

Between the Pyramid and the Labyrinth: Exploring the ‘Third Condition’¹

Exhibits offer designers opportunities to speculate about design in relationship to the work to be displayed and the contemporary trends in practice. Periodically society as a whole undergoes shifts of such magnitudes that require designers to adjust scales of thought to re-engage established core and foundational questions.

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We are, at present, under the influence of significant changes in the contemporary media landscape that ask, among other things, that we envision anew what museum spaces and, even more so, what museum experiences can be. We are faced with what Neil Leach describes as a state of “obesity” produced by the saturation of the aesthetic. This “absorption of everything into the realm of art, this swelling and distension of the category,” together with the overall increase in the production of content and the exponential ease of access to knowledge, are some of the factors resulting from the current shift, factors that challenge conventional practices.²

Museum experiences have been traditionally determined by the triad *content-space-visitor*, where spaces, many preexisting and repurposed, house the content for the visitor to access, and be affected by it. This long-established educational role of museums is currently being tested by the open access to information through the virtual world of the Internet. However, the virtual medium cannot yet offer the advantages that the immediacy of the physicality of a museum can, it “cannot account for the richness of lived experience.”⁽²⁾ The immersion of the sensing body into curated spaces and museums still holds immense potential to affect the experience and assimilation of the work.

When observing the content-space-visitor triad more closely and the types of experiences it affords, it can be said that, while the act of curating the content can produce exhibits ranging from seemingly objective displays to poignantly critical positions, the *design* of the exhibit for the curated content has the capability of augmenting the effect of the work through the activation of both the space and the participatory role of the visitor. Where traditional art exhibits require evenly lit, self-effacing spaces, of dimensions appropriate for the visitor to passively engage the art, other types of work, mostly those known as ‘installations’, challenge spatial conditions and ask of the visitor varying levels of involvement.

As expressed by Marshall McLuhan in *The medium is the MESSAGE*, “[w]e have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception.” In this redefined environment the visitor is offered the opportunity to act. McLuhan suggests that, “the mass audience (the successor to the ‘public’) can be used as a creative, participating force.” A role that in the 60’s was presented as an alternative valued for its social impact, emancipating and empowering the individual, has become at present the “total involvement” that the audience (or the global social network) has come to expect.³

Within this context of hyper abundance of information, the visitor, actively seeking to participate in the making of the learning experience, has the potential to encounter, when immersing the sensing body into installations and museum environments, opportunities to expand the nature of the experience from a visual and cognitive perception to a more diversely informed one, now scaled up by the incorporation of space as an integral component of the exhibit.

NARRATIVE AND DISCURSIVE SPACES, VISITORS AND PARTICIPANTS

The origins of ‘installation’ (one-off, site-specific, temporary exhibit), from a perspective of spatial awareness, can be traced back to the late 1940s with Lucio Fontana’s idea of *spatialism*. *Spatial Concept*, 1951, with its series of slits “aimed at transcending the illusory space of traditional art works...integrating art with architecture”; or perhaps even earlier to Duchamp’s *Porte, 11, Rue Larrey*, 1927, a single door hinging on two adjacent frames, that in its paradoxical function alternatively allowed the three adjoining spaces to flow into each other in multiple configurations.⁴ By the early 1960s the term ‘environment’ in art, a form of installation, was well in use. Allan Kaprow used it to describe his room-size multimedia works, a type also explored by several of his contemporaries. He identified size as the only difference between environments and ‘assemblages’; while assemblages, “may be handled or walked around...[e]nvironments must be walked into.”⁵ Although Kaprow was focusing on the constructed object when making this distinction, implied in his observation is the possibility for the *space* in and of the work to gain a different role, a performative one. Furthermore, together with the participation of space in the work, Kaprow noticed that the visitor, when inhabiting the environments, also became part of the work. He therefore started giving the visitors occupations, an increasingly “scored” responsibility, actions that resulted in the development of the ‘happening’. In Kaprow’s case the visitor’s participation in environments, “ultimately eliminated the audience altogether, leaving only participants.”⁶

The nature of the participation of the visitor is in great measure determined by the way in which content is curated within museum environments. Any logic, however abstract or subtle, behind the selection of the work constitutes a narrative. *Narrative spaces* provide varying degrees of order for the display of the work. Spaces with clearly stated narratives facilitate the engagement of the work yet in their specificity determine singular paths of experience. Spaces ordered by less explicit narratives allow the visitor, beyond passively receiving the work, to discover opportunities of engagement throughout the space driven by personal curiosity, interest, and character, making active latent opportunities, and shaping the ample range of experiences to be had.

Discursive spaces are considered here as narrative spaces that require the visitor to *actively* participate in the *making* of the work through the engagement with

the exhibit, resulting in the actual production of exhibit material, or enabling its performance. In the absence of the visitor the work remains incomplete. Kaprow's environment *Words*, 1962 serves as an example. The environment, including two rooms, sheets of paper, and writing tools, offered participants the opportunity to write phrases, words, and messages to be fixed to the walls. The piece remained in a constant state of becoming, as participants layered paper, editing and changing the environment, while being affected by it.

Within the wealth of design examples there is at present an increasing incorporation of interactive architecture (IA) and responsive technologies (RT), with the aim of acknowledging the presence of the visitor and inciting the visitor's participation. Designs that, "responded to an immediate and passing whim of a single person,"⁷ have been present for decades, yet many contemporary proposals have broadened their capabilities beyond a single reaction to encourage the visitor to collaborate in the construction of a *simulated dialogue*. These discursive devices entice the visitor, now a participant, to create personal experiences through the iterative exchange, establishing a reciprocal relationship with the work.

It is important to mention that, although IA/RT are quite successful in arresting our minds, in many cases they are simply a *means* of communication (automatically translating any data into a binary form and returning a scripted outcome), a medium. A distinction becomes apparent between *medium* and *content*. The medium, in this case IA/RT, is not discursive, it is only with the visitor's participation in the development or resolution of *content*, by means of the *medium*, that the exhibits become discursive spaces. McLuhan presents this distinction between the medium and the content at a larger scale, and observes that, "[s]ocieties have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."⁽³⁾ This observation continues to be true in today's hyper-mediated society and asks that designers implementing media, including IA/RT, remain aware of their impact, exercise critical judgment, and continue to strive for balance between medium and content.

EMPATHY AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Empathy is presented by David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese as an essential contributor to the aesthetic experience of a work of art. They concentrate their study on two components of such experience as they relate to the embodied empathetic feelings in the observer: those created by "the representational content of the [depicted] works," and those created by "the quality of the work in terms of the visible traces of the artist's creative gesture," the artist's physical actions. (8) Within this frame, the nature of the aesthetic experience available in mediated discursive spaces may differ from more established definitions described by Freedberg and Gallese. Works that employ IA/RT to produce simulated dialogs with the visitor, works that through responsiveness offer as the content reflections of the visitor, and works that require the presence of an actively collaborating visitor to become complete, all raise paradoxical questions. When empathy (the ability to recognize the feelings of an other) is compromised in the presence of a redefined visitor that is simultaneously visitor, collaborator, and content, how is the aesthetic experience of the work affected? What informs the aesthetic experience?

Katja Kwastek considers interactive media art as a hybrid between visual arts, time-based arts, and performing arts, also concerned with sociology and technology, thus underlining the difficulty in clearly determining its lineage; yet she

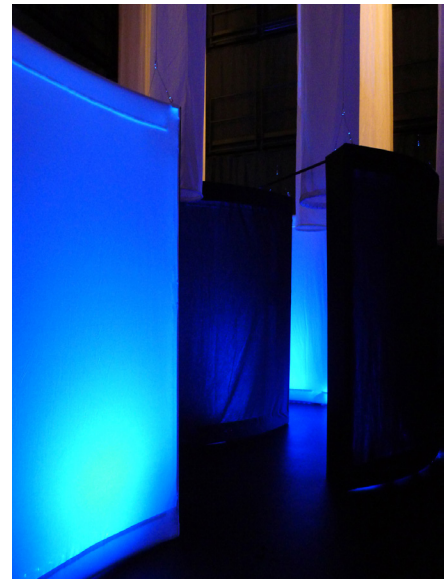
distinguishes it from other art forms by placing the action of the recipient at the heart of its aesthetics, the visitor is a source of his or her aesthetic experience. She adds that, in contrast to other forms of art, interactive media art presents the visitors with a “black box” situation, “whose works are not self-evident,” making the “exploration of the functionality of the work an important component of the aesthetic experience.”⁹

In this regard, an important aspect to consider when implementing these technologies is the way in which the visitor is to engage them. If implemented to be *explicitly* engaged (equivalent to pushing a button) the visitor, aware of the presence of the technology, *expects* an outcome from his or her action, resulting in a more instructional and self-centered experience. If *implicitly* engaged there may be no direct knowledge or awareness from the visitor that his or her presence is being sensed by the computing elements that, in response, actuate changes in the space, environments, or presentation of the content. While the former may better support content that intends to inform the visitor, or to raise the visitor’s self-awareness, the latter offers a more desirable approach to the design of exhibit environments for it affords IA/RT possibilities to make spatial contributions, rather than strictly cognitive. Instead of establishing an expected direct exchange with the visitor they may enhance the environments for diverse forms of dialogue to take place and, consequently, intensify the visitor’s empathetic engagement with the space and the material content.

THE LABYRINTH AND THE PYRAMID

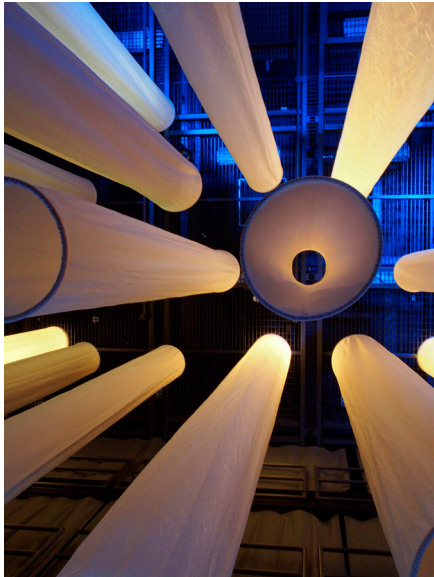
The design for the environment *Between the Pyramid and the Labyrinth*, is presented here as a design exploration that considers the concerns mentioned in the previous sections, especially with regard to testing and discovering desirable implementations of IA/RT to augment the experiencing of the space and the content. The responsive environment sought through the ‘lived experience’ to expose K - 12 students to learning possibilities available at the convergence of art and technology while simultaneously raising the awareness of the physicality of the space. The project was designed and fabricated by students of the School of Architecture + Design, and installed during the opening week of the Moss Arts Center in Blacksburg, VA, October 2013. The responsive technologies embedded in the environment were *implicitly* engaged by the participants, actuating changes in the space designed to raise the awareness of the unique qualities of the space of the exhibit. In this particular example the interactive and responsive technologies are both the medium with which to explore and display the content, and the content of the exhibit itself. This establishes a paradoxical frame of exploration for a design that presents that which it is trying to conceal, in order to achieve a heightened awareness of the relationship between space and technology. Furthermore, the installation, scheduled to open the night prior to Halloween, posed another challenge that shaped the intentions at the early design stages: to engage ideas of fear, eeriness, and the uncanny, while avoiding the use of any related iconography and signage, and to pursue those ideas through the physicality of the space.

A *labyrinth* came to mind as a product of the aestheticization of fear or the uncanny, from an architectural standpoint. When studying Bataille’s work Denis Hollier describes the labyrinth as, “that unsurmountably ambiguous, spatial structure where one never knows whether one is being expelled or enclosed, a space composed uniquely of openings, where one never knows whether they open to the inside or the outside.” Uncertainty about one’s position within such



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Figure 1: View in the labyrinth



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Figure 2: View up into the forest enhancing the verticality of the space

experience is inevitable, for being, “unable to grasp [the labyrinth] with a single glance, one never knows if one is inside.”¹⁰ Nevertheless the desire for clarity and knowing it, the desire to escape it sustains the journey through it. Intimately paired with the labyrinth, Bataille also speaks about the pyramid as the achievement of knowledge resulting from experiencing the labyrinth; the pyramid is the way out of the labyrinth. “This flight headed towards the summit (which is the constitution of knowledge...[i]s only one of the paths of the ‘labyrinth.’” He then continues, “[i]n truth, we cannot say of the summit that it is situated here or there. (In a certain sense it is never reached).”¹¹ Yet, the attempt to reach this ideal rewards one with gathered knowledge. To know the labyrinth would require one to be outside of it, to have escaped it, and therefore the paradox. Represented by the flight of Icarus to escape Crete, Hollier draws a parallel between Icarus’ vantage point and the summit of the pyramid, for it is only from above that, “[t]he entire labyrinth would fit inside an optical cone.” He adds, “[t]he pyramid is homologous to this optical cone, it is the very structure of vision.”¹⁰

Bernard Tschumi revisits the paradox of the pyramid and the labyrinth as it relates more specifically to space, where the pyramid represents the conceived space through reason and the labyrinth represents the perceived space through the senses.¹ The paradox is multifold when considering that the designer conceives spaces that originate in experiential memories, the visitor perceives spaces that can never be experienced in their totality at once and as conceived and, as Tschumi points out, “[w]e cannot both experience and think that we experience.” Still Tschumi concludes that, “only by recognizing the architectural rule...[t]he subject of space will reach the depth of experience and its sensuality.” It is in the process of ‘imaginary blending,’¹² available in the ‘third condition,’ the condition that exists between the pyramid and the labyrinth, that the paradox could be resolved.

MA AS THE THIRD CONDITION

The Japanese term *ma* is defined by its multiple manifestations applicable to a wide range of aspects in creative tradition and ritual. Known as the ‘Space-Time’ concept, Richard Pilgrim presents *ma* as, “the ‘interval’ between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events.”¹³ In music, it indicates the silence or interval between sounds. A necessary presence that frames the sounds, *ma*, embodying silence, is simultaneously brought to consciousness by the adjacent sounds. Similarly, in the traditional Japanese house *ma* is the distance between posts, the spacing of the posts that “denotes not only a straight-line distance between two points in space, but also a simultaneous awareness of both poles as individual units.”¹⁴ This simultaneity, an inherent quality of *ma*, is comparable to the ‘imaginary blending’ Tschumi presents as potential resolution to the paradox between conceived space and perceived space, and can be read in the original character for the term *ma*, as described by Günther Nitschke. “The ideogram, depicting a delicate moment of moonlight streaming through a chink in the entrance way, fully expresses the two simultaneous components of a sense of place: the objective, given aspect and the subjective, felt aspect.” Likewise, the pyramid and the labyrinth, the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective,’ are simultaneously present in the imaginary blending concretized in the original character of *ma*. In the ephemeral event, the moonlight is enhanced by the frame of the entrance way, and the entrance way is enhanced by the moonlight. *Ma* augments the experience of two or more things brought into relationship while sustaining the identity of each. Further defined by Pilgrim as a, “particular way of seeing, experiencing, or being

aware of the world,"¹³ *ma* is a way of bringing into being the 'third condition', where the pyramid and the labyrinth bring each other into existence.

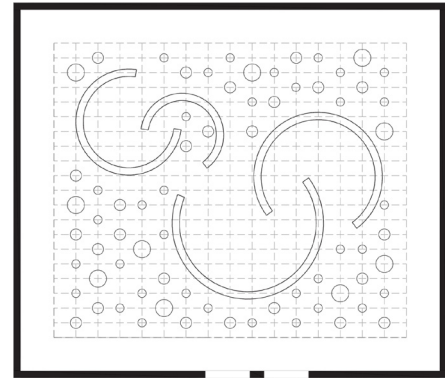
BETWEEN THE PYRAMID AND THE LABYRINTH

Specifically designed for the black box theatre in the Moss Arts Center, the installation explores the labyrinth and the act of traversing space as an experiential form of inquiry. The plan turns the forty-foot long black cubic space into an environment of labyrinthine qualities that reveals content and enables knowledge to be constructed only through the lived experience of it, and relative to the degree of interaction of the visitor-participant. In doing so the design finds physical manifestations that incorporate the innate simultaneity of *ma* at multiple scales and instances.

Derived from the concentric, circular labyrinth, the design scrambles and disperses circles that, as they randomly intersect, create potential paths of flow and hold spaces for invited media and digital artists to exhibit their work. The paths of the labyrinth are delineated by what Gottfried Semper considers to be the primordial act of architecture, the use of the "crude weaving" for the enclosure of space.¹⁵ The asymmetric pattern of light curved tensile structures wrapped in fabric unfolds and flows, fostering travel through the space by partially revealing areas and never allowing it all to be grasped with a 'single glance.' The visitors meander through the space following potential paths of exploration suggested by the diaphanous quality and placement of the curved fabric walls. The limited presence of normative spatial references or straight edges, and the strategic location of openings conceal the ordering systems underlying the design, thus acting as a device to sustain the engagement of the visitors aiming for the summit of the pyramid, and increasing their awareness of their own presence in space. The tall curved walls screen out the immediate areas while simultaneously drawing the inquisitive eye upward and, as a result, revealing the spatial volume of the dark box.

The curved walls made of two layers of stretched fabric, one white and one black, spaced one foot apart, give the forms apparent thickness and weight. However, unlike a conventional wall, the *poché*, traditionally a mass, is inverted into space. The spacing between the fabric surfaces allows for the placement of light sources within it. The dim light not only illuminates the nearby floor area to assist people moving through the exhibit but, caught by the weave of the two tensile surfaces, the light materializes the interval between the surfaces, affording the interstitial space of the walls a presence, while delaminating the perceived boundary.

Inhabiting the spaces in-between and around the curved walls, a *forest* of luminescent, textile cylindrical pieces, 25 feet tall, hangs from the ceiling and hovers above the floor. Several pieces, housing responsive technology, are actuated when the sensors read the presence of human motion, lighting up to reveal the volume of the penumbral cube otherwise hidden. Some of the sensors actuate two distant pieces at once affording the participant the effect in perception of depth and the awareness of the spacing between two elements (*ma*). For the audience in general the interactions raise the awareness of the space in constant change. And the space, sensing the crowd, increases its luminosity, in sync with the increasing volume of participants, as more sensors are triggered at once. In their idle state the actuating pieces project on the floor circles of dim light that, like stepping stones lit by the moonlight, invite the visitors to move through the space. Arata Isozaki describes a similar event when offering additional



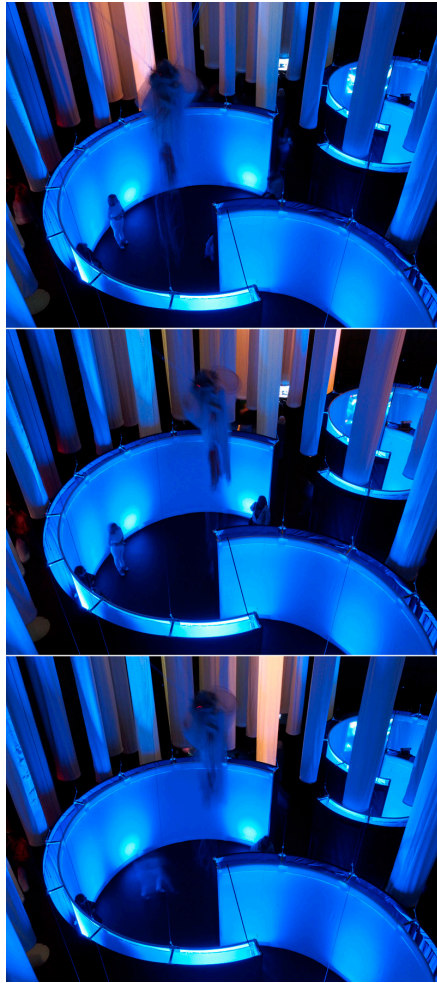
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Figure 3: Layout of the installation in the black box theatre

Figure 4: View in the forest with idle responsive elements



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Figure 5: Responsive elements dynamically actuated by the presence of the crowd

interpretations of *ma*, both as the spacing of elements, and as the consequent spatiotemporal event of moving through the space. He says:

Ma organizes the process of movement from one place to another. The breathing and movement of people divide the space in which the people live. The stepping stones leading to a teahouse determine the way one will walk over them: the *ma* - that is the interval - between the stones determines the walker's breathing rhythm.¹⁶

Isozaki's interpretation expands the experience, beyond the assimilation of visual content, into the physical, bodily engagement, where *ma* determines the breathing rhythm, which in turn establishes the pace at which the visitor traverses space.

In the installation the forest is a metaphor for the aggregation of elements that, while different in sizes and type of performance, produce a field of sameness, and in that sameness offer limited reference of the overall composition, and orientation within it. When considering alternatives for the distribution of the forest, the *intervals* between the *trees* (textile cylindrical pieces) become as important as the *trees*; their positions are defined by and define *ma*. Searching for what Isozaki identifies as the, "ultimate state of *ma*...[a] productive emptiness,"¹⁷ the final spacing is small enough to offer a coherent sense of a continuous field, and large enough to afford the experience of the cubic space by means of vertical perspectives of the space. Drawn by the long textile cylindrical pieces, the verticality of the space of the exhibit is perceived both within the hollowness of the pieces and in the intervals between them.

The curved fabric walls expose white fabric on their concave surface (toward the originating center point of the curve) defining the spaces for the invited artists and allowing for higher levels of light emanating from the *poché* of the walls into those spaces. The black fabric on the convex surface of the wall faces outward toward the forest areas, allowing for the control of the desired darkness in the forest, therefore increasing the effect of the responsive luminescent pieces. The fabric also serves as projection surfaces for processed real-time media. From a camera attached to 'medusa' (a robot with scripted behavior that hovers over the central space) video of the action in that space is projected on the wall of a remote space in the labyrinth. The sheer nature of the fabric allows for sporadic 'montages' of the projections, the see-through *poché* space, and the shadows cast by activity in the artists' spaces. Additionally, the interaction at specific locations is sensed and employed to actuate traveling sound through the cubic space, augmenting the visitors' spatial awareness.

The exhibit seeks to offer opportunities for visitors to interact creatively while learning about the potential within art and technology, stimulating engagement and inquiry. Dwelling between the labyrinth and the pyramid, and found in the oscillation between the sensible and the intelligible, the 'third condition' (yet another manifestation of *ma*, where the imaginary blending takes place), involves the perceptive body in a dialogue with material and space, aspiring to arrive to a deeper and more transformative experience of the content. Unlike the traditional content-space-visitor triad the exhibit embraces technological content that invites and expects the involvement of the visitor to become realized. The individual visitor redefined as a member of a network, akin to McLuhan's mass audience, is eager to act publicly, to perform, and to discover. The involved audience experiences the discursive space as it is affected, partially revealed, and

augmented by the overlapping responses triggered by individual actions that contribute and give rise to networked responses. The exhibit does not strive to offer predetermined answers nor set results, but seeks to raise questions and foster an avid state of curiosity to continue to encourage the flight toward the elusive summit.

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