

A Theory on the Ontology of Site-Reliant Immersive Environments

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The research sets an ontological and topological perspective regarding the formation and operation of immersive experiences and sees the latter as more-than-visual localised events that become rather than mere phenomena of appearance. It marks a shared vocabulary between art and architecture regarding the creation of space and frames a new art practice fundamentally architecturalised. This larval practice is ontologically constituted by immersive experiences, which occur as temporal events within actual architectural settings; places. The investigation expands the concept of immersion beyond the digitally constructed reality and sees the virtual as a complementary element of the actual for the formation of the real. The research attempts to establish a modality of an immersive spatial experience that is sensory, multiple as well as intimate, in topological and empirical terms with particular reference to the philosophy of the event and the complex spatial theories of Gilles Deleuze. In practice paper examines the poetics of specific artistic environments as immersive events that play the role of reflective case studies and seeks to establish that spatial art creation exists embedded and fed by the lived every day encounters, disrupting our actions generated by habit.

Keywords: Space, Event, Sensory, Immersion, Experience, Habit

Introduction

Like philosopher Peter Osborne, if we agree that sculpture and installation art are two terms that have become redundant and limited to their curatorial expansions in terms of the making of art spaces, we should not ignore the prominent ‘architecturalization’ of contemporary art, vis-à-vis an era when architecture is

a term without which contemporary could not continue to exist (Osborne 2013, 141).

This reveals another important aspect for the practice of contemporary art, which is its spatial institutionalization. As art practices are becoming more and more preoccupied with the making of social facts rather than art spaces (Osborne 2013, 141), it is interesting to explore the ontological characteristics of such situations and their contribution to the discourse of contemporary art criticism. In this context, this paper explores the poetics of an art practice that is spatial and critical and the conditions under which the experience of such an art practice goes beyond the aesthetic, and does not remain autonomous from the everyday lived world. It summarizes the theoretical outcomes of a recently completed doctoral thesis; an interdisciplinary research project sponsored by the University for the Creative Arts at Canterbury, Kent UK. This project attempted to make a contribution to the current philosophical discourse of specific contemporary art practices that reflect on the ontological elements of architecture. It also sought to contribute to the contemporary art criticism by framing and redefining critical terms looking at the latter as constitutive concepts of a vocabulary that defines an emerging area of creative spatial practices.

The paper looks at art experience as a temporal and a spatial becoming that is intimate and multiple. It focuses on environments that are produced by the enfolding of two fields: art as experience and architecture as site. These environments will be defined as immersive in the context of this paper, with immersion becoming a constructive term for the experience of space. The aim of this paper is to potentially shift the agenda from thinking art and architecture as distinct disciplines and to map the parameters and theoretical vocabulary of a hybrid artistic practice. The establishment of a vocabulary as such will lead to a synthesis of practice and theory for the production of spaces that is neither purely architectural nor solely artistic. The sensorial

input is the primary ontological element of an experience of such spaces and is defined in terms of the eventuality rather than the phenomenal exploring, with senses seen as faculties of perception that create intimate responses to the production of an affective atmosphere. The paper critically revisits phenomenological theories and attempts to transcend those by introducing a new epi-phenomenological perspective.

Following the Kantian thinking, where subject and space become an inseparable pair, the interest is put towards the operational relationship of this system as substance-subject set and less on the embodied experience of a subject that beholds in a noetic distance from what encounters. Enfolding the ontology of immersive space, within this context, can lead to a shift from the spatial ideology that sees art spaces and architectural spaces as ontologically distinct. It introduces a new set of aesthetics beyond the primacy of the body and more specifically what the eye can see, with a concentration on a brain that is the flesh of the mind and is temporally spacing (Eliasson, 2012). A new vocabulary is introduced to index this, and includes three key terms: *chorotopical*, *veoma*, and *genomenon*.

Literature Review

Chorotopical

Proposing that the ontological relationship of art and architecture as spatial practices is heading towards the formation of a new practice, we define the latter as *chorotopical art* [from the Greek terms *choros* (χώρος) for space and *topos* (τόπος) for locus]. The outcome of this process is ambient, non-inhabited space conceived to create an event of immersion. Contemporary chorotopical art exists at the point of redefining site and site-specificity. Based on a more-than-phenomenological and empirical understanding of spatial lived experience, site operates as architectural envelope of own energy and dynamic, and is approached as *aylos topos* (άυλος τόπος = immaterial locus). *Aylos topos* is a term chosen to describe the set of geometrical, cultural and social parameters and the dynamic synergy of those in the context of space creation. It moreover refers to the energy related attributes that a specific place holds when becoming a site for artistic intervention. The above set frames a locus of a specific sense and character that creates an almost tactile atmosphere. As a result of place making within this envelope of *aylos topos*, this enfolding, the experiencing subject becomes one with the surroundings during the event of an immersive experience.

Peter Osborne, who looks at the indeterminacy of the critical terminology that surrounds contemporary site-related artistic practice, questions Robert Smithson's dialectic of site and non-site along with a negated site-specificity. Osborne who is the author of the book *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013) talks about a critical form of genealogies for the so-called and taken for granted installation art. Interestingly he mentions the potential of a post-conceptual ontology of art practice, which is site-reliant but the definition of site is neither institutional nor archaeological, but is rather constructive. The material manifestation of a site-reliant art practice in this instance does not demand an institutionally confirmed space (gallery) but a site that will form part of the ontological construct of an artwork that is not just aesthetically present. The insight that Osborne brings to the re-definition of installation art as an -ontologically spatial- art practice is very much referential and contributes to the axiomatic for the definition of immersive lived experience. The latter is formulated to take place and occur –rather than aesthetically appear– in sites that are places, sometimes intriguingly transformed by name and only into galleries to appropriately facilitate the artwork's curatorial logistics.

In this instance the sites are not spaces that have been physically recalibrated to simulate the institutional presence of a gallery and very rarely present the commoditized white walls, rows of spotlights and grey industrial floor repainted every season. Born out of the hand and brain of the architect or master mason to originally become churches, catacombs, fortresses or towers,

schools or factories, they carry their timeline with them on their rusty beams, nail holes or slippery marble floor tiles. Their architectural anatomy is their birthmark and the most recent operation forms their inner skin. Some listed and preserved with care whilst others abandoned and left to grow old, these sites are timeless and await intervention to become temporally defined. A site-reliant practice that inserts a different spatial logic is not necessarily negating their perceptual psychology, but on the contrary may establish another critical dimension in their situational inhabitancies.

Veoma

The theory of event establishes a topological ecology for the production of chorotopical art practice. The experience of such as a localized event of immersion is defined as *veoma* (βίωμα) having a root from the Greek verb *veono* (βιώνω), to experience through living. *Veoma* refers to a situation of spatial –more lived and less embodied– experience of mental and corporeal engulfment. Architecture in the context of *veoma* would refer to the site as a spatial framework that holds the energy for the *veoma* to occur. The latter then becomes a memorable lived immersive experience that is embedded yet interrupts the actual world and is attached to specific anthropological places (Auge 2009) received as sensation. As Nicholas De Oliveira explains it:

‘the sensation itself... [has] replaced the traditional art object’ (De Oliveira 2003, 49)

In this state of immersion, the subject remains in contact with the physicality of the site at the same time collapsing the reliance to the given, the expected, and the Cartesian. However, even when the senses function in totality, *veoma* continues to be an experience that holds intimacy and therefore subjectivity. Totalization may concern the extent and intensity to which the senses are activated producing affects and not so much the nature of the experience, which is defined by multiplicity and involves deep mental engagement. As such, it relates to attributes associated with the individual, such as memory and mood and is therefore open to subjectivity and multiple readings. Should space be the substance, which the subject is immersed within, this substance deforms and enfolds along with the subject as the *veoma* occurs.

Immersion may be described as a temporal condition of deep mental involvement. The mental aspect of the production of immersion and how this process can be translated into *veoma* –lived experience– is the main focal point of the theorization of chorotopical art and site-reliant immersive experiences and the concentration is placed on theorizing the experiencing subject as a mind temporally spacing (Eliasson 2012). Anthony Vidler writes:

[it is] as if the subject itself were at one with the surfaces of its enclosure...enveloped and dispersed at one and the same time, its own surfaces inner and outer, if any “outer” or “inner” may any longer be distinguished (Vidler 2000, 230).

It is evident that Vidler refers primarily to a mental process. Metaphorically, one can describe *veoma* as a physio-psychological passage; a transitional space in which one encounters moments of disruption to the habitual that gradually lead to an immersive state. The complexity of the *veoma* being spatio-temporal and intimately physio-psychological relates to the primary attribute of a folding described by French poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze as openness to multiple possibilities. Deleuze’s spatial theory of the lived world being fabricated by multiple ‘enfoldings’ (Deleuze 1993) creates a potential opposition to the phenomenological assumption of an absolute embodied engagement within a world that is one and only. This multiplicity of the fabric of space reigns during immersive *veoma* as the experiencing subject becomes enfolded between states of spatial awareness and loss of a perceivable measure to the given. The ‘warping’ (Vidler 2000, 9) of the texture of the perceived world is the key temporal operation that takes place during immersion and the experience of chorotopical art.

This new geography is filling in the blind spot created by the hegemony of vision without denying the primacy of it. Ironically, the blind spot in the seeing-apprehending mechanism of the cerebral cortex-eyes complex is called scotoma. Scotoma derives from Ancient Greek *scotos* (*σκότος*) for darkness and describes the natural area of no visual acuity in the visual field, which is not dark in reality but rather missing visual input (data). The existence of scotoma implies that somatically as well as philosophically there is a visual inconsistency that is naturally filled in intellectually when the brain contextualizes what we see. This paper aims to change the emphasis towards a contextualization of theorizing spaces that are less absolute (phenomenological) or abstract (post-phenomenological) and more fluid (epi-phenomenological) (Psarologaki 2014, 152-162).

Genomenon

Deleuze's theory of the 'event' and 'becoming' (1993) and Badiou's topological ecology of 'localized events' (2005) support the theorization of immersive experiences as temporal and situational occurrences that are received sensorily and produce affects during *veomata*. As such, if we consider the artistic experience a more profound and personal event that goes beyond the appearance of things and towards the becoming of temporal input-output events, perhaps we can talk about an epiphenomenological or *genomenological* approach. The latter would refer to concentrating on the outcome occurring by multiplying action in opposition to a phenomenon of appearance. Deriving from the verb *gignomai* (*γίγνομαι*, *gi.gno.me*, to become), *genomena* would constitute the events that occur or become in relation to their ontological existence. In *Science, Religion and Society* (2007) we read:

The Greeks spoke of three levels of reality: *onta* (things that are what they are), *phainomena* (things that appear to be what they may or may not be), and *genomena* (things that have happened). We derive the terms ontology and phenomenology from the first two expressions; *genomenology* would be a natural derivative from the third. (Eisen & Laderman 2007, 255)

The experience of an event that becomes or has become –a *genomenon*– is a subjectivated temporality in praise of intimacy and multiplicity. The singularity of the phenomenological world concerned with the embodied experience of a subject that perceives the appearance (of things) cannot afford the ontological complexity of site-reliant immersion. In the latter the subject goes through a series of stages arising during experience as a becoming, a lived perception, a virtual-actual (Massumi 1992, 62) temporality. During situations of non-passive immersion, subject and space become a meta-stable virtuality, a 'supermolecule' creating states (moments) and 'each singular state [is] a threshold state composed of a set of potential responses' (Massumi 1992, 69).

In the context of immersive experiences, the subject-space is a system that correlates with other systems and responds affectively to receptive atmospheres. The uncertainty of the Cartesian position of the atmosphere is one of the key elements that relate the atmospheric to the immersive. An uncertainty of this kind belongs to the non-absolute, the fluid and multiple. Ronald Bogue refers to the Deleuzian Nietzsche and writes:

'in our world of becoming, of constant flux and change ... no entities preserve a stable identity' (Bogue 1989, 20).

For Germont Böhme on the other hand, the atmosphere transcends the boundaries of a concept, as it exists between objects and subjects (Böhme 1993). I propose that there is no actual or conceptualized distance between the experiencing mind and the perceived surroundings. Through the membrane of the atmosphere subject and world enfold producing space. Atmospheres appear to be layered, draped, and enfolded. They constitute the fabric of space

between the subject and the material world as if this fabric is formulated by the enactment of feelings in response to the stimuli received. These are understood as affects. Chorotopical art facilitates the sensory challenge and the poetic enactment of an affective atmosphere. Affects are not singular expressions of emotion; on the contrary, in combination with percepts, they create a relay of intimacy between subject and environment that become enfolded. This new spatial logic that transcends the phenomenological is based on concentrating on what occurs rather than what appears: the situational events that take place and in a state of becoming have active presence instead of solely appearing.

Practice as Reflective Case Study

Estrangement (2013)

‘Space is an integral constituent of the self’ according to Richard Etlin (1998) who is rendering the parameters of the spatial self into a triplet: ‘personal space’, ‘lived space’ and ‘existential space’. In response, my project *Estrangement* (2013) attempted to establish an immediate relationship between subject and surroundings. In contrast with the everyday sensuous activity, experiencing *Estrangement* involved sensory data that is not accurate and limited only to peripheral vision or due to moving too fast during spinning in an actual site; the main pedestrian subway in Dover town in Kent, UK. The affect produced is not singular, nor is the somatosensory activity that takes place: losing awareness of location in the immediate world as well as the feeling of being trapped in a spatial continuum with no escape.

Paul Rodaway in his book *Sensuous Geographies* (1994) unfolds the spatiotemporal character of a sensuous experience where each sense has a complex profile that relates to space-time, for instance the tactile experience as a sense of pressure, temperature or balance and movement. He adds to the importance of the ability to move (locomotion) as part of the inspection of space noting that because

we do not just sense passively but actively, sensuous experience is exploratory and this exploration marshals all the senses cooperatively (Rodaway 1994, 27-28).

Rodaway identifies two typologies of movement, exploratory and performatory, as associated with the perceived and the behavioral respectively. The most important observation made by Rodaway is the geography of intimacy generated by a subject who is presently taking part in the spatial event. He explains how we first get in contact with an immediate topology of smell and touch which is then extended to a wider one of the environment as allowed by locomotion and supported by memory and expectation (Rodaway 1994, 32). Rodaway’s position of the subject in the center of this topology and with the experience coming ‘firstly within the circumambient space’ relates to the position of a spectator inside a panorama.

It is critical to mention at this point that, as Henri Francis Mallgrave notes, the sensory faculties ‘engage a crossover of sensory inputs and operate independently of any single one’ (Mallgrave 2011, 199). This complex of independently functioning senses becomes evident in situations of sensory deprivation where the affect is shaped by the deprived sense as well as the rest. For instance, kinesthesia in *Estrangement* in crossover with the deprived focused vision creates the feeling of nausea or disorientation. The feeling of not being able to evaluate the world through immediate touch and interpret its meanings via focused vision affects muscle memory and hand-eye coordination, which kinesthesia emphasizes (Mallgrave 2011, 201). Interfering with this crossover makes the surrounding world feel distant and unbound to the immediate proximity of a subject that moves without changing location and sees without looking.

The synthesis of Mallgrave and Rodaway's theories on an intimate geography of sense creates the core idea behind *Estrangement*. Pre-conceptual documentation in-situ produced a continuous spinning video that shows the interior of the underpass rotating horizontally in loop. The video then led to a 3D panoramic view of the site interior space, created by a Google Mobile device, using the built-in Google Panorama application. In-studio testing concluded with the creation of a model that bears the photographic panorama of the interior and acts independently as a rotating device surrounding the spectator on eye-level (figure 1). *Estrangement* synthesized the concepts of panorama and self-rotation also in the creation of a short video with the camera spinning in space to delineate the feeling of estrangement once the habitual –and in this instance– linear movement within a space is disrupted and focus vision is taken over by peripheral vision.



Figure 1 (clockwise): *Estrangement* (2013), site-notational model, time-lapse from video documentation, and panoramic image of site

Source: Psarologaki (2015)

In the panorama of *Estrangement* a technologically mediated sensuous geography (Rodaway 1994, 176) is created to question the intensity of the actual and virtual presence of site, yet this is not pre-conditioned. The senses as exploratory faculties are not exploited to the degree that they become hyper-realized, but they are orchestrated by kinesthesia. Site here is but an immaterial locus intensively present in-situ and off-situ on different calibrations. The subject rotates-the site rotates. The rotation video as well as the model brought to light an element that became critical for the continuum of the project and is directly related to the concept around site as one of the key themes for this investigation. In the attempt to create the feeling of nausea from being trapped in a spinning motion, model and video constructed an off-site virtual space that delineates the site as distorted via photographic or moving image. The movements of the

residents are naturally patterned by habit in the pedestrian subway. Estrangement attempts to break this pattern by interrupting the elements that sustain and reinforce it: the linearity and self-awareness of position within the surrounding environment.

Cryptology (2014)

Cryptology (2014) was the project to manifest the environmental moment of chorotopical art with the sculptural suppressed by the situational. The architectural envelope becomes a critical component of the work from an archaeological and contextual aspect and the affinity to the material sense of site dissolves into a dependence on the physically implied but not fully apprehended via the senses. The physical place as location –The Crypt Gallery of St. Pancras Parish Church– afforded very little expansion as site. With its entrance just a breath away from Euston Road, one of the busiest streets in Central London, the interior of The Crypt escapes from the city rhythms, sounds and imagery. Half of it underground, it maintains a microclimate almost independent from the city climate. The potential monumentality of a site is replaced by the eeriness of the afterlife, the stillness of time, the silence and an unusually enveloping coldness.

There is no longer a necessity for the physical space of the site to play an institutional role for the artwork and its role is no longer that of a host. *Cryptology* did not deduct the placeness from the site. It only exploited its architectural order, character and environmental qualities to mediate sensory intensities. The receptive atmosphere of *Cryptology* was imposing. The intervention focused on the element of air, which mediated the properties of the space including its soundscapes, light, temperature and scent (odour). Air, as the carrier of scents and sound vibrations, intrigued the visitors to explore spaces that were phenomenally empty and affected the apprehension of the geometry of spaces that remained invisible yet perceptible. A set of four fans was installed vertically at the entrance of an open wall chamber facing towards the central passage. The mechanism remained hidden in the darkness only making its presence noticeable by the humming noise of the fans and the intense breeze of their airflow. The stream of air created an invisible yet immediate threshold that interrupted the movements of the visitors. *Cryptology* empirically facilitated a non-Euclidian hyperspace of transformations and fragile topologies. The topology of air drastically affected every component of the intervention.

The bright white beams of light directed from floor to ceiling were given flesh by artificial mist and created temporal gates once dissolving into darkness and reappearing in the mist. The climate of the exterior occasionally penetrated the otherwise solid walls, through small oculi and the heavy entrance gate that remained half-open. The fresh breeze from outside merged the airflow of the fans installation and moved the mist in unpredictable directions. Occasionally the entrance was covered by thin mist revealing the atmosphere of the interior to the passers-by. A part of *Cryptology* was primarily visual (figure 2). The experience however of this visual effect was fundamentally spatial. The light intervention not only responded to the physicality of the site, but also recalibrated its architectural order and rhythm. It welcomed the visitors in the main passage, indicating three more corridors to explore. When in between the light gates, the visitors had no indication of spatial boundaries other than the light beams that enveloped them in a cloud of thick fog.

The space absorbed and guided, inviting the visitors to touch the intangible and feel the essence of light on their fingertips. The more one stayed in space, the more the space revealed, the passages appeared brighter and the steps became more confident. The light gates, visible from every corridor in the Crypt, became a reminder for the location of the main passage coordinating the visitors' movements. Interestingly the light installation did not dominate the intervention. Once the visitors' eyes became accustomed to the light conditions of the interior, the grandiosity of the immaterial light beams faded to the point that the soundscape, the smell-scape and the temperature mediation were equally imposing.



Figure 2: Liana Psarologaki, Cryptopology (2014) installation view (light)

Source: Psarologaki, 2015

In Cryptopology an enclosure of heat embraced the sensitiveness of the thermoceptive system of the visitors, creating an interior that is significantly warmer –and dryer- than the rest of the Crypt. The visitors bathed in the warmth of a ceiling heater hanging in the middle of a chamber and the more time they spent in, the more they felt the coldness and condensation of the rest of the Crypt as they exited the room. The walls of the room were the physical barriers of the warmth for the topology of temperature. The contrast between temperature conditions (threshold) was clearly defined. One step outside of the room was adequate for a feeling of cold and condensation to penetrate the skin, although not as solidly tactile. It is interesting that the above thermal intervention within an interior that is already non-heated and neighboring with soil through stonewalls is received not only via the skin but also through inhaling and exhaling. An environment that makes the mouth cavity dry and is so unreasonably humid that breathing requires effort is perceived as uncomfortable. Scientifically the level of comfort may have been standardized but the comfort affect is not necessarily bound to one environmental parameter and sometimes associated with the feeling of familiarity or the domestic.

Different from all realities, but still embedded in the actuality of the lived world, the reality of chorotopical art and Cryptopology is another reality: an actual-virtual reality experienced in a more-than-aesthetic way. It intensifies the act of gathering the world around oneself and the projection of oneself into space during a lived experience. Can immersion, even when site-reliant, be hyper-sensuous? The question remains. The sensuous geography of veomatic immersion is not hyper-real or an excess of reality (Rodaway 1994, 177) but only synthesized and mediated to temporally evoke receptive atmospheres.

Conclusion

The taxonomy of the experience during a veoma becomes more complex as the subject moves from a non-singular programming of a topological order in space to a geography created on the basis of a disruption to order, a de-familiarization and distraction from the habitual. Immersive experience becomes a temporal issue to establish this other kind of geography that moves away from the singularity of the body in favor of the multiplicity of the mind, which is yet to be extensively described. The physical or somatic is not negated but rather recalibrated through the prism of the intellectual. Synergies of different light, scent, sound, and temperature conditions established spatial thresholds that divided, guided, oriented, and surprised the visitors.

It is clear that there can be no set pattern or taxonomy of a feeling that relates to personal situations and a sensation that is not merely corporeal but above all mental, behavioral and social. The sensing of the atmosphere is key for perceiving a space that we mark as comfortable or pleasant. Our experience in space is subject to our expectations and presuppositions and immersion occurs by our stepping into an atmosphere that is captivating and unexpected. The limits and limitations of chorotopical art and site-reliant immersion reflect directly on the nature of the creation in practice. Although immersion is an event fundamentally mental, it requires the physical presence of the subject in space (off-site or on-site), not only because it is a temporal and situational event but also because it is a lived occurrence. Site-reliant immersive environments are challenging in terms of documentation. They only take place within a specific timeframe as first-hand lived experiences (veomata) and become archived only in terms of their audio-visual aspect.

To conclude, this paper theoretically mapped the poetics of immersion events that are fundamentally site-reliant and synthesized in the context of a larval artistic practice, which is ontologically architecturalized. It did so from a philosophical standpoint, examining Deleuze's spatial theories, specifically revisiting the concept of 'event' (Badiou, 2005). The research introduced an epi-phenomenological theory based on the concept of genomonon (Psarologaki, 2014) that frames the lived memorable experience of immersive events, defined as veomata. These were framed as artistically orchestrated experiences, mapped around specific sites, which occur as temporally embedded in our everyday social constructs, creating an ephemeral gateway disrupting our habits of the everyday world.

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