "the elements of the form . . . are related as to place and proximity: the mode of presence of the form is spatial. The concept on the contrary, appears in global fashion, it is a kind of nebula, the condensation, more or less hazy, of a certain knowledge" (Barthes 120). In this sense, the presence of the viewer is the only thing that activates the meaning of the work, or the form, rather than the concept or significance. Robert Irwin similarly uses this in his work by highlighting situational relationships to spaces which are activated or enhanced by his installations. In his *Untitled (Acrylic Column)* (fig. 4) series Irwin's columns are nearly imperceptible but they slightly shift the visual field of the spaces they inhabit.



Fig 4. Robert Irwin, *Untitled (Acrylic Column)*, 1970-71, Acrylic, 144 x 9 x 5 1/2 in, Pace Gallery.

Their subtlety evokes the same technique I use to push the unassociated nature of my work. The space then becomes contextually intangible.

Without reference of its inception the entire installation turns the viewer into the medium of the work. The thoughts manifested by someone in the space are the ideas communicated in the interaction. The art acts as a vessel for this medium of exchange. McLuhan discusses the importance of medium in his writings from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* He suggests that to be able to unlock the power of communication one must understand its medium. He uses the following example to illustrate this – "electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth" (McLuhan 2). Here he suggests the medium of light is the speed in which it can deliver information, rather than its ability to illuminate. For me the medium of communication are the viewers' thought processes in the

situational proximity of abstraction and ambiguity. The spatial disorientation and context of the room will highlight this for a viewer, but the communication of the work relies on the awareness and presence of the viewer's mind.

The equivocation between inner and outer experience puts into question the reality in which the interactions of the work lay in. In this way the work acts as a simulation of a human experience. Baudrillard explains this phenomenon as such – "simulation . . . stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference" (Baudrillard 6). Here he critiques the value of sign and significance and emphasizes the negation of such. The result is a simulation which becomes self-referential outside the realm of the real. He goes on to critique McLuhan and the importance of a medium's message by saying

> "[it is] impossible now to pose the famous question: 'From what position do you speak?' – 'How do you know?' 'From where do you get your power?' without hearing the immediate response: 'But it is you (from you) that I speak' – meaning, it is you who are speaking, you who know, you who are the power" (Baudrillard 44)

People find their "power" or reality within themselves or by the fact that their reality is in direct relation to the millions of realities that come in contact with theirs. Without the whole there is no one, and without the one there can also be no whole in that respective reality or otherwise. This supposes a simultaneous simulation of said reality because there is not one true reality or origin, and thus, no continuation from origin to end. There is no linear path, no a priori in events meaning or medium which outlines the idea of a hyper reality. Baudrillard would suggest that we are living in a hyper reality. The contemporary processes of simulations in the hyper real

manifest themselves in simulacrum. My work emphasizes this idea of simulations in the hyper real and focuses on the power of a singular inner reality, relating back to the actuality of the viewer experience.

This project has opened up a new realm of possibilities which I aim to implement in my work as my practice progresses. Focusing on what the viewer brings to the artwork allows me to deconstruct and pinpoint the intricacies of the human experience in reference to an indefinite spatial environment. In this piece I chose to disorient and limit the viewer because of the way it references direct inner and outer space. Concurrently I am interested in articulating concepts of motion in a similar means to the way this project was conducted. The words of Robert Irwin from his essay *Notes toward a Model* are especially succinct in relation to my process –

> Art as an aesthetic inquiry is a non-thing. Which is to say that, like time and space, it has no actual physical properties. Or infinite physical properties. There are in aesthetic experience potentially as many "arts" as there are encounters with its incidences in the world. In confusing the art/object of art with the subject of art, we objectively tried to hold to the idea of one transcending art. While there is no one transcending Art, there is one infinite subject: The subject of art is aesthetic perception. (183-184)

Our perception stems out of various influences from culture and society. Aesthetic perception can be any way someone is influenced by something within their frame of reference. Art tackles this concept in specific ways but this idea is not exclusive to art, or visual experience. In my practice the key is human interaction which acts as the medium of communication outside of art – without that there would be no purpose for the art, but without the art there would be nothing.

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