

# **INSTALLATION ART:**

AN ARCHITECTURAL TOOL IN THE EXPLORATION OF PLACE AWARENESS

An Extended Essay submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
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## **Abstract**

This essay seeks to explain the characteristics of installation art which make it a suitable architectural tool in the exploration of place awareness. Firstly it explains what contemporary installation art is and the similarities it shares with architecture. Secondly it looks into case studies to discuss the ways in which place awareness is explored through a variety of installations conceived by artists and architects. The theoretical base for analysing the chosen works comes from phenomenology and its study of the embodied experience of architectural space. The works are divided according to the main elements which constitute spatial awareness; the body as the vehicle of sensory interaction with space, and perception as the a cognitive tool in the navigation of space. This methodology aims to dissect how the spatial aspects (materiality, scale) of the environments created in installations affect the way people navigate and experience a particular space. The final discussion opens the door to the idea of using installation art as a critical spatial practice which can aid in breaking the limitations of conventional architectural practice through its exploration of sensory stimulation and spatial perception; advocating an additional architectural design tool in the practical and theoretical development of the concept of place awareness in our built environment.

## **Preface**

I have identified EAR (Edinburgh Architectural Research) journal, a non-profit academic journal published annually by research students of the Department of Architecture at The University of Edinburgh, for my extended essay on "Installation Art and Place Awareness".

The topics covered in this journal are of a wide variety, all in relation to the exploration of architecture through different mediums found in art, history and culture; therefore, I feel it an appropriate choice.

## Introduction

“The development of the concept of place is a necessary condition for finding an existential foothold.”<sup>1</sup> (Norberg-Schulz)

We understand our being or dwelling in the world through a matrix of place perceptions.<sup>2</sup> Place is the physical environment (buildings, towns and cities) which we construct so as to ‘concretise our image of the world’.<sup>3</sup> The images or schemata of the world which we carry, originate from our interaction with places<sup>4</sup> (walking along the pavement, entering a house, sitting on a chair).

Neuroscience has found that the brain uses an interactive process of repeated cycles of imaging, presenting and testing to make sense of the world and ourselves in it.<sup>5</sup> In this process, how we perceive, experience and remember our surroundings depends on our awareness of them.

“Awareness of ‘place’ is critical to the definition of a memory. Physical environment is therefore essential to memory reconstitution.”<sup>6</sup>

If place and our awareness of it plays such a crucial role in our experience of our built environment, then how can architects as place makers begin to explore this phenomenon of perception? Unfortunately, contemporary architectural practice is laden with time and cost restrictions which do not allow genuine freedom in the exploration of how spatial composition (materiality, scale) affects our awareness of place. In contrast, contemporary installation art and its inherent concern with our spatial awareness, as well as its similarity to architecture, a notion put forth by Sarah Bonnemaïson and Ronit Eisenbach in their book *Installations by Architects* (2009), allows for spatial concepts and ideas to be explored relatively quickly.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the desire of installation artists to activate the viewer and to induce a critical vigilance towards the environments in which we find

ourselves, makes this art form an ideal candidate to begin to explore the ways in which architects can distill the experience of architecture, and broaden their knowledge on issues which are critical to architectural practice.<sup>8</sup>

“Just as life consists of one perception followed by another, each a fleeting, non-linear moment, an installation courts the same dense, ephemeral experience. Whereas painting and sculpture freeze time and perhaps suggest something eternal, installation abhors such an effect. The viewer is in the present, experiencing temporal flow and spatial awareness... there is no separation or dichotomy between the perceiver and the object.”<sup>9</sup>

If installation art leans towards an exploration of what constitutes place awareness then the main question this essay aims to answer is what are the characteristics of installation art that make it a suitable architectural tool in the exploration of place awareness? Firstly the essay introduces installation art as a place between art and architecture where its inherent spatial and phenomenological concerns open ground for a discussion on the human experience of physical space. Secondly, through a theoretical discourse, anchored on phenomenology and its study of the embodied experience of space (subjective-objective, body-mind), case studies of installations (visited personally and reviewed in literature) are critically explored under two categories of place awareness:

- 1) the body as a vehicle of sensory interaction with space,
- 2) perception as the a cognitive tool in the navigation of space.

Projects realised by architects as well as artists have been included in order to highlight an existing collaboration between the creative practices. The thread connecting the works is the artist or architect's ability to awaken the viewer's awareness of place, either by stimulating the senses through materiality, scale and interaction, or by activating perception through disorientation.

This selected methodology is designed to open the way for a discussion on the ways in which different installations have addressed the physical and cognitive aspects that make up an embodied experience, culminating in a final discussion on how this art form could become a useful and more widely used tool, as part of a critical spatial practice in architecture, to open the way for a better understanding of place awareness.

### **Installations: a place between Art and Architecture**

Described at times as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’,<sup>10</sup> and influenced by early site-specific sculptures, land/environmental art, conceptual and performance art, installation art has only been widely known as such since it became a major movement in the 1990’s.<sup>11</sup> In describing contemporary installation art, Claire Bishop (2005) makes a clear distinction between two dimensional art forms such as painting, sculpture, film or photography, which tend to be visually dominated and experienced from a distance, and installation art’s key characteristic of engulfing the person experiencing the work in a three dimensional space.

“Instead of representing texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience.”<sup>12</sup>

Sarah Bonnemaïson and Ronit Eisenbach (*Installations by Architects*) argue that this art form shares an elemental characteristic with architecture in that an installation is a three-dimensional work of art that is site specific (commissioned for galleries, streets or landscapes).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in a similar way to an architect designing a habitable space, an installation artist will combine and arrange materiality and scale so as to create a spatial composition which encourages the the viewer to enter, touch and experience the work.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Mark Rosenthal reflecting on the fact that much like architectural spaces acquire their meaning from the human interactions which take place within them,

installation art also requires a human presence to fulfil its purpose and extract its meaning.<sup>15</sup> These characteristics, which lean towards the essence of architecture, coupled with an existing and increasing involvement of architects in making installations,<sup>16</sup> expose this art form as a fertile place between art and architecture for the practical exploration and analysis of the constitution of the human experience with place.

So how does installation art investigate this embodied experience and intricate loop of interaction? Firstly, it does so through immersive environments, by making the work large enough for the whole body to enter, it allows for a complete sensory experience where focused and well as peripheral vision can be applied in the inspection of the work.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, by allowing the viewer to direct the experience of the work (firstly by choosing whether to enter into the work or not, then choosing which angle to view it in) each person can choose his or her interpretation and meaning of the work.<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, by placing the person viewing the work in a situation where his or her assumptions of place are questioned, their consciousness is also forced to activate its mechanisms of perception and ultimately create a awareness of place which is critical and analytical in essence.<sup>19</sup>

Art institutions such as the Tate Modern in London with its yearly commissions for the well-known Turbine Hall, the Guggenheim in New York, the Serpentine Pavilion and various others have brought this art form to the public sphere, its popularity increasing as people look for ways to escape “the passivity of mass-media consumption”.<sup>20</sup> At times adopting a social agenda, such as in the work of Olafur Eliasson, what ties the variety of expressions of this art form together, is a creative focus on sensory immediacy, physical participation and heightened awareness.

“[Installation art] has a desire to heighten the viewer’s awareness of how objects are positioned (installed) in a space, and of our bodily response to this.”<sup>21</sup>

The purpose of heightening awareness is to allow the viewer to analyse the frames of his or her perception. This characteristic coupled with the insistence on the literal presence of the viewer, respond to the claims of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that subject and object are not separate entities but intertwined and interdependent, “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it.”<sup>22</sup> He also argued that perception is not simply a question of vision, but involves the whole body:

“I do not see (space) according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.”<sup>23</sup>

The phenomenological concepts of Merleau-Ponty; our connection to physical objects and space involving an embodied experience (subjective & objective, mind & body),<sup>24</sup> were first appropriated and explored in the minimalist sculpture of the 60’s, and according to Bishop (2005), this appropriation continued to filter through the contemporary installations of the 80’s and 90’s.<sup>25</sup> Although not all the case studies in this essay are perceived to come from a phenomenological base, I would argue that whether intentionally or unintentionally, a sensitivity to this notion of embodied experience of place, ripples through the range of installations chosen for analysis. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa also expands on the notion of the embodied experience of place:

“Our bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment; the world and the self inform and redefine each other constantly. The percept of the body and the image of the world turn into one single continuous existential experience; there is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self.”<sup>26</sup>

## Embodied Experience

In our experience of physical spaces, our body is the tactile instrument which we use to measure our surroundings.<sup>27</sup> To carry out this measuring our body, through our senses, collects a myriad of stimuli from the places we inhabit which is then processed by our brain to make sense of what we are experiencing.<sup>28</sup> According to Pallasmaa, it is through our bodies and their awareness of place that we create our perception of the world.

“We behold, touch, listen and measure the world with our entire bodily existence, and the experiential world becomes organised and articulated around the centre of the body.”<sup>29</sup>

In his book *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa also discusses and argues the importance of a multi-sensory experience and awareness of space beyond the *oculacentric* one which we are accustomed to in the west, he places the haptic realm of the body, and its connection to our senses, at the centre of the integration between our experience of the world with that of ourselves.<sup>30</sup> He does not see the body solely as a vehicle for the physical navigation of places, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration.

“My body remembers who I am and where I am located in the world.

My body is truly the navel of my world.”<sup>31</sup>

The haptic experience of the body with place was explored by architect Thom Faulders through his *Mute Room* installation for the *Rooms for Listening* exhibition in San Francisco in 2000 (fig.1). In the given space the architect designed a tactile landscape of materiality and colour by installing a wave of pink memory foam onto which people could lie and listen to music. The installation looked towards a stimulation of the sense of hearing by marking it clearly through texture, colour and light, and inviting the visitor to investigate.<sup>32</sup>

The texture of the memory foam also allowed the weight of the body to imprint a temporary memory of its interaction with the space. The pink colour used to cover all surfaces, mimicking the appearance of the subcutaneous flesh of the eyelid, was designed to evoke a peaceful ambience similar to that of when we close our eyes.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 1:** Mute Room, Thom Faulders, San Francisco, 2000

In the case of the Mute Room, the installation is not only looking to interact with the body, but also uses parts of it as direct inspiration, “The hilly lump beneath the foam’s surface was analogous to an overgrown larynx and operated as a fixed sound baffle. It enhanced acoustic clarity, similar to the way a musical note ‘decays’ in the air before dissipating.”<sup>34</sup> This suspension of the body in a boundless haze of sound and colour, dissolves the spatial boundaries between floor, wall and ceiling.

This acoustic investigation may be linked to Peter Zumthor’s idea of the *sound of space* where he sees interiors as large instruments collecting sound, amplifying it and transmitting it.<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon is affected by the peculiar shape of the room, the materials applied to its surfaces and how these have been manipulated within the space.

Thom Faulders for this installation also used the phenomenological concept of “bracketing” in relation to the sound. By isolating the senses, in this case hearing, the experience is intensified and it opens ground for an awareness of the effect of vibration on the body.

### **Levels of Intimacy**

“[In installations] sensation is the data of immediate awareness;  
the audience acts as (both the) catalyst and receptor.”<sup>36</sup>

Architect Peter Zumthor who also concerns himself with the makings of place and our perception of it, uses the phrase ‘levels of intimacy’ to refer to scale in relation to architectural spaces.<sup>37</sup> Equally Kent C Bloomer and Charles W Moore argue that the experience of the body is at the centre of our memorable sense of three dimensionality, and that this sense “constitutes the basis for understanding spatial feeling in our experience of buildings (places).”<sup>38</sup> This notion of levels of intimacy and our sensing of space through our bodies was explored in the Body Building exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco in 1998, in particular through an installation by architects Byron Kuth and Elizabeth Ranieri called *Body in Repose (fig.2)*.

Designed as a place of rest within the museum, with an intent to explore what it would be like to inhabit our psychological and physical self at the same time,<sup>39</sup> a cavity was opened in the gallery wall where soft human-sized cubicles for people to sit in were placed. The structure of the installation was covered in felt with the aim to absorb sound and create a sensory haven from the busy environment of the gallery. The use of soft fabric implements a comforting atmosphere which allows the dulling of noise, making way for contemplation and awareness of how the body feels in close proximity to physical boundaries. This enveloping of the body and alteration of the auditory senses allows the viewer to perceive

his or her body within and out-with itself. In this case, the installation brought the level of intimacy to the immediate boundaries of the physical body.



**Figure 2:** Body in Repose, Byron Kuth and Elizabeth Ranieri, San Francisco, 1998

By addressing the gallery space from inside the wall, a tension was also created between outside and inside conditions as people could watch the world unwind in front of them while feeling sheltered in a womb-like space, “by embedding the row of soft cubicles into the cavity of the museum wall, Kuth and Ranieri created an opposition between the cool white gallery and the soft intimacy of the felt enclosure.”<sup>40</sup>

## **Interaction**

Another way of exploring the body in relation to space is to incorporate a bit of performance on the part of the viewer. Just as we perform activities in the buildings we occupy (opening and closing doors, looking out the window), some installation artists use performance as a way to extract uniquely individual meanings from the work.

In his book *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa, in quoting Richard Lang, makes reference to how a great musician plays himself rather than the instrument, and the way in which for a football player “the mind does not inhabit the playing field but the field is inhabited by a

*knowing body*.”<sup>41</sup> This idea of a knowing body is explored by artist David Rokeby through his notion of *interactive interfaces* which involve feedback systems between the viewer and the work, incorporating body movement to delve into the uniqueness of our subjective viewpoint.<sup>42</sup>

The *Very Nervous System*, an installation which was featured in the Venice Biennale in 1986 and has been in evolution for 13 years, used the movement of a person’s body to map an imaginary space. Computer and motion sensors allocated different musical sounds to specific parts of the space. Movements were read, interpreted and turned into many layers of sound, allowing the person engaging with the space to create his or her own musical symphony.

“After 15 minutes in the installation people often feel an afterimage of the experience. The installation could be described as a sort of instrument that you play with your body... I am interested in creating a complex and resonant relationship between the inter-actor and the system.”<sup>43</sup>

In a similar installation called *Dark Matter* (fig. 3), commissioned by Wood Street Galleries in Pittsburg in 2010, the object of perception once again became the movement of the body itself within an empty space, this time a heightened perception is achieved by bringing the level of intimacy within the fabric of the skin. Sight was taken out of the equation by placing the ‘actor’ in a blacked out gallery space. Awareness of place was heightened by omitting visual navigation and by turning sound into a tactile entity. “The sounds are all very physical: breaking ice and breaking glass, creaking metal, falling rocks, bursts of flame. They were ‘painted’ into the space by hand.”<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 3:** David Rokeby, Dark Matter, Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburg, 2010

This artistic concept of creating interactive feedback loops between the subject and the object, resonates with a notion put forth by Pallasmaa in which he states that we are in constant dialogue and interaction with the environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of the self from its spatial and situational experience.<sup>45</sup>

By representing sensory information in a specific manner and medium, and allowing complete control with the interaction that is taking place, the artist creates a condition of place where the subjective individual experiencing the work, and the objective work itself, become a complete integrated experience.

### **Activating our perception**

When viewing or experiencing the world through our body and senses, we rely on the apparent stability and linearity of physical places in order to orientate us within our context.<sup>46</sup> In buildings, their connection to the ground (floor) give us horizontal stability on which we can walk, vertical elements such as walls denote the paths we can take within

the building and the ceiling allows complete enclosure and shelter from the elements.<sup>47</sup> As established in the previous section, our body and senses use this physical data from our surroundings to create images of where we are located and what we are experiencing and perceiving.

One of the main concerns in contemporary installation art is a desire to “activate the viewer”.<sup>48</sup> This activation of our perception is in part done as a critique on the passivity of mass-media consumption as well as a means to bring about “a critical vigilance towards the environments in which we find ourselves.”<sup>49</sup>

Artist Richard Wilson uses existing architecture as the starting point for what he believes the purpose of art should be: “to show what is already there but is unseen, to reveal intrinsic beauty”.<sup>50</sup> His 20:50 installation (fig.4), which was first installed in Matt’s Gallery in 1987, and has been in display in Edinburgh (1987), Tokyo (1992), Los Angeles (1995), London (long-term) and finally Australia (1996), transformed a room in a gallery into a type of theatrical illusion by creating a perfect reflection of the top half of the room.<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 4:** 20:50, Richard Wilson, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2003

A metal structure contains the mass of slump oil installed into the space. A waist high sloping ramp, leads a single person into the middle of the room, the pathway narrows as it advances into the room in order to concede a 'rushed perspective.' The material quality of the slump oil presented a perfect reflection of the architectural space where the viewer, while looking for a ground plane is actually looking at the ceiling.<sup>52</sup> This shift of spatial composition disorientates the viewer and activates an awareness of the place in which the work is installed.

Olafur Eliasson is another artist whose work strives to turn our assumptions on their head. In contrast to Richard Wilson's approach whose work uses the site or architecture of the gallery as a starting point, Eliasson uses nature to draw inspiration from. Eliasson's work turns architectural spaces into stages for experiencing an 'illusion' of exterior natural forces. He is known for incorporating sunlight, water and mist into spatial compositions designed to de-centre and disorientate the viewer.<sup>53</sup>

A well known work of his is the *Weather Project* installation (fig.5), which was exhibited in the Turbine Hall as part of the Unilever Series exhibition held at the Tate Modern in London (2003-2004).<sup>54</sup> The installation was comprised of a semi circle of lamps placed behind a semi-transparent plastic foil, which were reflected by a 3000 square metres of mirrored foil on metal frames to create a full circle and the illusion of a glowing sun.<sup>55</sup>

One of the main elements to the work was the people experiencing it, their human scale highlighting the monumentality of the space. This 'illusion' created by Eliasson also had a magnetic radiation which amazed people and forced them to rely on their own perception and the site's few parameters. This striking manipulation of the space and activation of peoples' perception was done so to produce a critical attitude in them with regards to "the way they see and locate themselves in relation to that external *materia*."<sup>56</sup>



**Figure 5:** Weather Project, Olafur Eliasson, Tate Modern, London, 2003-2004

Further exploration of what constitutes our perception of place is done through the implementation of a reflective surface (mirrors on the ceiling), from which one can experience *seeing oneself seeing*. This phenomenon of perception is highlighted by Merleau-Ponty as a unique quality of the human consciousness, without which the notion of front and back, past and future would not exist.

“The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.”<sup>57</sup>

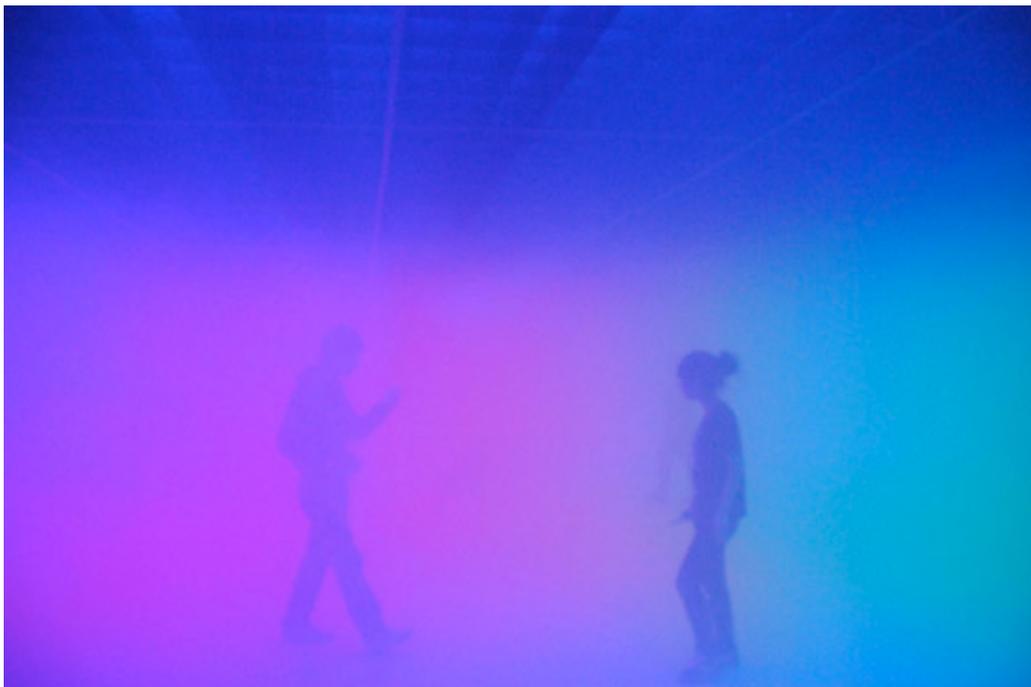
In addition, the reflective surface provided by the mirrors provides an ocular device which allows a spatial connection to the phenomenon of perception known as the ability to see *oneself seeing*. Described by Merleau-Ponty as a cognitive characteristic unique to humans, this perceptive sensitivity is what, according to Eliasson, allows for a critical view and reflection on the assumptions and expectations we have of the places we inhabit.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, this adopted strategy towards spatial composition, also opens a door into the psychology of awareness, which the artist can test through the manipulation of light.

Within the composition of scale and materiality in the Weather Project, the viewer does not only experience *external materia* in an indoor setting, but can also in a sense experience a collective awareness by finding his or her perceptive body in the sea of people reflected on the ceiling. By disorientating and activating these various cognitive functions the installation is allowing people to delve into their consciousness and spatial awareness individually as well as collectively.

Eliasson’s work is also marked and recognised by the creation of distinct atmospheres. In the case of the weather project, artificial fog was also used to add density to the light and to give another layer of materiality to the unique *atmosphere* of the place. Architect Peter Zumthor believes that atmosphere is a key aspect of any place which, more often than not, is what makes a certain place or architectural space memorable;

“(Atmosphere)... this singular density and mood, this feeling of presence, well-being, harmony, beauty...under whose spell I experience what I otherwise would not experience in precisely this way.”<sup>59</sup>

In a collaboration between Eliasson and architect Ma Yansong called *Feelings are Facts* (fig.6), a unique sensory atmosphere was created constituting of mist, light and colour, which challenged peoples' everyday patterns of spatial navigation. Definition of space is lost in the cloud of mist and colour, the spectrum of colour lights in the only visual aid to orientate the body in the space. In addition, the architecture of the long transect of room was used as an element which broke the conventional rules of stability in favour of a instability which emphasizes the important role of the moving body in the perception of our surroundings.<sup>60</sup> The lowered ceiling and inclined wooden floor, had visitors readjusting their balance, inducing an insecurity which forced them to constantly shift their weight and body posture to counterbalance the inclination.



**Figure 6:** *Feelings are Facts*, Olafur Eliasson and Ma Yansong

Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2010

The boundless space also exposed the fragility of peoples' spatial perceptions, as traversing the dematerialized environment, viewers experience a heightened sensory awareness.<sup>61</sup> In this case place awareness is explored through a combination of devices

from which, architect Ma Yansong points out, space is dissected and its physical definition questioned.

“space and light bring life into existence, there is no space, unless given light and boundary. Space has never existed, but rather exists only in the specific feelings it induces. Space in reality, exists only in sensuality. Our feelings and sensibilities are seeing facts in the context of habituated life. Not until shutting our eyes, can we feel the world from within, space and light will touch your soul.”<sup>62</sup>

Driven by a strong social engagement, and all the while trying to “integrate art into society, so that it will once more have the function of helping sensual orientation in a world where technology and media have forced nature into the background”,<sup>63</sup> Eliasson aims to work with *models of perception* and not with perception itself,<sup>64</sup> with the relationship between the individual and the immediate environment becoming paramount in this exploration of place awareness.

Through the manipulation of spaces in a manner to disorientate people, Richard Wilson and Olafur Eliasson have accomplished the creation of experiences closer to the *natural attitude* of perception which phenomenology is so keen on encouraging people to seek through the “verification of everything for ourselves, individually, with our own intuition.”<sup>65</sup> The enigma of what constitutes our perception is what keeps these artists active in their exploration of how the body sees itself within a place and how it perceives its own awareness. By manipulating and altering our common spatial relationship to the basic elements of place (floor, wall and ceiling, indoor and outdoor), our perception of place is also subsequently altered. It is the common assumptions we make about place (stability, linearity) which lead artists to create work that questions our cognitive frames of awareness and perception by twisting the fabric of physical spaces and their function.

## **Installation Art: an architectural tool in exploring place awareness**

According to Pallasmaa, our sensory input is the gateway to analysing our experience with physical space. Borrowing from psychoanalytic theory and by using the notion of body image or body schemata as the centre of this integration,<sup>66</sup> he believes that more comprehensive concepts can be drawn on the crucial relationship between the body and its awareness of place.

“The authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the tectonic language of building and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the senses.”<sup>67</sup>

In a similar way to architects, and highlighted by the case studies in this paper, installation artists design spaces in which a certain environment or atmosphere is created, they do this through the manipulation of space using elements such as light, colour, scale and materiality. As these spaces are not required to be functional, an artist can choose which part of our experience with place can be explored (haptic, optical, perceptive). Some choose to look at the physical interaction with the work through our bodies, as in the case of *The Mute Room*, *Body Repose*, *The Very Nervous System* and *Dark Matter*, while others use spatial composition to awaken our perception and awareness of a particular setting or place (*20:50* and *the Weather Project*).

“In exploring (installations), the pleasure of looking is linked with other senses, tapping feelings and triggering associations. Stimuli used to prick the senses, promise authentic meanings.”<sup>68</sup>

The aesthetic experimentation with the elements of space inherent in installation art also allows for a distillation of the experience of architecture,<sup>69</sup> turning this art form into a useful tool in the exploration of place and what it signifies in terms of our built environment.

Furthermore, the ability of installation art to turn a passive perception of the environment into an active and critical one is what, according to Jane Rendell, makes art successful at opening discussions and allowing for an analysis of dominant ideologies on different aspects of place making, as well as question where these ideologies have come from.<sup>70</sup> She has coined the term 'critical spatial practice' to describe the cultural and social conditions created through public art (installations, interventions and pavilions) that allow this active engagement with current issues in art and architecture.<sup>71</sup> She highlights the fact that this practice is mostly seen in the art world, and also comments on the increasing involvement of architects within this 'critical spatial practice', culminating in the conclusion that architecture may yet have a lot more to learn from public art.<sup>72</sup>

Through *critical spatial practice* within the public realm of art, architects can engage in an exploration and distillation of our sensing of space. Having established that place awareness is a concept involving an embodied experience with space (body and mind), and if a critical spatial practice is to take place between installation art and architecture, then this opens the door for a deeper and in a sense "quicker" and more accessible exploration of what constitutes the human experience of the places which become stages to our lives. The fact that this art form is already being explored by various architects (sometimes in collaboration with artists),<sup>73</sup> makes installation art a *place in between* these creative practices and more importantly a critical crossover ground for the dissection of place awareness.

What is noticeable through the analysis of the works chosen is their simplicity and ability to create environments suitable for further analysis of the workings of the body and its interaction with space. The installations reinvest experience with meaning unrelated to facts or data and by helping to make sense of perception, they reveal answers and assumptions about how our individual awareness responds to the spatial composition within a place. This exchange between subject and object, Pallasmaa states, can act as a mirror from which our emotions and feelings are reflected:

“A work of art functions as another person, with whom one unconsciously converses. When confronting a work of art we project our emotions and feelings on to the work. A curious exchange takes place; we lend the work our emotions, whereas the work lends us its authority and aura. Eventually we meet ourselves in the work.”<sup>74</sup>

If architecture is, according to Schulz, the ‘art or place’ which represents the totality of human existence,<sup>75</sup> then installation art, and its preoccupation with the intricate relationship of spatial experience, becomes a suitable partner within the arts for a practical exploration of place awareness.

## **Conclusion**

Installation art is at times associated with attention-seeking and mass publicity for the benefit of art institutions, which are criticised for following the same agenda for art work as commercial propaganda does for goods. However, I would argue that the very fact that it can be presented to the masses makes it an ideal candidate for a broader and more comprehensive study of the elements of place awareness. If we can leave the discussion of popularity aside, and concentrate on the ways in which it tries to activate peoples’ perception and encourage critical awareness, we can start asking questions as to how could this art form evolve into a crucial part of an architectural education? Could future place making benefit from students of architecture being taught about place awareness through the medium of installation art?

As place makers, architects undertake the task of designing spaces which we inhabit through an embodied experience of them. Therefore, further questions are asked on whether architectural practice should, in a similar way to installation art, also seek to unravel the makings of place awareness? Evident in the case studies, installations of

various forms and designs can begin to reveal the makings of this spatial experience. Additionally, by analysing the works through a phenomenological lens, we can observe space ceases to become solely geometrical and objective, detached from our bodies and our subjective and emotional experience, but instead becomes a critical mirror from which to anchor our experience and ultimately our view of the world.

By activating our consciousness and allowing the viewer to direct his or her own experience of place, installation art is gradually pulling us away from a passive encounter with physical space, and opening the way for an active and spatially critical one. If our embodied experience of place frames our perception of the world, then through the selected case studies I have tried to bring to light and, in a sense, 'dissect' the various spatial elements and tools used by installation artist to explore and experiment with the elements of our physical and cognitive experience with space. By questioning the perceptive boundaries we create through our common assumptions of place, installation art opens an alternative framework for architects to critically analyse and expand their knowledge on what constitutes our awareness of place.

The technological age has bombarded our environment with sensory data and information which is quickly processed but not necessarily absorbed and comprehended. Unfortunately architectural practice suffers from a similar fate and it is through the more 'real' and palpable experiences which installation art offers, that we may be able to activate our senses and perception and direct our place making in a way which is more holistic and in keeping with our subjective emotional and existential needs.

*"The world ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity  
as waves wash round a wreck on the shore." <sup>76</sup> Merleau-Ponty*

Word count: 5645

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space & Architecture*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1971, p.17.
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