

Inhabiting Spaces

Barbara Campbell-Lange

29-10-2022

This piece is made by many. It's in 3 short parts, with three lines for and from Vanessa.

On the Difficulty of Inhabiting

The task of the first term is to design a single space, for one person, at scale 1:25.

This is to be a space where there is *no difference* between living and working; a space that uses only the *most common* elements – windows, doors, stairs, bathroom, kitchen, etc. It is to be a space that is *generic*, not multifunctional; a space that is simple enough to allow *any* activity.

The process is one of subtraction, of taking out. Where reduction, almost to the point of looking blank, monotonous even, exposes an essential structure, where only the most basic ingredients remain.

The design is to estrange one of these elements and make this the theme of the project – where *estrangement* is a subtle de-familiarization of average and ordinary situations. A removal of preconceptions and assumptions. It is to express a position on living.

How any subject moves through this space, experiences this space, is to be addressed *by the means of the architecture itself*: an indispensable arrangement of walls, rooms and passages – not diagrams. This is to test the utmost *basic and fundamental* conditions of Architecture: those of Enclosure, Separation, and Inhabitation.

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Brick was to be used. For everything – for the walls, the floor, the roof, the altar, the pulpit, the font and the seating of this one room space. And pencil drawings, sheets and sheets, set out the precise location of *every* brick at 1:20.

Arriving on site, the bricklayers were informed that they could use neither plumb-line nor spirit-level; And the *only* type of brick allowed was ordinary, standard, and full-size.

Continuing with constraints the architect insisted there would be no '*specialty-shaped bricks*' (as are often needed to solve difficult junctions) and that *no brick in the entire construction of the project* was to be cut-to-fit – ever.

Jointing proved a challenge. Particularly corners. This was solved only through a *very* free proportioning in the ratio of mortar to brick: for the mortar had to compensate *spatially*. This resulted, often and mostly, in very large joints where bricks appear to be softly floating in a matrix of mortar, rather than rigidly constrained – bonded – as conventional coursework.

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Toothy openings for door or window were never framed *into*: closure was instead effected by applying elements such as glazing *across* an opening, to the *face* of the wall – *on* it not *in* it.

To be in this space – to inhabit it – is to experience walls and floors that faintly swell and slope with quiet massiveity. The prevailing pattern of brickwork is interrupted with moments of eccentricity and randomness where adjustments and adaptations have occurred, as if an ancient textile, Byzantine or Persian.

And the brick vaults of the ceiling are neither horizontal nor parallel, pitching gently to an *almost*-centre, expanding and contracting in width as they run from wall to wall, a treatment strangely moving, where the inanimate insinuates something of the rhythm of breathing...

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I like to look at floor plans.

I need the hand-made grid.

I return again to geometry.

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It has been said that when you start making – painting, writing, thinking – *everybody* is in your studio – the past, your friends, your enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there.

But if you continue... *as* you continue... they start to leave, one by one, until you are left completely alone.

And then,

if you're lucky,

even *you* leave.....

Inhabiting Spaces

Ian Kiaer

29-10-22

It's only been a few weeks since I first, unwittingly walked into Vanessa's studio. I hadn't understood that the address on the Copy Press invite was hers, and I was late. Everyone was sitting, intently listening—I had knocked on the wrong door before finding the right one and was both anxious and clumsy in attempting to sit without causing further nuisance, hence it took a while to understand quite where I was.

Naturally my focus was on those reading, and then there was that remarkable film. In between, I had time to take in a space usually given to an altogether different activity. Of note was a small wooden platform, built into the floor at the back of the room, only one step high, with two or three leaning canvases. They had been turned discreetly to the wall so as not to draw attention, but it seemed important they remained there, staged quietly to remind and insist that the room be restored to its primary purpose once the guests had gone.

Their backsides naturally invited playful projection as to what possible states of incompleteness might be revealed on their 're-turn.' Till now I had only ever seen Vanessa's paintings finished, whether as thrown shapes in city spaces or variously installed on exhibition walls. Yet this thought of a pause in the process, of coming upon them when only partially resolved, leads to a question of how they are put together. I'm aware that by talking of finish and completion I'm falling into a trap, which the paintings resist, for always my experience of them is one of vivid, sometimes livid, instability. Their clear lines and defined forms speak of a commitment to pinning down and making abstract, the precision of an interlocking geometry that speaks to open and oscillating worlds.

These paintings, bold, bright brilliant things, whose colour alignments become stranger the longer one spends with them, are hard-edged and serious. I think of a particular time in art school yore when relationships were ended over whether one used masking tape or freehand. I mention this, less

to imply a humourless formalism, than for how it speaks of an engagement with subtle variations in painting language that mattered intensely, that something really was at stake. I might be wrong, she will certainly tell me if so, but I think of Vanessa's work, emerging from, contending with and perhaps finally rejecting the absurd extremities of those days, for hers is not a reductive formalism but something more playful, experimental and innately absorbent. I was told I mustn't mention the book, but so many of the *Murmurations* seem to have been soaked and saturated in the paintings over years, they have emerged, coloured from thinking about painting, from thinking while painting, and after—when painting is finished for the day.

A visit to Paris last year to an Annie Albers exhibition at the Musee d'Art Moderne, reminded me of how lively and sensual her textiles and weavings are—when viewed next to her husband Joseph's drier project, the comparison appeared almost cruel. I think of Vanessa's student trip and her speaking with Sonia Delaunay and about Robert, and how there was gender injustice there too. But perhaps it's the textiles themselves, and how they seem to weave a space between painting, thinking and making that evokes Adorno's essay and murmurs long into the space of Vanessa's studio. There is so much more I want to say, about the painted white wood walls, the sense also that this working dwelling was shared with John, what rich exchange and critique there must have been.

In the evening I went home sensitive to what it meant for that studio to be in that part of the working city, a working space reserved for painting for some forty years of the building's much longer life; a remnant, of when young artists could still pool funds to secure a place—for sensing, looking, mixing, touching, amidst industry, trade and finance. I think of its relationship to art school, how it remained necessarily set apart and private, yet profoundly connected. How else would so much experience and understanding be sustained and shared so generously, for so long.

Inhabiting Spaces

Tim Renshaw

29-10-22

I'll begin with a few remarks on inhabiting space or being inhabited by space. And I'll draw on a few examples from architecture and painting.

Inhabiting built space for me simply means to be grounded in space and enclosed by walls. Whereas being inhabited by space is I think a bit more elusive as it carries the sense of being possessed by space. There are many different ways to be possessed, but I'm only thinking of it as something you breath in, so a kind of imbibing of space

Unlike the solid built structures we inhabit, the space you breath in needs to be a little malleable, elastic, a bit airy and is thus closer to an atmosphere. Solid walls are easy to see whereas atmospheres are harder to place. But atmosphere is a word that I have come across in many different accounts about the experience of architectural space.

One I particularly like comes from the architect Peter Zumthor, who titled one of his publications '*Atmospheres*'. As the title of Zumthor's book suggests atmosphere is an important material of good architecture and when asked what defines the qualities of good architecture he states,

'quality architecture to me is when a building manages to move me. What on earth is it that moves me? One word for it is atmosphere.'

Taking the idea of an atmospheric building to an extreme is Diller and Scofidio. *Blur Building* 2002, which was a huge ovoid shape constructed from mist which you could walk into. *Blur Building* in the photo's looks an impressive spectacle as it appears to levitate above a lake in Switzerland. But it wasn't really made to be inhabited for a long period of time. Photographs show people wrapped up in waterproofs, heads down marching along raised platforms. And the photos indicated that you could stride through this space without walls but you clearly couldn't inhabit it for any length of time. But I also wondered if you could be inhabited by this space.

You could certainly breath in the mist that formed the space but I wondered if this amounted to being truly possessed, affected and inhabited by it?

To move things on a bit I'll introduce a comment by a painter. It's a pithy quote from Bart van der Leck from around 1918 and made in the context of the de Stijl movement, he states

'Architecture joins together, binds – painting loosens, unbinds'

I first read this as stating a blunt opposition between Architecture and 20C Modern Painting, as though when it comes to the question of space they face each other across an impermeable divide. Whereas the practice of the architect concerns structure that of the modern painter involves un-structuring - that is imagining a space where shapes float free in an anti-gravitational atmosphere.

I now prefer to read it as a correlation of opposites or two poles connected in an opposing-responding relationship. And one that I hope that may be mutually nourishing. This leads me back to Zumthor who I would describe as an architect painter. In fact, one of the images included in PZ text is a small watercolour still life by Giorgio Morandi painted in 1963. The little watercolour shows dark indigo shapes in relation to the whitish colour of the paper. In places the dark shapes read as shadows from which the white of the paper stands out like a vessel, in other areas of the watercolour the dark shapes feel more object-like and the white recedes and is sensed as the ground. The figure ground reversal is gentle, like slow respiration, where black and white shapes take on shape in parts of the painting and simultaneously reabsorb into the ground in other parts. It's a kind of un-grounding - grounding relationship

In this movement of grounding and un-groundings I also have Vanessa Jackson's paintings in mind, that is a painter architect who makes luminous colour expand beyond the outlines that contains them and whose geometries work to give structure, balance and a kind of grounding but may well tumble at any moment

Being absolutely un-grounded or untethered when its forced upon you is a terrible experience such as exile, homelessness And even if being un-

grounded is a matter of choice such as a visit to the blur building it feels like a fairly vapid form of inhabiting space

To conclude these remarks, inhabiting space, I think, requires solid ground beneath your feet and for obvious reasons, but also because, when you stand barefoot on the ground there is also the awareness of a boundary and separation between the skin of the foot and the intimately close ground. Grounding includes this primal awareness of boundaries that range from our skin that envelopes us to the walls that enclose us.

Being inhabited by space, being open to it and breathing it in dissolves this separation between body and space into a continuous flow with no division. Finally, to be open to space, to allow the atmosphere to flow through you does I think requires a solid ground.