

Staging: Synthesizing the Human Contribution

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*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.*¹

– Margaret Visser

INTRODUCTION

This presentation will consider the role of staging as an observatory practice that seeks to comprehend the experiential nature of lived space. I will discuss making a scene; the production of gestures and, thereby, spatial comprehension as part of a whole research methodology to which I refer as staging. The value of this work for the field of architecture is arrived at using observation/staging as the primary mode of study.

SOCIO-GRAPH

In the engagement of a specific environment, our experience as occupants begins with an impulse to scrutinize everything.² In this almost instantaneous assessment, we enter into a dialogue with the humanity of place; an intercourse with time, deep time; and thus, are immersed in the visual and perceptual challenges of the inherited landscape and its cultural inscriptions. The tangible buildup of routine spatial engagements produces what Joan Simon calls a socio-graph³, a support system for the metaphysical occupation of its environment. The ordinary quality of this type of material surround yields a deeply reflective engagement that assist in maintaining an ontological wakefulness, or, in the words of Victor Turner, “a quiet celebration of ordinary experience.”⁴

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, thereby, 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

Suspended by water, memories dance upon the belly of its corpse.

– Lyric

There is a central quality that is the root criterion of life and human spirit...this quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named.⁵ Its realization is the product of reflection; a consequence, illumination, perception that is achieved by immersing self into ceremony and surround.

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



Figure 1. Performance art installation.

people who silently looked on as the water's surface began 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 experiential nature 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, accommodates ordinary bodily experiences and, thereby, quiet celebrations of personal sentiment.

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.



Figure 2. Abstract inventory.

Ův 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 ordinary quality of this type of material surround yields a deeply reflective engagement. Essential to this staging 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. The measure, a rhythmical arrangement of 1/2"x1 1/2" 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.

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 pepper shaker and six place settings. Each place setting consisted of a strainer plate and a teaspoon. The handle of each spoon, at the five live settings, was cast up and to the left. 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 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 sensory quality of the table setting as a result of its inherent characteristic tone, texture and aroma. This burlap, from Calcutta, is used primarily for containing large volumes of grain.

Accompanying the table setting and its measure were six Kitchen Abstracts. Each drawing consisted of a brown paper grocery sack, a chain stitch and serger needles. The sacks had been moistened, crushed and then pressed. Each abstract illustrates

a unique set of binding similar to that of the stories that join 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.

Through the buildup of direct sensuous matter, the occupant is confronted with the ponderous burden of dealing with its significance with respect to his or her own mealtime experiences. An acknowledgment 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.

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

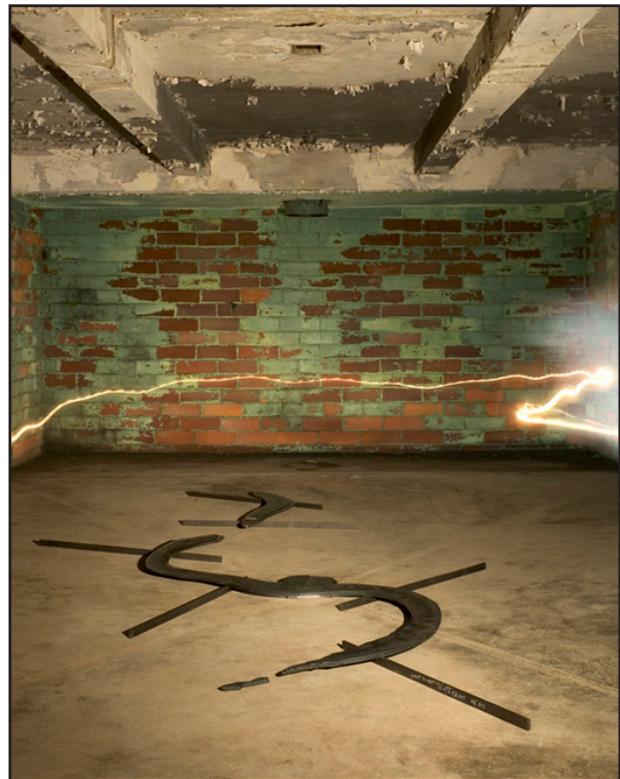


Figure 3. Performance art installation.

Vault^o (figure 3), a performance art installation, was developed in the confines of Des Moines' 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 vault was built ca. 1850. It 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.

The installation consisted of a measure, a *baldachin* and a set of reliquary. The measure, a sinuous arrangement of ½" thick steel print plates on ½"x1½" steel bar stock blocking, was placed on the floor of the vault proper. The *baldachin*, a bleached muslin cloth (6 feet by 18 feet), was placed over the measure bearing a corresponding ink impression. Occupying the two niches adjacent to the entryway was a reliquary box containing thorns atop a modeling stand that stood as a memorial to those interred in this facility. Accompanying each arrangement was a white floral wreath and numerous white candles placed on the surrounding floor.

Essential to this staging 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 enclosure.

CONCLUSION

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.⁶

To this end, the act of producing such measure of space serves as agent in the cultivation of a specific architectural way of thinking. This process of inquiry is the embodiment of an interdisciplinary agenda that has to do with engaging in new perspectives via the assertion of self as performer, choreographer, and scribe in an effort to authenticate the architectural essence of lived space and define the criteria for making ethno-specific propositions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) p. 19.
- 2 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Penquin Putnam., 1980), 58.
- 3 Simon, 15.
- 4 Victor Turner and Edward Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience*, (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986): 34.
- 5 Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 19.
- 6 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Penquin Putnam., 1980), p. 195.