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Beyond 'Visual' Art: Non-Sighted Modes of Beholding Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper investigates new engagements afforded people with visual impairments by hybrid or intermedial forms of art, such as – pre-eminently – installation art. Against ocularcentric models of 'spectatorship' championed by someone like Clement Greenberg, it argues the centrality of non-sighted modes of beholding to a number of paradigmatic examples of installation art. In so doing, the paper proposes the importance of such modes in bringing the beholder's orientation into play, and in negotiating the unstable relation between the virtuality of the artwork and the 'real' site context. Thus considered, visual impairment might be reconceived not an impediment to an aesthetic encounter (a *lacking* or *deficiency*), but rather a 'gap' to be creatively negotiated as part of a fully embodied experience. This takes on a particular importance in installations that explicitly seek to activate the space of reception using senses other than sight, and the paper concludes by examining concrete examples of such art practice.

1.

If aesthetics is to have continuing relevance to the experience of contemporary art practice, then it is important that it reflects not only

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the reality of new aesthetic modes of encountering art, but the needs of diverse audiences. These two issues are, I believe, closely linked; that they are rarely discussed together reflects, on the one hand, a disconnect between the philosophy of art and the reality of much contemporary practice, and on the other a 'default' beholder often conceived (putting to one side intersectional issues of race, sex, gender, sexuality and class) as an able-bodied 'viewer' or 'spectator'. My particular concern in this paper is the theoretical consequences of such ocularcentric norms when considering contemporary art practice, integral to the very characterisation of what is still referred to as the 'visual' arts. In so doing, the paper will address an area of research that has received little critical attention outside of the writing of blind artists and/or theorists.[2] In particular, it will consider the significance of new engagements afforded people with visual impairments by hybrid or intermedial forms of art, such as – pre-eminently – installation art.

2.

For many years, the experience of 'visual' art afforded those people with more severe sight-impairment was limited to rare opportunities to touch objects in a museum's collection (often while required to

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2 See, for instance, Fayen d'Evie (2017), Georgina Kleege (2018). This paper has emerged out of an ongoing research connected to a joint funding bid with the visually impaired artist Aaron McPeake, and I am immensely grateful for his invaluable contribution to my thinking about the subject matter. McPeake and I have previously collaborated on artworks, including our 2017 work *Circumstantes*, an installation within Sigurd Lewerentz's Sankt Petri church in Klippan, Sweden.

wear gloves) or, more problematically, mediated access through tactile facsimiles of objects or paintings. This situation has somewhat improved, at least in part in response to disability discrimination legislation. Most major museums now offer guided tours and audio-descriptions aimed specifically at a blind and partially-sighted audience; and some museums, galleries and heritage sites commission exhibitions or works of art that offer a multi-sensory experience. However, there is still a tendency to treat blind people as a unitary group, defined *by* their 'disability' and undifferentiated in terms of their degree of sight impairment and levels of art knowledge. Writing in 2003, Fiona Candlin notes:

> However diverse individual blind people might be, as museum visitors they are primarily defined in relation to a lack of sight. The continuing lack of basic provision means blind people can only visit in a disabled capacity; tactile flooring is still virtually non-existent, good lighting is often sacrificed for ambience and large print labelling generally comes in a distant second to the designer's overarching exhibition concept. Museums and galleries may flaunt their access credentials (especially in funding applications) but access is often tokenistic and tends to remain low on the list of institutional priorities. Blind people are constituted as a marginal group not because their blindness makes them so, but because the ocularcentricity of museums and galleries ensures that non-visual engagement with art and

artefacts remains virtually inconceivable in all but the most innovative of institutions. (2003, p. 101)

This situation has not significantly changed in the intervening years, and institutional priorities continue to prohibit touch. When the second of the five casts of Henry Moore's *King and Queen* (1952-3) was first installed in 1954 on remote moorland at Glenkiln, in Dumfries and Galloway, everyone (including livestock) could rub-up against, or climb over, the bronze work; by contrast, when a cast of the same work (owned by the Tate) was installed at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in 2013, alongside paintings by Francis Bacon, no touching was allowed. Such a situation is exacerbated by the increasing use of laser-beam alarm systems in galleries, which make the close viewing of paintings almost impossible for anyone with visual impairment.

Sometimes the lack of awareness of how blind people encounter art can be almost comical; a blind acquaintance was stopped (for health and safety reasons) from entering, alone, Anthony Gormley's immersive installation *Blind Light* (2007), an illuminated glass room filled with mist, installed at the Hayward Gallery in London. Yet this was a work where everyone's experience was to blunder into unseen strangers in the dense fog. On a more serious note, those charged with improving accessibility are rarely given the kind of voice afforded curators within their organisations. And, of course, Covid 19 has served to reinforce this marginalisation,

reinforcing an institutional fear of 'touching' the artworks while presenting particular difficulties for visually-impaired people in terms of negotiating virtual tours.

Such concerns with access are not, however, the primary focus of this paper. Rather, I intend to focus on how this marginalisation is mirrored by a gap in philosophical thinking as to how engagements beyond the optical might potentially expand the experience of art: not only for the partially-sighted and blind community, but for *all* beholders. This challenges what David Bolt refers to as 'ocularnormative' epistemological approaches that equate seeing with knowing, prioritising visual perception over other forms of knowledge (2014, p. 18). In confronting this issue, I propose the centrality of non-sighted modes of beholding art to a number of paradigmatic examples of installation art.[3] Indeed, I will argue that such fully embodied, multi-sensory modes are essential to the experience of 'situated' installations that we have to physically enter, or (in some circumstances) to which we are pointedly excluded.

3.

Let me return to my opening claim. Elsewhere, I have sought to counter suggestions that postconceptual art is non- or even anti-

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3 Of course, in so doing we might make a convincing case for galleries/museums to rethink the kinds of spaces they make available for the commissioning of installation works (beyond the generic white-cube), and the kind of intrinsic haptic and auditory locational cues such host spaces afford. But that is another story.

aesthetic – a position held by someone like Peter Osborne (2013). This requires confronting misconceptions about the nature of the 'autonomous' art object as necessarily self-contained (Wilder, 2020b). In so doing, I share Juliane Rebentisch's contention that installation art transgresses not so much the 'idea of autonomous art' but rather 'an objectivist misunderstanding of it' (2012, p. 14). If, by 'bracketing' a world from the spheres of practical and theoretical reason, installation art offers an experience that demands the performative role of the subject (in bringing forth something that is not, in and of itself, given by the work), then as Rebentisch argues the aesthetic experience "does not transcend the concrete empirical subjectivity of the subject of experience but rather reflects on it in a specific way" (2012, p. 271). This demands reflection not only upon the beholder's productive role (what we might call the beholder's share), but on the need to confront 'silent' social and cultural assumptions by disrupting or invalidating norms and conventions (such as the ubiquitous 'do not touch'). The resulting dehabitualisation – a characteristic feature of much installation art – necessitates (i) shifts in spatial and ideological orientation towards the work in question, and (ii) (and this is where my position differs from Rebentisch's) a central role for the imagination. In particular, I have argued that the latter is critical to negotiating the intrinsically unstable relation between our perception of the 'real' situation and the bracketed 'virtual' realm of the artwork (Wilder, 2020a).

My argument is therefore that non-sighted modes of beholding are integral to both bringing our bodily orientation into play and *binding* the resulting imaginative processes, whereby we experience the work as both a virtual space (i.e. a semblance) and a spatially-situated reality. Thus considered, visual impairment might be reconceived not an impediment to an aesthetic encounter (a *lacking* or *deficiency*), but rather a 'gap' to be creatively negotiated as part of a fully embodied experience. And while this bodily orientation might be considered as a factor in *all* situated art, it arguably takes on a particular importance in installations that explicitly seek to activate the space of reception using senses other than sight.

4.

This paper therefore maintains that the engagement afforded blind and partially-sighted people – marginalised not by their blindness, but societal attitudes – should not be solely thought of in terms of 'disability access' or 'social inclusion' (though these *are* important), but one that expands our understanding of the distinctive ontology of postconceptual art. This encompasses – but is certainly not restricted to – works appreciated through senses other than sight. Moreover, such a position intersects with the problem of defining a distinctive phenomenological experience for installation art (distinct from, for example, our engagement with sculpture, where the immediate

environment is organised by the kinetic potential of the sculpture itself rather than the situation we occupy).[4]

However, if such 'expanded' experiences are to constitute more than tokenistic gestures towards widening participation, there is a need to identify where the criticality lies in such an engagement: an encounter that should, of course, be as challenging for a blind audience as it is for a sighted one.[5] The issue is pressing given that intermedial works often seek to *problematise* the beholder's orientation towards the work, dehabitualising the beholder-position by disrupting or negating norms and conventions. Crucially, such a theoretical process should be distinguished from the very real practical problems of access for people with disabilities that some installations present (as the recent controversy over wheelchair access to the 2002 work *Your Spiral View* at Olafur Eliasson's retrospective at Tate Modern demonstrates).[6]

This discussion takes place against a backdrop where the 1960s and 70s witnessed a fundamental challenge to the kind of medium-specific modes of art championed by the likes of Clement

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4 See Susanne Langer (1953). This is a position I share with Elisa Caldarola (2020), who has argued something very similar.

5 As Candlin (2003) notes, there can sometimes be a tendency to 'dumb down' on touch tours, though this is certainly not always the case as more blind and visually impaired artists are increasingly involved in organising and leading them. In the UK, organisations such as VocalEyes, founded in 1998, have been pivotal in transforming the quality of touch tours and audio-description.

6 See the media response to Irish journalist Ciara O'Connor's Instagram then Twitter thread about her experience of being excluded as a wheelchair user by Eliasson's installation. O'Connor's objection was not just that she was excluded, but Eliasson's rhetoric around the installation offering a fully-embodied experience that she was not able to participate in.

Greenberg and Michael Fried, dominated (at least in Greenberg's case) by reductive notions of the 'optic' that negate the beholder's bodily engagement, even in the case of sculpture. Thus, Greenberg claims: "The human body is no longer postulated as the agent of space in either painting or sculptural art; now it is eyesight alone, and eyesight has more freedom of movement and invention within three dimensions than two" (1993, p. 59). The supposed self-sufficiency of modernist painting and sculpture was criticised by a new generation of critics and practitioners: not only for its demarcation of the virtual space of the artwork as distinct from the space of the beholder, but also for its explicit ocularcentrism and disavowal of haptic modes of engaging art. By contrast, new forms of intermedial art explicitly sought to *activate the space of reception*, in what constituted an ideological rejection of the very notion of context-independent art.[7] Here, not only was the context of a work's reception considered constitutive of a work's meaning, but intermedial art potentially offered a more complex physical engagement, inviting multi-sensory perception including sound, touch, smell, proprioception and even (on rare occasions) taste. Early examples might include Michael Asher's air flow works of 1969, where industrial fans created tangible columns of air, or Lygia Clark's 1967-8 *Máscaras Sensoriais* [*Sensory Masks*], which enveloped the face of the wearer, integrating sachets that were both aromatic and textural.

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7 See, for instance, Alex Potts (2001). Of course, this should not hide the fact that many of these early installations were notoriously inaccessible for many people with disabilities.

5.

A number of questions arise here. If, as noted above, a stated intention of much intermedial art involves an intentional problematising of the beholder-position, prompting acts of ideation, how might such perspective-shifting (to use Wolfgang Iser's term)[8] be achieved through non-sighted modes of beholding art? How might non-sighted modes of beholding likewise dehabitualise perception and impede ideation (i.e. our attempt to grasp different levels of meaning)? And how might such an expanded notion of such processes feed into the wider question of defining a distinctive mode of virtual space (in Susanne Langer's sense) for intermedial forms of contemporary art such as installation art?

My suggestion is that the above questions are, in fact, necessarily linked; that in bringing our full bodily orientation into play, non-sighted modes of beholding art are integral not only in terms of our orientation towards the work, but to processes of dehabitualisation. They constitute a distinctive (if not defining) feature of the phenomenological experience of installation art (a space into which we physically enter), playing a particular role in terms of destabilising the conventions of a work's reception. Of course, I am not the only one to make such a claim. Claire Bishop, for instance, notes in the introduction to her 2005 book *Installation Art: A Critical*

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8 See Iser (1978).

History that installation art "loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters", such that:

> Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art. (2005, p. 6)

Bishop's position, with its emphasis on touch, smell and sound, clearly intersects with my own concern with non-sighted modes of beholding art. And while the importance of an embodied beholder might be said to characterise many 'situated' historical works (prior to the Greenbergian fallacy of the self-contained art object),[9] it is undoubtedly true that the intermedial work emerging out of the 1960s marked a paradigmatic shift in practice away from a modernist emphasis on the optic. However, Bishop's two claims need to be prised apart. To reduce the beholder (as Fried notoriously does)[10] to a 'literal presence' denies her role in negotiating the unstable boundary between real and virtual, something which Bishop's own writing emphasises throughout the rest of her book.

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9 See Wilder (2020a).
10 See, for instance, Fried's 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood' (1998).

This has certain consequences. If our engagement with installation art is one which brings our situated perception into play (a perception *already* enmeshed within the world, in Merleau-Ponty's sense), then non-visual modes of orientation *are also constitutive of the critical reflection that installation art prompts*. They are vital in activating our imaginative and ideational orientation towards the work, facilitated not only by the ease with which we move between frames of reference (coordinated between different sense modalities), but in their use of demonstrative frames of reference shared between perception and mental imagery. This conceives non-sighted modes of beholding art as integral to what I hold to be the *locative*, or *indexical*, functioning of situated art (Wilder, 2020a) – exemplified by (though by no means limited to) certain forms of installation art – and to the subsequent destabilising effect of the work in question when our perception and/or wider orientation (including ideological) is then challenged. Bishop (2005) similarly refers to this as the 'decentring' of the subject, though I prefer to describe it as a problematising of our orientation towards the work in question, in that any displacement is dependent upon what I am calling the work's locative function. And, to repeat, non-sighted modes of beholding art are integral to the very processes of dehabitualisation

The artist Fayen d'Evie, for instance, has likewise written about the radical potential of blindness, employing the metaphor of 'blundering' as a stumbling blindly, 'a staggering or pitching

movement with lurching shifts in perceptual perspective, or an unanticipated discovery' which 'allows for uncertainty, tenuous threads, and peripheral distractions, while also affirming wayfinding through blindness' (2017, p. 43). For d'Evie, "blindness may activate attentiveness in audiences" and "destabilise performer-spectator conventions" (p. 43); she reminds us that "blindness and visuality need not be mutually exclusive", but rather "introduces a complexity and diversity of embodiments and relationships to perception, imagination, and consciousness" (p. 44). Drawing upon her own "unstable" functional vision, she writes: "To retrieve the agency of blindness, the definition I carry instead as we blunder onwards is blindness as a mode of perceiving that, to a radical extent, makes tangible the limits of normative constructs of vision, impairs ocularcentrism, and destabilses 20/20 cultural paradigms" (p. 44). And as she notes, blindness is a mode of perceiving that connects us more explicitly to the ground as a point of reference for navigation, whether through the use of a mobility cane or echolocation; we might add, it also connects us to the reality of a work's context.

Indeed, installation art constitutes a space that while virtualised – removed from functional imperatives – compels acts of imagination/ideation that, at least in the most critically pertinent forms of practice, *do not take place in isolation from the work's situated context*. Indeed, it is the tension (or slippage) between these two superimposed but miscalibrated realms that arguably destabilises the beholder. This varies from work to work, in that the extent to which

the wider conditions of access enter into the work's semantic content varies widely. At one end of the spectrum are works that make little connection to their site and can be relocated without fundamentally changing the work's meaning; at the other are site-specific works that are entirely dependent upon their site context and make little sense (or at least suffer a considerable loss) when removed from that situation.[11] Thus conceived, we might set out a series of interconnected ways installations orientate us within their virtual worlds, which overlap with (while distinguished from) the real space

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11 Of course, the same artist can make both types of work, which highlights definitional problems based on the imposition of necessary conditions. An example might be Mike Nelson's narrative-driven work. Claire Bishop uses Nelson's work as paradigmatic of what she calls the "dream space" type of installation: "Such work is characterised both by psychological absorption and by physical immersion – the viewer does not identify with a character depicted in a scene but is placed in the position of the protagonist" (2005, p. 47). However, different works by Nelson construct very different relations to site. *Coral Reef*, for instance, is a completely immersive installation entered through an unassuming door into a completely internal world of fifteen rooms with interconnecting corridors. Originally constructed in late 1999, and opened in 2000 at Matt's Gallery in London, the whole complex installation was then reconstructed in 2010 at Tate Britain, with little impact upon the work's meaning. Here we navigate our way through a confusing set of intersecting, and seemingly abandoned rooms using the same orientation skills we employ when faced with any real sequence of rooms for the first time; nonetheless, we are not only lost within this labyrinthal space but confused as to 'where' we are, such is the reality of the replicated spaces that do not belong to the space of the gallery – a confusion intensified when we encounter the doubled-up space of the mini-cab office for a second time, throwing any residual sense of orientation into disarray in an even more destabilising moment of déjà-vu. It is as if we have entered a parallel world, both familiar and strange. By contrast, *Mirror Infill* (2006), a site-specific work installed at the Frieze Art Fair and commissioned by Frieze Projects, constructs its labyrinth of interconnected spaces in a parallel realm that relies for its impact directly upon its juxtaposition of disconnected worlds. The work, entirely invisible on the outside apart from its entrance door (concealed by the warren of commercial gallery stands), seemed to defy reality, opening up an impossible space dominated by the red photography lights in a fictional darkroom and printed images of the site's transformation from building site to art fair.

that we occupy as beholders. Here, Langer's notion (alluded to earlier) of sculpture making virtual 'kinetic volume' out of real, three-dimensional space might be contrasted with works where the organising role is enacted not by the sculpted object, nor, indeed, the sculpture itself (in the case of non-gestural abstract sculpture), but the *entire spatial situation* and the potential of our movements within.[12] Proprioception plays a particular role here; indeed, I would suggest that this organising of the kinetic potential of the spatial situation takes on its full potential (in Merleau-Ponty's terms) when it comprises a kind of bodily-readiness to the virtual involving *all* the senses: in other words, it utilises locational cues that engage multiple senses, and in so doing also involves our imaginative orientation towards the virtual realm of the artwork.

6.

How is this manifest by particular examples of art practice? In the final section I will offer some paradigmatic examples; but first, I believe it is worth briefly digressing in order to discuss the problem of defining the elusive categorisation 'installation art'.

If intermedial art (which by definition occupies a territory *between* media) gives rise to new 'genres' under umbrella terms

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12 See Langer (1953, ch. 5 and ch. 6, pp. 69-85 and pp. 86-103). See, also, Wilder (2020a, ch. 8).

such as 'video art', 'sound art', 'performance art' or 'installation art',[13] then we need to distinguish between the former terms – distinguished by a particular type of content – and the latter term, which describes not so much a *content* as a distinctive format in which individual objects (in the analytical sense of calling forth a reciprocal subject) are unified into a single work. These categories overlap, in that we can coherently talk of 'video installations' or 'sound installations' or 'performance installations' as subgenres of 'video art', 'sound art', and 'performance art', distinct from, say, single-channel video works, monophonic/stereophonic sound works, or performances that happen in conventional theatrical settings (rather than a gallery situation). This has led to a certain confusion, in that the term installation art has been taken to encompass both specific manifestations of these other genres *and* a genre in and of itself, while many artists work across all these genres (such as, pre-eminently, Bruce Nauman). This is further complicated by other overlapping categories such as *expanded cinema*, *land art*, *environments*, *happenings* or *expanded painting*.

In trying to define the latter's multiple manifestations one might benefit, as Anne Ring Petersen suggests, from Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance, which he famously applies to the problem of categorising various kinds of games (Petersen, 2015, pp.

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13 See, for instance, Juliane Rebentisch (2012). Other terms such as 'haptic art' or 'olfactory art' have not really taken off to the same degree.

35-6).[14] Such an approach conceives of resemblances not as unchanging and fixed, but as relational and shifting, with malleable boundaries between categories that are subject to challenge. This creates 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (Wittgenstein, [1953] 2001, p. 27).

However, as both Wittgenstein and Petersen suggest, at least some resemblances might be conceived of as exemplary or paradigmatic. Petersen usefully identifies three recurrent tendencies that have dominated discourse about installation art: (i) the phenomenological approach, with its broad emphasis on spatial and temporal experience; (ii) the contextual approach, which identifies connections with external circumstances, both institutional and historical, social, cultural, economic, political and technological; (iii) the performative approach, which emphasises the experience of the work as constitutive of a situation and process (2015, pp. 75-89).[15] These are not, however, mutually exclusive, and the most interesting installations might be said to address all three discourses.

Might we likewise conceive 'situated' works perceived through different non-sighted modes of beholding (such as sound, smell or

14 See Wittgenstein ([1953] 2001). Petersen, however, compromises her position by then blurring the distinction between an *art form*, *medium*, or *genre*.

15 These tendencies, reflected in particular works of installation art, have much in common with Claire Bishop's historical genealogies of installation art, which she divides into: (i) the dream scene ('organised around a model of the subject as psychological, or more accurately, psychoanalytical'); (ii) a heightened perception ('a phenomenological model of the viewing subject'); mimetic engulfment (encompassing 'different returns to late Freud and his idea of libidinal withdrawal and subjective disintegration'); (iv) an activated spectatorship (with a poststructuralist informed critique of 'the activated viewer of installation art as a political subject') (2005, p. 10).

touch) as constituting an overlapping and criss-crossing set of resemblances within the wider category (or genre, if we want to use that term) of installation art?[16] And might this also acknowledge differences in experiences (*which in itself might be thought of as constituting a case of overlapping resemblances*) of differently abled beholders? This shifts the emphasis on 'resemblance' from a likeness in appearance to the sharing of certain characteristics or properties beyond the mere visual. In Wittgenstein's terms, this might be thought of as a shift from considering the enduring physical properties of games to characteristics of the rules of engagement and the consequent experiences intrinsic to the *playing* of different games. This, to use the language of Wittgenstein, is a drawing of boundaries for a 'special purpose'.

This shift of emphasis is not, therefore, to submit to a subjectivism where the experience is removed from the constraints of the work (which would posit the subject's aesthetic experience *as its own object*), but rather to acknowledge that the art 'object' (for want of a better word) is aesthetic not by virtue of qualities that *precede* the experience, but in its enactment.[17] This is not an escape from the particularities of the work and its context, but rather reflects upon the

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16 This usefully conceives of what Krauss terms artistic 'invention' (countering the so-called post-medium condition of contemporary art) not in terms of artists *inventing their own new medium*, but (as Dairmuid Costello has suggested) in terms of novel juxtapositions of existing media (often using extra-aesthetic technologies, or technical supports, co-opted by artists) (Costello 2012).

17 Again, my position here echoes Rebentisch's defence of the philosophical turn to aesthetic experience from the charge of subjectivism (2012, p. 10, pp. 130-131).

experience occasioned by the work (and its instructions) in a specific way, such that the beholders role is genuinely performative. I conclude with a series of key examples, demonstrating the importance (if not centrality) of senses other than sight. To quote Wittgenstein:

> Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining – in default of a better. For any general definition may be misunderstood too. The point is that *this* is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word "game")' ([1953] 2001, p. 29^e).

7.

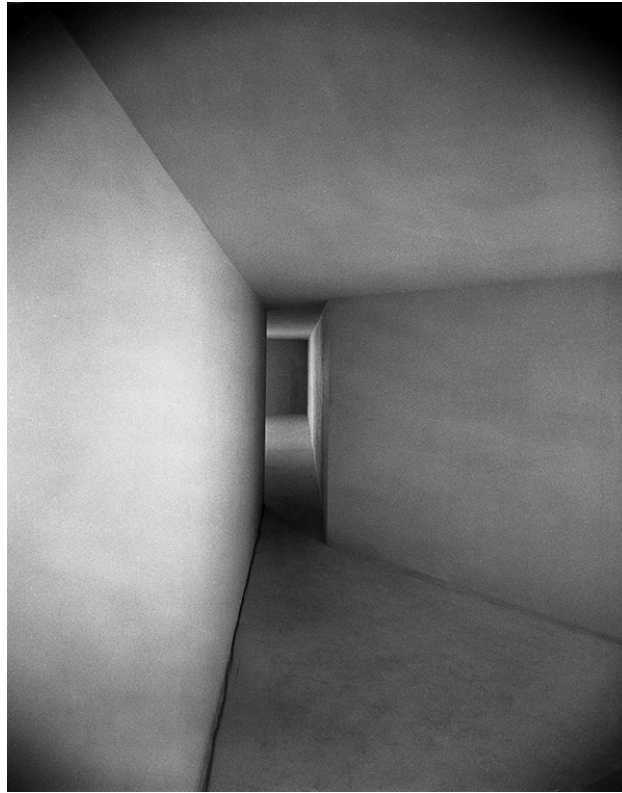**Figure 1.** Michael Asher, installation at Pomona College (1970)

Figure 2. Michael Asher, installation at Pomona College (1970)

Asher's site-specific 1970 installation was originally conceived as an amplification of his earlier air flow works (Asher, 1983, p. 38), which had sought to deal with 'air as an elementary material of unlimited presence and availability, as opposed to visually determined elements' (p. 8); but at Pomona he eschewed mechanical devices in favour of natural ventilation by opening up the lobby to the gallery by removing the doors, such the work's two interlinked triangular spaces could be entered at any time of the day or night. This had certain

consequences, abstracting the surrounding ambience such that 'exterior light, sound, and air became a permanent part of the exhibition' (p. 34). Of particular concern here, the sound of people moving through the installation became key, such that 'exterior and interior sounds were collected and amplified in the smaller triangular space and transmitted through the corridor' into the larger, and darker, triangular space (which had no lighting other than that which passed through the interconnecting space). The installation offered an experience that while visual, would amplify the sounds of someone moving within the space, especially using a white mobility cane, providing audible clues as to the work's formal configuration. The work thus heightened perception, visually, acoustically, and haptically. Nonetheless, as with Asher's wider work, this intersects with a critique of the political and economic role of the exhibition, and an expectation as to the beholder's familiarity with such an institutional context (thus allying sensory immediacy to an institutional critique).
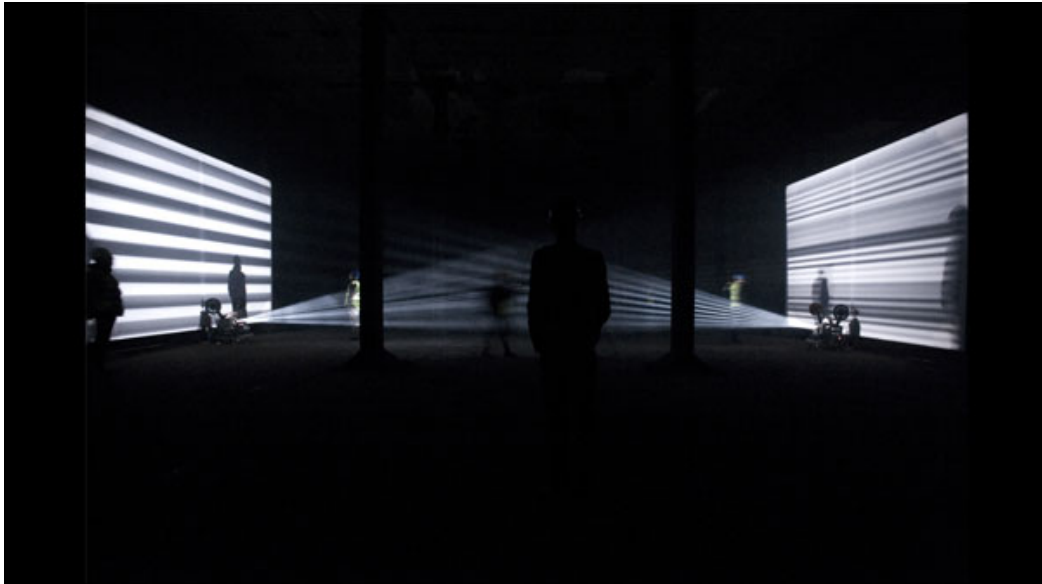
Figure 3. Lis Rhodes, *Light Music* (1975), as installed at The Tanks, Tate
Modern, London, in 2012

Figure 4. Lis Rhodes, *Light Music* (1975), as installed at The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, in 2012

Rhodes's *Light Music* is a two-screen 16mm black and white film installation, conceived within the remit of what if often referred to as expanded cinema. First installed at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in the Festival of Independent Video (1975), it was re-installed at the Tanks at Tate Modern in 2012. The two screens face each other at opposite ends of the haze filled room, such that the two beams traverse each other, and the apparatus of projection are incorporated into the work. The work addresses the relation of sound and image in a novel way by printing the abstract, visual pattern of the films (a

series of different horizontal and vertical black and white stripes made without a camera) over the audial tracks, thus generating a synchronised sound and visual experience through optical means. The image thus constitutes a visual score of what one is simultaneously hearing, such the experience is akin to an aural equivalent to the flickering patters on the two screens. These patterns are also apparent in the beams themselves, such that one can enter into the cones of striated light. The spatial arrangement creates a dynamic, immersive environment that invites the participation of the beholder, who disrupts the beams as she passes through the space. This is an experience that engages beholders with even minimal residual vision, while the audio tracks (and the not inconsiderable sounds of the projectors themselves) create dynamic interference patterns as one moves through the space.

Figure 5. Wolfgang Laib, *The Passageway* (1988), MoMA, New York

Since 1988, when he built the demountable *The Passageway* at MoMA, Laib has been creating a series of aromatic wax rooms lined with golden beeswax, the most ambitious example being the 40 metre long underground passage entitled *From the Known to the Unknown – To Where is Your Oracle Leading You* (2014), installed at

La Ribaute, Barjac, France (fig. 6), in what was the former studio of Anselm Kiefer. The earlier works were made from slabs, whereas the later works, such as the one at La Ribaute, involved applying the wax directly to the supporting walls in one, irremovable piece. Beeswax is a natural material secreted from the abdominal glands of honey bees, and which is used to form cells for honey storage or larval and pupal protection. It has long association with candle-making, for sealing/casting, but also in burial rituals; it is thus rich in associations, which Laib exploits while refusing to close down the work's meaning. Beeswax is one of a limited number of intrinsic materials found in nature that Laib employs extensively in his work, a list which also includes pollen, stone, rice and milk. These enclosed, confined spaces (lit only by bare lightbulbs), intensify the sense of smell, yet they are not so much claustrophobic as meditative, the smell unlocking memories to transport us to someplace 'elsewhere'. The inspiration was Laib's own extraordinary experience of making his smaller beeswax works, which involved having his head inside the work. The translucent walls reflect the light in such a way as to seemingly emit a soft glow. Here, the beholder is given a very concentrated experience: a heightened perception rich in historical associations. And not surprisingly, Laib is critical of categorising himself as a 'visual' artist, stating that if it was only the visual experience that mattered he simply wouldn't be an artist.

Figure 6. Wolfgang Laib, *From the Known to the Unknown – To Where is Your Oracle Leading You* (2014), installed at La Ribaute, Barjac, France

Figure 7. Mona Hatoum, *The Light at the End* (1989), Showroom Gallery, London

Originally installed in a triangular-shaped space at the rear of the Showroom Gallery in London, the Palestinian artist's work has been re-staged at various venues. The work is constructed out of iron, steel, brass, glass, aluminium and electrical elements. The tunnel-like space is darkened, other than a single light which reveals the blood-red colour of the painted bricks, and the sculptural installation itself, which emits a soft and enticing glow. But the work's most memorable aspect is the palpable change in temperature as one

walks towards the glowing lines of light. Lizzie Wright describes the work thus: "As progress into the tunnel is made, the temperature rises until the heat becomes oppressive: it becomes clear that the grill glows with a dangerous heat that would burn the skin if touched." The title of this work suggests optimism – a pathway through the tunnel of despair – yet the installation cruelly shuts of this possibility and instead leads the viewer into a confined and oppressive space. Hatoum has described how the work concerns "the idea of imprisonment, of torture, but it is also a seductive image. Once people have adjusted to the dark and watched the bars glow … then they begin to see them as beautiful bands of light. I was interested to explore this feeling of being attracted and repulsed" (Wright, 1990). Here, the experience is problematised to the extent of constituting a very real threat of harm, while keeping the beholder distanced by the wall of heat emanating from the electrical elements.

Figure 8. Ernesto Neto, *Navedenga* (1998), MoMA, New York

The Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto makes immersive sensorial environments, that while highly visually evocative (with their anthropomorphic rounded appendages and orifices) foreground the tactile and olfactory senses. Indebted to the participatory work of Neo-Concrete artists such as Lygia Clark, his biomorphic forms are constructed out of stretchable materials such as translucent polyamide fabrics, often weighed down by sand (revealing the forces of gravity). The resulting organic forms are in stark contrast to the orthogonal geometry of the host space. Here, the cuboid tensile form

is stretched in each corner at the top by extended, pendulous forms, filled with sand, and at the bottom by sand-filled cloven 'feet'. Neto's characteristic suspended forms often include aromatic materials, though in the case of *Navedenga* it is the fabric that is impregnated with the smell of cloves. This experience is much stronger when the beholder enters into the tent-like structure through a narrow, slit opening in one corner, and is forced to tentatively step onto the flexible fabric in order to stumble through the inherently unstable space. When two people occupy the space together, this intensifies the experience, one person's movement destabilising the other; one is forced to cooperate in order to effectively move, as one negotiates the central hanging form and the soft, Styrofoam-filled appendage which partially fill the space. As the beholder manipulates the enclosing fabric, she also experiences the sound-deadening effect of the fabric enclosure, a strangely comforting experience rich with childhood associations and evocations of the body, while also steeped in a tradition of institutional critique.

Figure 9. Susan Philipsz, *War Damaged Musical Instruments* (2015), Tate Britain, London

Philipsz's *War Damaged Musical Instruments* was installed in the

Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain in London. The work comprised fourteen audio recordings of British and German brass and wind instruments damaged during conflicts stretching over some 200 years, and left gathering dust in various museum storage rooms. The earliest instrument was a Bugle salvaged from the Battle of Waterloo, found beside the body of a 14-tear-old drummer boy; the latest were four German instruments (an alto saxophone, a keyed bugle, and two transverse flutes) salvaged from the Alte Münz bunker in Berlin, in 1945. Each recording, where the instrument had to be coaxed back into some sort of life (however discordant and tentative) was played through a separate speaker, located throughout the entire length of the space. In her essay 'Beyond Borders', Philipsz notes that "while making the recordings we were aware that we were probably the first people to hear these instruments since they were damaged" (2019, p. 286). The instruments were, literally, reanimated through the player's breath. Philipsz writes:

> The notes I recorded were based upon the four tones that make up the military bugle call "The Last Post", a signal to soldiers in the theatre of war that fighting was done, and to follow the sound of the call to find safety and rest. The tune was deconstructed and fragmented to such an extent that it was practically unrecognisable. In the space the long tones and silences allowed each tone to sustain before the others sounded. That audible spacing helped reinforce a feeling of

length within the long physical space. I used sound to define distance and used the volume of the space to add volume to the work (pp. 286-288).

As Philipsz notes elsewhere in her essay, the acoustics of museum spaces are seldom given consideration; but here, in the reverberant spaces of the Duveen Galleries, they become a means of navigating through both a present reality and the poignant echoes of the past. As Adrian Searle wrote in his *Guardian* review:

> For all its mournful aspects, the music is as uplifting as it is painful; close then distant, clear then broken, a cry then a whisper. The sound is wonderful. The shrapnel damage and bullet-holes, mutilated bells and mangled tubing add their own flavour. The players have to work around the instruments' injuries. Often they have to substitute one note for another. Some instruments are irrevocably out of tune. Brass and woodwind, trumpets and saxes are the most bodily of instruments; what we hear are damaged, tremulous bodies, gasps and tremors. Sometimes the voice collapses altogether (Searle 2015).

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