

Interstices Under Construction (Auckland, 12–14 Jul 18)

University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, Jul 12–14, 2018

Deadline: Feb 28, 2018

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PRESENCE

Buildings, cities, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, and music, even, are already physically present and persisting in a present. Why theorise their presence, and what relevance could such a notion have for arts rooted in space?

The contemporary emphasis on the physical, material, performative and atmospheric – rather than on meaning – is a reaction against the overly discursive and semiotic strains of '80s post-modernism, when the identification and attribution of meaning became a core practice of architectural thought. Afterwards, materiality and its effects assumed what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht terms a “non-hermeneutic” presence (2004: 1-20), coinciding with the much vaunted ‘post-theory’ in architecture and its rejection of criticality. Today, we no longer believe that theory has been surpassed, nor, by the same token, that a complex of meanings can be kept separate from its mediality, that is, from material. Neither is pure manipulation of data, without aesthetic and bodily intention, able to produce architecture. The material and the immaterial are not easily divided.

While presence concerns communication, it concerns space even more—through its occupation (or dis-occupation) and activation. Gumbrecht reminds us that, what is ‘present’ to us (in the sense of the Latin *prae-esse*), is “in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies” (17). He reminds us also of George Steiner’s remarks that the arts, “wonderfully rooted in substance, in the human body, in stone, in pigment, in the twanging of gut or the weight of wind on reeds”, begin, but do not end, in immanence. The task of the aesthetic is to “quicken into presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and ‘the other’” (Steiner, 1989: 227).

Absence of presence is not the same as presence of absence, in which traces, silences or voids powerfully embody (and make present) something not present. For example, the voids of Berlin: Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman; or the voids of Eduardo Chillida, Jorge Oteiza and Tadao Ando; the silence of John Cage and the *mā* of Toru Takemitsu—they all involve experience and affect. By contrast, representation seems to be involved with the “age of the sign” and “conceptual deduction” (Gumbrecht, 2004: 57). However, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out in France, representation “is as old as the West”, and maybe there is “no humanity (and, perhaps, no animality) that does not include representation” (1993: 1). Nancy’s conception of presence does not refer to a permanent state, but to nascence: “Presence itself is birth, the coming that effaces itself and brings itself

back” (5). Gumbrecht relates this wavering to the double movement of withdrawal and unconcealment in Martin Heidegger, particularly in relation to his account of a Greek temple in terms of presence via the notions of “earth” and “world”. Here, “the sheer presence of the temple triggers the unconcealment of a number of things—in their thingness—that surround the temple” (Gumbrecht, 2004: 73). For Nancy the very act and pleasure of drawing, insofar as it is “the opening of form” (2013: 1), is also a nascence. What would it mean for a drawing, building, artwork or poem to perform or keep alive the performance of its birth? Perhaps the malleability of Alvaro Siza’s works (Molteni 2003) or Lemi Ponifasio’s irruptive choreography (Ponifasio, 2009) provide some hints to the potential of works’ in *statu nascendi*.

In addition, a human tendency to endow buildings and artworks with life includes practices involving the holy and tapu, such as sacrifice, rites of foundation and the address to a living ancestor (in whare and fale, for example). These frame, stage and enact the effect of “living presence” – exceeding an aesthetic stance of disinterested contemplation of art’s formal qualities (Eck, 2015: 172). “Studying what makes viewers deny the representational character of art”, argues van Eck, “will help understanding why art is such a universal feature of human life” (209). After all, “aesthetic experience” provides feelings of intensity unknown in specific everyday worlds; there is no aesthetic experience without presence effects emerging seemingly out of nowhere.

In all fields of art practice, what might be the status of presence in Virtual Reality and digital representation obsessed with verisimilitude? How can even purposeful design, particularly in an era of parametricism, retain an element of the *statu nascendi*, as unprogrammed (or even unprogrammable) emergence? The “joy of averring oneself to be continually in the state of being born—a rejoicing of birth, a birth of rejoicing” (Nancy, 1993: back cover) requires an acceptance, even embrace, of the fact that existence “comes nude into the world”.

We invite you to submit an abstract for the forthcoming Interstices ‘Under Construction Symposium’, inspired by the spark of presence and its spatial effects. Following the symposium, papers will be sought for Interstices issue. 20 on this same theme. For publishing options and the required formatting, please refer to the Guidelines for Submissions on the Interstices website.

The symposium will be run in conjunction with a colloquium led by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Harold Marshall and other principal speakers to be announced.

Abstracts of 300 words may be forwarded to Sue Hedges up to 28 February 2018: susan.hedges@aut.ac.nz

Dates: Keynote lecture on the evening of Thursday 12 July 2018 followed by full days on 13 and 14 July

Venue: University of Auckland, Symonds Street, Auckland, in collaboration with Auckland University of Technology

Conference organisers:

Ross Jenner, Andrew Barrie, Julia Gatley, University of Auckland
Andrew Douglas, Sue Hedges, Auckland University of Technology

References

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Nancy, J. L. (1993). *The birth to presence* (B. Holmes Et Al. Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Nancy, J. L. (2013). *The pleasure in drawing* (P. Armstrong, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Ponifasio, L. (2009) *Tempest : Without a body [performance]* Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfLqv85uCww&feature=player_embedded

Molteni, E. (2008). "Comme un sculpteur, on doit maintenir l'argile humide". *Casabella*, 763, 11.

Steiner, G. (1989). *Real presences: Is there anything in what we say?*. London, UK: Faber.

Reference:

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