

PHARMACOPHORE: Architectural Placebo

Ariane Lourie Harrison
Yale University
Seth Harrison
Harrison Atelier

For *Pharmacophore: Architectural Placebo*, a design-dance installation at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York in December 2011, Harrison Atelier (HAT) designed a pharmaceutical-cultural landscape which included a network of polyurethane inflatables lodged within a glazed and steel seating structure recalling both pharmaceutical company facade and medical waiting room. The audience sat within this framework, apposed to the back-lit glass and resting against the inflatables.

The work juxtaposed narratives about feedback and therapy with the unpredictable effects—noise, lights and informal audiences—of the urban site. Pharmacophores are the common features shared by the set of chemical structures that interact predictably with classes of biological targets. Yet the desired cause and effect relationship is often perturbed by physiological and psychic forces, among the most common is the placebo effect: a beneficial change in a biochemical state, albeit temporary and unreliable, produced in anticipation of therapy.

The types of responsive networks that we sought to introduce in this installation engaged both the physical and visual capacities of the audience: the inflatables, in addition to cushioning the audience also transmitted the shifts and movements of his or her neighbors. The “feedback” from the inflatable network was one of alternating pressure, yielding unruly gestures as the inflatable “arms” popped up or in some cases served as a proxy for an absent human embrace.

In manipulating the physical architecture of Storefront’s iconic façade designed by Steven Holl and Vito Acconci, we opened the “stage” to the varied inputs of the street. The audience for the piece, seated within the installation, became actors in the set as performers opened the gallery to the street; in parallel, streetside spectators found themselves encountering performers on the sidewalk as the interior and exterior space blurred during the performance.

Pharmacophore: Architectural Placebo was conceived, dramaturged and designed by HAT, choreographed by Silas Riener and performed by Merce Cunningham Dance Company members Rashaun Mitchell, Silas Riener, Jamie Scott and Melissa Toogood. The production featured lighting design by Aaron Copp and Nick Houfek, and an original score by Loren Dempster. The installation and performance explore the cultural and philosophical economy that surrounds medicine, technology, and the human prospect in the 21st century. *Pharmacophore: Architectural Placebo* typifies the integration HAT seeks to make by combining expertise from science and culture to create installations, performance and architectural works that engage formal and social issues.

