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Staging: Synthesizing the Human Contribution

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Staging: Synthesizing the Human Contribution

Abstract
The following paper considers a series of inquiries that are the manifestation of a desire to comprehend the experiential nature of lived space. My perspective is anthropological with specific interest in material culture and ritual. I will discuss phenomenological staging as part of a whole research methodology consisting of two other basic precepts; biographic and ethnographic writing. Each of these systems of thought work to inform the other and cumulatively serve to help define the criteria for making ethno-specific propositions.

Disciplines
Architecture
Ritual is a series of actions constantly repeated. Repetitiveness serves the meaning being expressed, for if the pattern is at least generally constant we can concentrate on the message embodied in the performance. Repetition soothes us, apparently, in and by itself. Human beings rejoice in the action of patterning. Rituals are about lasting.  

– Margaret Visser

**Introduction**

The following paper considers a series of inquiries that are the manifestation of a desire to comprehend the experiential nature of lived space. My perspective is anthropological with specific interest in material culture and ritual. I will discuss phenomenological staging as part of a whole research methodology consisting of two other basic precepts; biographic and ethnographic writing. Each of these systems of thought work to inform the other and cumulatively serve to help define the criteria for making ethno-specific propositions.

**The Gap**

Architecture is about constructing the event as much as it is about providing the shelter for its associated rituals. Our disciplinary chore is to mine the gap that exists between the logic of objects and that of its figure; between a people and their anticipated surroundings. The dimension of this divergence, as suggested by Immanuel Kant, is based purely on perception.

Although the intellect is quite capable of comprehending experience in terms of noumena, it is by intuitive means that we experience such observed spatial and temporal relations. Critical to either case is the consideration of what Nassim Nicholas Taleb refers to as the black swan or the dynamics of uncertainty. However, the initial formation of our perception is based on empirical grounds. Hence, the distinction of object and figure as things they are in themselves.

Examining the gap, then, is a matter of synthesis; the (re)combining of the constituent elements of a people including its knowledge, its beliefs, its social organization, and the material world in which it exists. An examination of this sort, ultimately, leads to a core revelation which Martin Heidegger, like Kant, was concerned with – that of being (ontology). However, Heidegger breaks from Kant’s philosophy by expanding his interpretive enterprise of self to include the significance of historicity (the constitution of being of world-historical occurrences).

The bond between the figure and its object(s) can only be understood through synthesis; a recombining of the constituent elements upon comprehending the ontological aspects present for both the figure and the object as constituted by the presence of both. As a result, our perception of a people matures, revealing a more subjective set of logic from which to inform the production of space. The authentication of our perceptions as architects is dependant on our will to develop the means by which we can accurately establish an informed interpretation of the nature of a people’s being based on their historicity.

**Abstract Recognitions**

Continuity of meaning and value is the essence of cultural identity. Their recognition as agents in the sustainability of a particular group is developed through experience. Every experience is constituted by interaction between “subject” and “object,” between self and its world. In an experience, things and events belonging to the world are transformed through the human context of that world. We, who are external to this world, are changed and developed through intercourse with its material culture.
The following inquiries are the manifestation of a desire to comprehend the experiential nature of lived space. As phenomenological staging, their content is temporary, incomplete and universal. They are an interpretation of a lived experience and thus provoke dialogue. The act of producing such a material survey serves as an agent for anticipating its architectural potential. Like ethnographic studies, their purpose is to unfold a cultural view of the world. As such, each effort is the embodiment of a performance agenda that has to do with authenticating our comprehension of the corresponding items of experience through memory, anecdote and ritual.

Drift (figure 1), a performance art installation, was developed specifically for the Maytag Reflecting Pool at the Des Moines Art Center; an interior courtyard bounded by the work of Eliel Saarinen, I.M. Pei and Richard Meier. The ceremonial performance consisted of casting 100 wax tablets into the water and carefully wading out into the shallow pool to light them. The work incorporated (and magnified) the space of the site and created a private, contemplative experience for the 100 or so people who silently looked on as the waters surface begin to dance with light. Each ignition was punctuated with silence followed by the acoustic creep of footsteps through water.

The conceptual aspect of this exploration focused on the sentimental nature of candles as a matter of developing a scene of intimacy within a voyeuristic environment. The site was transformed into an arena in which the audience was invited to be actively present; immersed in its visual and perceptual challenges. The viewer, by reciprocal examination, becomes aware of his/her personal presence and its coincidence with relation to the referent material and attendant.

It is difficult to determine the poetry of the courtyard by traditional architectural means. However, this inquiry gives some revelation. I was privy to a wonderful single-point perspective, having waded into the shallow of this pool. Common citizens watched in complete silence, a kind of intensity commonly rooted in the act of deep reflection. This place, an oasis from a deducible context set apart for reflection on mundane ritual and not a sanctuary for the elite.

Ov Course

That individual experiences vary with respect to their context is well known among those engaged with the conception and enactment of works based in human occupation. This variation in response to environment derives from our interpretation of the items of experience (phenomena) and their material arrangement. Cross-culturally, perceptual readings of context correlate with reflective and anticipatory processes of understanding.

Öv course (figure 2), an abstract inventory of these findings, is a buildup of mundane matter (a table, its cloth, cutlery, feed sacks, grocery bags, and burlap) associated with the
mealtime ritual. The enclosure created by this inventory produces what Joan Simon calls a socio-graph, a support system for the metaphysical occupation of its environment. The ordinary quality of this type of material surround yields a deeply reflective engagement.

Figure 2. Abstract inventory.

This work was hosted by the Karolyn Sherwood Gallery in Des Moines, Iowa. It contained a constructed abstraction of the mealtime setting. Essential to this place setting is the accompaniment and arrangement of various recordings of story, artifacts and sketches along a materialized line of measure laid out on the floor. The goal of this work was to develop a manner of procession or approach that allows for a hallucinatory type experience like that of our collective memory of mealtime.

The material culture occupied a gallery space measuring 16 by 40 feet. A staging area (8 by 24 feet) consisting of 3/16” thick steel floor plating defined an area of intimacy within the galleries confines in which to engage the table and its measure. This pickled plating had been cleaned of its protective grease in effort to reduce risk of slipping. As a result, the individual plates became recorders of foot traffic. This result was due to the moisture tracked in and the subsequent oxidation that would occur over the next 24 hours.

The measure, a rhythmical arrangement of ½”x1 ½” steel bar stock set two feet on center, provided an extension of the table settings into the foreground upon entry. This component and its frequency spoke to the distribution of people at the table as well as food. Its development is based on the desire to bring about a processional approach to the table using the rhythm and sub-rhythm established by the measure and steel plating respectively.

The table hosted a party of five guests (Dolores Joan Goche, David A. Burns, Debra Marquart, Elizabeth Zimmerman and Oliver Gillen Goché). An audio recording represented the presence of each of these Midwestern storytellers at the table. Each recording contained a story related to food production, food processing, or mealtime as a child. Each place setting hosted a discrete voice, yet all stories were heard simultaneously. The conclusion of the five stories was announced with a sequenced script; ‘a course, b course, c course.’

While the underside of ‘the board’ supported a DVD player and five speakers, the top of ‘the board’ was concealed by a tablecloth, a salt and peppershaker and six place settings. Each place setting consisted of a plate (nickel-plated drain strainer) and a teaspoon. The handle of each spoon at the five live settings were cast up and to the left in reference to the desert spoon as cited by Emily Post in her manuals for etiquette. In each of these five cases, the spoon was placed upright with its bowl in the center of the plate, a signal that this person was still present and not finished with their meal. The spoon at the sixth place setting (anonymous) was turned face down with its handle to bottom right; an indication that this spot at the table had not been occupied.

A backdrop to the table and its measure had been developed using 36 by 108 inch pieces of burlap. The intent of this tapestry was to enhance the intimate quality of the table setting as a result of its inherent characteristics of tone, texture and aroma. This burlap, from Calcutta, has various uses. However, it is largely known as a material used
for packaging large volumes of grain given the strength of its natural fiber.

Accompanying the table setting and its measure were six Kitchen Abstracts. Mounted on the right hand wall of the gallery space, each piece was centered on each of the steel plates that made up the staging. Each drawing consisted of a brown paper grocery sack, a chain stitch and serger needles. The sacks had been moistened, crushed and then pressed. The chain stitch, which navigated across the resulting wrinkles, was an effort to bring about a stronger awareness of the topographic nature of the paper. Equally, the piercing of each serger needle was established as a matter of composition and interpretation of the bags’ surface qualities. On the whole, the abstract illustrates a type of binding similar to that of the stories that bind the lives of those that make up a particular culture. These stories, brought to table, are the extension of stories constructed while preparing the food and artifacts for its culminating ritual.

The cultural references emerging in this work result in an experience that is nostalgic. Through the buildup of mundane matter, the occupant is confronted with the ponderous burden of dealing with its significance. They are led to comprehend the nature of the work based on their prior mealtime experience and its relationship with the direct sensuous matter (the offering) of the installation.

And so I discovered that the world is made up of many separate things, and that there is between them no division. What is experienced in actuality is the unity of all—and not simply self, another’s story, the light bulb overhead, an upside-down spoon, the cloth below, burlap, brown paper bags, and serger needles. We include equally the past—our numerous disparate pasts. To enter into this knowledge, familiarity and experience is as extraordinary as awaking each morning with an immediate comprehension of all that is about you.

**Vault**

And now, with calm economy, I await the ghost hour. In this still moment, I am present. Descending from flesh and bone, a mark (nota/maculã) appears. This mark is humble...almost silent. In a delirium of immediate recognition, I study its nuance and am reminded of my childhood tracings while playing in the dirt (humus).

Of thorns and steel and ink, I commit this work to ordinary time, to ordinary people, to ordinary passage.

– Incantare

![Figure 3. Performance art installation.](image)

Vault° (figure 3), a performance art installation, is an intellectual excavation that seeks to develop an ideological critique of metaphysical existence based on human *sentience*. Developed in the confines of the city receiving vault at Woodland Cemetery, the work was presented to the public on June 9, 2007. Its manifestation is based on the desire to unfold a cultural view of the world through the re-insertion of rite in a long since vacant setting originally constructed for the temporary interment of passed lives.

The city receiving vault was built ca. 1850 and is believed to be Des Moines’ oldest standing building. It is located in the south-west corner of the cemetery. The vault served as an on-site morgue where bodies would be stored in the winter until spring when the ground could be
manually excavated. The vault sometimes held as many as 100 bodies.

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The installation consists of a measure, a baldachin and a set of reliquary. The measure [8 & 9], a sinuous arrangement of ½” thick steel print plates on ¼”x 1½” steel bar stock blocking, was placed on the floor of the vault proper. The baldachin [10], a bleached muslin cloth (6 feet by 18 feet), was placed over the measure bearing a corresponding ink impression. The reliquary [11], a small box in which thorns are kept, was placed atop a modeling stand. Each of these pieces was accompanied by a white floral wreath and white candles. Occupying the two niches adjacent to the entryway, these particular works stood as memorials to those interred in this facility. This inventory, amidst the decay of its confine, introduces us to a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences.5

Essential to this place setting was the accompaniment and arrangement of a performance sequence including an acoustic atonement of the measure, placement of the baldachin, the recital of an incantare and a requiem (Vocalise by Sergei Rachmaninoff) performed by concert violinist; Caleb Polashek. In this way, the viewer entered into a full sensory experience and corresponding recognition of self. What remains and is contained, as a result, is the collective memory of repeated human celebration specific to this place.

In the rite of human burial of which this work speaks, it is the accent on the human object, represented metaphorically here by the measure and its corresponding baldachin, that most distinguishes the occasion. This reference to the history of place and its occupancy is punctuated by my own productive curiosity within this type of enclosure and my culminating role as incantare. Accordingly, my performance as eulogist in this basic measure of rite made evident the emotional intensity surrounding the body in such an experience and, correspondingly, its specific architectural setting.

As a response to these conditions, we have developed the following set of guidelines that support a spatial regeneration for Iowa that holds the livelihood of its communities as the main concern without compromising the state’s economic competitiveness that is largely determined by the continuous innovation in the agricultural industry.

First, geographically consolidate communities to achieve a critical population that is closely networked without necessarily being spatially dense.

Second, recognize the landscape morphology of Iowa with new patterns of settlement and land-use boundaries. The six-mile grid of the American surveys reduced the sensitivity toward the natural formations of the land of Iowa, which we propose to reverse.

Third, maintain a small cycle of exchange that is centered on reinforcing community relationships. This scale of exchange needs to co-exist with the larger, industrial cycle of exchange.

Conclusions

Continuity of meaning and value is the essence of cultural identity. Their recognition as agents in the sustainability of a particular group is developed through experience. Every experience is constituted by interaction between “subject” and “object,” between self and its world. In an experience, things and events belonging to the world are transformed through the human context of that world. We, who are external to this world, are changed and developed through intercourse with its material culture.

An idiosyncratic architect occupies the space between the figure and its envelope. The crafting of such space is, as Bernard Tschumi suggests, dependent on the articulation and relationship of its constituting parts; its language, its composing materials and its individuals or societies.6 To do so requires the development and execution of a whole methodology based on phenomenological means of interpretation; to make that which is ethno-specific by thoughtfully linking an environment to the ritual and story of a people. This series of inquiries into spatial phenomenon and the human contribution are abstract recognitions, for both the author and
the audience, of culture’s experience and make-up. As John Dewey writes:

A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. The work of art operates to deepen and to raise to great clarity that sense of an enveloping undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience.  

Within the human desire to comprehend our relationship to culture is issued the simultaneous desire to belie its representational content and hence transcend it. To this end, the act of producing such measure of space serves as agent in the cultivation of a specific architectural way of thinking. Like ethnographic studies, the purpose of constructing Place Settings is to unfold a more acute view of the world. This process of inquiry is the embodiment of an interdisciplinary agenda that has to do with engaging in new perspectives such as asserting self as performer, choreographer, incantare, etc. in an effort to authenticate the architectural essence of lived space and define the criteria for making ethno-specific propositions.