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04 Artists occupying interiors occupying artists

Alex Schweder

No matter his or her medium, every artist creates an interior: a subjective experience inside the minds of the audience. Within the context of this publication, suggesting that the expertise of producing interior space is also in the purview of a discipline other than interior design may read as an affront to some. This provocation, however, is meant to enrich the field of interior design, not dilute it. Through the artworks featured in this chapter, three of which I co-created, I will argue that the interior qualities of designed environments are so imbricated with the interior subjectivities of their occupants that it is not possible to discuss the interior of a building without also addressing the psychological interiors of the inhabitants. Interiors are made from both subjectivity and sofas, and designers not only have legitimacy in working with both but they can be as playful with behavior as they have become with bricks.

In studying spaces that artists design and occupy, this chapter will show that not only are interiors expressions of their inhabitants' identities, struggles, and relationships, but they produce them as well. To map the relationship between interior space and inhabitant as suggested, it is useful to see how artists forged a similar path in their field. By tracing how the subjectivity of artistic audiences came to be constituted as the art itself, I will argue that the same relationship that exists between performance art and audience also exists between inhabited space and inhabitant.

Historically, visitors to museums were thought to passively receive meaning emanating from a painting or sculpture¹ (Hill, 2003: 22), thus locating the value of the work in the material object itself rather than its impact on viewers. Frustrated by the reduction of their work to a commodity, artists working in the mid-twentieth century began shifting the definition of art away from marketable objects toward ineffable subjective experiences. As a strategy toward this end, artists recast viewers of their works from passive consumers into collaborative producers whose perception of an artwork produced the meaning. As part of this change, artists began making immersive environments that stimulated the full sensorium of their visitors' bodies.

Artists who make interiors today heighten the perception of their audiences by breaking their habituated ways of using spaces, often riffing on the everyday environments that interior designers produce. These artists identify their trope as "installation art." While their palettes overlap with interior design through the use of materials, scale, and the reconfiguration of existing spaces, a key difference between installation art and interior design is how each discipline thinks about occupants. Where interior designers might ask "How does this environment reflect who my client is?", an installation artist might ask "Who will a person become when entering the space I make?" One question characterizes a subject's psychological interior as static, while the latter understands subjectivity as plastic. It is because of their allowance for fluidity in subjectivity that I choose to reference artistic endeavors rather than engage the history of design, which contains prevalent and problematic attitudes towards behavior evidenced in movements such as functionalism.

To explore the idea that corporeal occupation of an interior space can beget psychological transformation, performance artists have lived for several days or even weeks in environments they built. From the late twentieth century, Chris Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971)², Vito Acconci's *Seed Bed* (1971)³, or Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh's *Cage Piece* (1978–79)⁴ are a few such historical precedents. Artists today build on such works by constructing and occupying extreme interiors and using them as giant microscopes through which they can more clearly see how these environments influence their subjectivities.

Sometimes, however, an artist's planned outcome and what actually happens during a performance do not align. Marcel Duchamp spoke of this in 1957 as the "art coefficient" (Lebel, 1959: 77–78), referring to this gap between artistic intention and its reception. Here, Duchamp claims, is where creativity and art occur, in the space where clear communication between people breaks down and interpretation is used to construct a makeshift bridge over the chasm of possible meanings. In the performance artworks that I will be discussing the authors occupy their works with the intention of the space precipitating a psychic transformation. The only people who can verify if the intended change in subjectivity occurs, however, are the artists themselves. This puts them in the awkward position of acknowledging that a work did not actualize their pre-inhabitation hopes if something unexpected occurred. Duchamp's theory is perhaps most helpful in this moment, when the person that the artist wanted to become and what they actually became are not the same thing. Duchamp's position gives artists a way around the idea that living in their work is a failure if the result is different from the point of departure intention. Duchamp's theory affirms that the most creative moments are produced by the unknown and unexpected.

To explore the connection between subjective alteration and spatial inhabitation I will discuss six artworks in this chapter: three from the practices of other artists and three from my own. While I can only corroborate what I experienced, discussing the three initial works will provide a context for the latter, which have similar practices and ambitions.

THE HOUSE WITH THE OCEAN VIEW

In 2002 Marina Abramović, whose seminal performance art spans decades, lived in *The House with the Ocean View* between November 15 and 26 at Sean Kelly, a gallery in New York City. Her artistic intent was to endure the stresses of a 12-day occupation of an interior comprised of only three sparsely furnished rooms suspended above the gallery floor; one for sleeping, one for sitting and one for ablution. She only consumed water, never spoke to the audience, and performed every action—including bathing and urinating—in front of her audience. Abramović describes the set up as ritualized fasting using the repetition of both everyday actions and a metronome to induce a trance-like state wherein she is "purified." While purification is a slippery term in this context (Birringer, 2003),⁵ it does suggest the artist's desire to influence her subjectivity through occupation of an interior space. By continuously living in this ascetic interior, I interpret that she wished to become as empty as her environment.

What Abramović filled herself up with are the silent connections she has with her audience. As the title of the work suggests, the artist considered her audience from the very start; the mass of their presence was the "ocean." Throughout the work she singled out members of her audience (as she would come to do again a decade later in her performance of *The Artist is Present*), and in silence they would "exchange energy," as the artist described it. According to the artist, a connection between them was made that could not have come about if they were in a more distracted state. For Abramović, empathy and connection are facilitated by space and circumstance; so in an adjacent room there was a bed and costume that a member

of the audience could occupy for one hour to become more like the artist. From this set up I speculate that Abramović's intention for her and her audience's subjectivity was to transform mental experience into something shared, and that her vehicle to do so was the interior occupied by both.

DANS LA PEAU DE L'OURS

French artist Abraham Poincheval also used physical deprivation to induce mental alteration in his 2014 occupation performance *Dans la peau de l'ours* (In the bear's skin). Poincheval, in his own words,⁶ wanted to become more "bear like." To induce the hibernation associated with this animal, Poincheval lived in the interior of a bear sculpture that he fabricated using a wooden formwork. Without leaving this womb-like space for 13 days, he slept, read, and lived his life in what looked like a taxidermy bear on the outside and a Tom Sachs' spaceship on the inside. Before beginning the performance Poincheval had loaded up one leg with the food he thought a bear might eat (honey, berries, and the like), designed a second leg to supply water and collect urine, a third leg collected trash, and the final leg let in fresh air. Almost as a photo-negative of Abramović's relationship with her audience, Poincheval's audience could not see him but were encouraged to chat with him to keep him company. Even though the somatic artist/audience exchanges were different, both relied on the interior spaces⁸ of exhibition and inhabitation to precipitate psychic change.

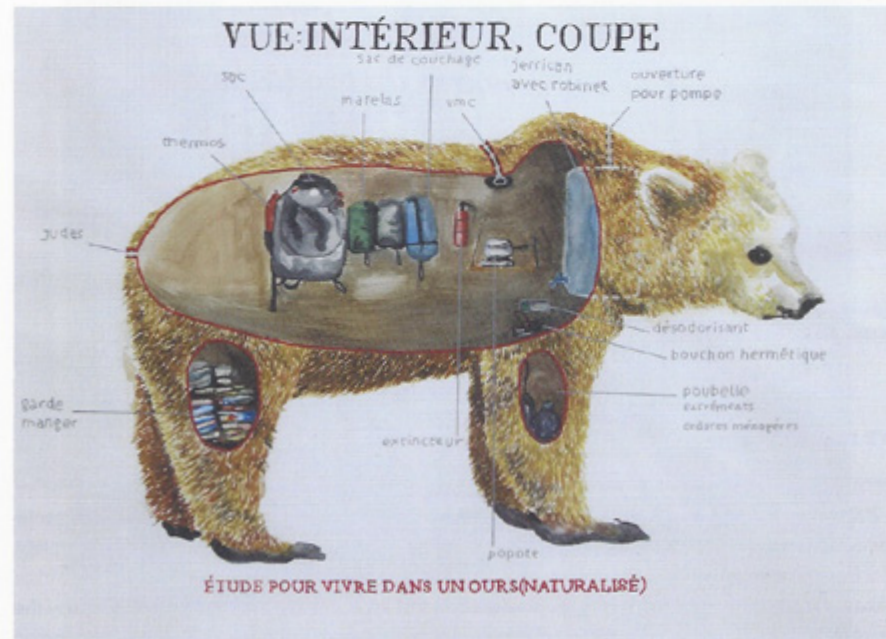


Figure 4.1
Étude pour vivre dans un ours (naturalisé) vue extérieure. Abraham Poincheval. © Collection Musée Gassendi, Digne-les-Bains



Figure 4.4
We Have Mice, Ward Shelley, 2004

We Have Mice was written up in several high-profile publications, including *The New York Times*. Accolades like these padded the artist's psychological interior against the stress normally experienced when inhabiting an extreme physical interior; until the exhibition was extended for a week. He recounted⁹ how he experienced a psychic break after the performance unexpectedly went beyond its anticipated duration. This change felt like a loss of autonomy, and Shelley reported that his burrow began to feel like a detention cell. Caged animal-like behaviors followed. He said he started acting irrationally and even broke up with a girlfriend. When he finally exited the work and went home to his own studio, his home, ironically, had been taken over by rats.

Did Poincheval feel more bearish or Abramović more pure? Is the work a failure if these things never happen or if some entirely other psychological interior occurs, as was admitted by Shelley in the *Mice* performance? Can we consider the unintended push back of an interior to be its own kind of subjectivity, independent of its occupants? These are the questions that I will consider for the remainder of this chapter as I discuss first-hand accounts of my own collaborations with Shelley where we were both authors and audience.

FLATLAND, STABILITY, AND IN ORBIT

Shelley and I met as Fellows at the American Academy in Rome in 2005. During the year we spent together there my own emergent ideas on performance and architecture were finding expression. I shared my view that architecture has always contained performances, and we discussed Shelley's works in which the performance of daily routine influenced the shape the architecture took over time.

In 2007 Shelley and I synthesized these ideas through a project called *Flatland*, inspired by the Edwin Abbott novella of the same name in which characters inhabit a two-dimensional world.

Winston Churchill's phrase, "We shape our buildings and afterwards, our buildings shape us,"¹⁰ influenced my thinking about how buildings change the ways in which we behave. I was curious about how an extreme interior environment would affect me, my relationships with other artists, and my relationship with the building itself.

At New York's Sculpture Center we constructed a structure that was as close to two dimensions as we could make it. Abbott's inhabitants of Flatland had a radically different understanding of a world in which only two dimensions were perceived; we wanted to experience a similar shift. Our building was four storeys tall, 24 feet wide and two feet deep. Six of us¹¹ committed to occupying the structure for three weeks, with the only rule being "you can leave at any time but you cannot re-enter." My fantasy at the beginning of this work was that we would quickly change the building in reaction to a space that constrained us.

What actually happened was quite different. Because our building's dimensions were so confining, assembling our entire community in one location was impossible. Our early interactions were limited to two-person encounters. Confined within two feet, an occupant was only ever able to face and talk to one flatmate at a time. There was never the opportunity to have a group discussion, because we could only meet in a line. Issues could not easily be addressed as a community and our group of six began to form associations divided by two personality types, which I will call the "order people" and "free-spirit people." Those who normally thrived in the clamor of many people and things simultaneously vying for their attention seemed to find the space frustrating. Easily distracted, they tended to generate (in the eyes of this "order person") chaos and clutter in the shared 196 square-foot space that the three "order people" found problematic. Because broad communication was thwarted by the shape of the interior space, differences in style led to misunderstandings



Figure 4.5
Flatland, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2007. Photo: Mark Linz



Figure 4.6
Flatland, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2007. Photo: Mark Linz

and defensiveness. Those who preferred more internal stimulation became withdrawn and, by the two-week mark, the "free-spirits" had elected to leave—not so much due to the social polarization as the space's inability to afford group conversations. By the end of *Flatland* the three of us remaining were working happily in our two-by-eight foot rooms. The vacated spaces were left empty. We had adapted to the environment by taking on tasks that were inward and contained; hibernating in a way, similar to Poincheval.

While conceptualizing this work with Shelley I had conveyed to him my expectations of how the physical form of the building would change over time. I thought that the building would come to look like an old shoe, portions of its envelope stretched and worn from the internal forces of its occupation. The space was, in fact, too restrictive for any of us to feel we could alter the structure. If one person were to saw some wood, the dust would fall into the bedroom below. Every movement required careful planning. My desire to make a building whose form changed in direct relation to occupation remained unfulfilled. In retrospect, however, this project's success for me was the realization that architecture could be practiced solely by working with the subjectivity of its users.

Precisely because this project's outcome did not align with my initial expectations, the observations made during, and reflections arising from, the experience of performing *Flatland* generated new ideas for future performances. *Flatland* clarified my desire to make an environment that changed physically in direct relation to its occupation in order to visualize the intersubjectivity that it was producing.

In pursuit of this ambition Shelley and I began designing a new situation to inhabit in 2009, *Stability*. Suspended at its center, tilting one way or the other like a seesaw in reaction to the occupants' location, the relationship of the two inhabitants to one another was immediately visible through the building's incline. If one of us moved away from the fulcrum and the other did not, the angle of the building would change, impacting on the other's experience of the space. The other person would have to either move in order to re-level the space or continue what they were doing at an angle. In this way it was like an "occupant-harmony-o-meter," where viewers could gauge our willingness to cooperate through the tilt of the floor.

Like *Flatland*, this work can be considered an architectural caricature, a building that exaggerates something already occurring in and through designed spaces—namely, the construction of relationships between inhabitants as affected by the spaces they occupy. Such changes to our subjectivity become habituated and we no longer realize they are occurring. Yet typical multi-family housing affects who we are, how we behave, and our perception of our neighbors. If the walls allow sounds to permeate from the adjoining flat we find ourselves changing how we use the space.

Shelley and I occupied *Stability* for nine days. By the end we had become constantly, but unconsciously, aware of one another's activities. We had adapted to the initial frustrations we encountered, and in a sense our experience of this space had become domesticated. Thus, in a sort of "domestic bliss," Shelley and I came to know what the other was feeling through the building. Slight shifts in weight coming with more frequency often signaled agitation with work or other relationships. There was never a need to knock because the building would tip in anticipation of approach. Our scale-like structure was not just visualizing intersubjectivity but producing it.

Through the extreme situations that *Flatland* and *Stability* set up, Shelley and I gained an intimate understanding of how buildings influence our subjectivity. In both of these inhabitations our relationship to one another through the building was optional; we could always opt out of it. By the end of both of these projects we thought that their dimensional anomaly, width, and incline were too quickly adapted to. *Flatland* should have been thinner and *Stability* should have had a 30-degree, rather than a 15-degree, tilt.

In 2014 we found an opportunity to make a work where cooperation through tandem living was non-negotiable. Through Shelley's relationship with Pierogi we built and performed *In Orbit*, a 25-foot wheel that Shelley and I lived on continuously for ten days. Furniture for six activities was affixed to the interior and exterior of the wheel: bathing, dressing, cooking, working, relaxing, and sleeping. To change activities we would need to coordinate not only our schedules but also our locomotion to turn the entire wheel until the desired furniture rotated toward us.



Figure 4.7
Stability, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2009. Photo: Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley



Figure 4.8
In Orbit, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2014. Photo: Scott Lynch



Figure 4.9
In Orbit, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, 2014. Photo: Scott Lynch

While our intent was to set up equitable living spaces, we soon found that Shelley's experience on the top of the wheel was quite different from mine. Occupying a concave floor versus a convex one makes for an appreciable difference in how quotidian tasks can be managed. I was able to take my shoes off at night and put them on the floor next to my bed, for example, while Shelley would need to tether his up to prevent them falling off the wheel's circumference. He was more likely to fall than I was and thereby needed to spend the duration of the performance harnessed with a safety line to one of the metal beams above. He depended on me to act responsibly to prevent bodily harm, since my body was providing the weight that kept the wheel from rotating unexpectedly. Emotionally, Shelley expressed difficulty in having to inconvenience me. He described his experience as akin to being a car passenger needing to make a stop, whether for a stretch, toilet break, or for food. The passenger, he described, is at a disadvantage and feels as though he is under the driver's control. This fundamental power imbalance requires that the passenger trusts the driver not to abuse control. Shelley recognized that these recurring feelings, prompted by the architectural circumstance we had contrived, were in fact rooted in his own psychological make-up.

Again, we intended something other than what we experienced—coordination and dependence respectively. Over several projects Shelley and I have come to understand that this disconnect is productive of new work. As I write we are using the unexpected experience of caretaking to inform a new work titled *Dead*.

Man Friend.¹² In this new performance, after a coin flip one of us will sacrifice his autonomy so that the other can thrive. Again, we will use an interior space to manifest this complex relationship. The work will comprise a fully programmed apartment with a workspace, sleeping area, kitchen, and bathroom that one of us occupies. The one who sacrifices his autonomy will stay only in a bed for the duration of the performance. The bed will be situated, either through ropes or balance, such that if the artist in the bed gets up then the other artist's dwelling will fall apart. In return, the artist whose house is held up through sacrifice needs to tend to the artist in bed by feeding him, changing his bed pan, cleaning him and keeping him company. Each contingent to the other in different ways; caretaking, when necessitated by the design of a habitable space, makes the complexity of the relationship palpable.

CONCLUSION

Practicing designers are not known for embracing uncertainty. The preparation and coordination required to ensure a project is within budget and on schedule prohibit many designers from leaving much to chance. As we have seen through the environments designed by and lived in by artists, the unknown is the human subject and who they will become through the space. This aspect of design, who we will become in relation to it, is an emergent area of spatial aesthetics. Considering the formation of subjectivity in relation to occupation no doubt has its pitfalls if a designer applies the same control over a subject as they do over objects. If, though, designers can work with occupants to use their spaces in innovative and playful ways, the latter gains a sense of agency and self-determination.

NOTES

- 01 Hill citing W. Benjamin's *The Work of Art*.
- 02 In his final year at University of California, Irvine, Chris Burden lived in one of the school's lockers for five days, with only five gallons of water located in the locker above and an empty five-gallon container in the locker below.
- 03 Reconfiguring the floor of the Sonnabend Gallery in New York to slope upward and create an inhabitable space below it, Acconci would spend the day in this cavity masturbating to fantasies based on the unseen movements of the visitors above him.
- 04 Montano and Hsieh lived for one year in New York City tied together by a rope around their waists that only allowed them to be eight feet apart. They went about their lives as best they could.
- 05 Here Birringer acknowledges the ease by which this work's notion of purity can be undermined as glibly assuming uncritical new age spirituality.
- 06 GecBeats News, April 2 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L29Qd3vtoV8.
- 07 Sachs is a contemporary American artist, born in 1966, who roughly assembles quotidian materials, such as wood and Tyvek, to make approximations of highly technical objects such as the Apollo lunar module.
- 08 This performance was staged at Le Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature (the Museum of Hunting) in Paris, located in two combined historic buildings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As its mission the museum "exhibits the relationships between humans and animals from antiquity to today." The rooms of this building are themed by animal, and contain objects that have been used to communicate, hunt, and culturally contextualize the animal of focus, from poems to whistles and primitive portraits to contemporary art. When walking through the museum's rooms, visitors sense what it is like to become animal. Poincheval's performance furthered the museum's subtly executed mission by enacting it in an extreme way.
- 09 Ward Shelley, in discussion with the author, March 21, 2016.
- 10 On October 28, 1943 Winston Churchill was addressing the British House of Commons in the House of Lords to consider the reconstruction of the former after its 1941 destruction by the Germans. The debate was between rebuilding the old design that did not have enough seats for all members or constructing a new design with ample

space. Churchill successfully argued for reconstruction by pointing out that the cramped feeling of a too-small space embodied the importance of a decision when all members were in attendance.

- 11 The other four artists participating in the *Flatland* performance were Pelle Brage, Eva LaCour, Douglas Paulson, and Maria Petsching.
- 12 In building construction, a "dead man" refers to a mass buried underground that acts as an anchor for a structural element that is in tension. *Dead Man* was also the title of Chris Burden's 1972 performance where he pretended to be a corpse next to a car on the highway. *Dead Man Friend* simultaneously refers to both of these while also implying a relationship.