

BETWEEN HERE, THERE, MYSELF AND IT

Embodiment and inhabitation of sculpture, installation and beyond

ENTRY

In this thesis, I want to look at static sculptures and installations that have the capacity to generate movement and constitute situations in which the viewer gets activated. Works in which the artist consciously choreographs viewers' movements in space and directs their gaze. This is applicable to most artworks but I'm interested in works where the passage through, towards, into, under, around, above and away from the objects or material in question, becomes an integral part of the viewer's experience. In some cases even to the point where you can no longer talk about the object in itself without talking about the path and directions taken and the given space where you encountered it.

My interest in this stems from my experience of what spaces can do. The strange numb, gradual, unnoticed power they have over my movements, routines, mood, and awareness of others and myself. The most interesting space, to me, is a space that is so dominating that, the attempt to grasp what aspects create the atmosphere - light, smell, temperature, dimensions, colours etc -still doesn't diminish the power it has. Such a space is not felt as powerful at all, it is just there as an inescapable reality so banal and matter of fact that you wouldn't think of questioning it. I am talking about everyday spaces such as the waiting room, the supermarket or the institution where I go everyday.

When I try to measure the effect of a space, I always think about spaces I've been in, that were worn and used, for instance abandoned old buildings that haven't been maintained or renovated. They contain marks and traces of which parts have been used and how; where on the floor most feet have stepped, where the toilet, kitchen or offices were located and how they were furnished. Such places emit information about occupants' behavior, contain remnants of a lived environment and manifest a very physical history. What also happens in the encounter with the used space is that normal, well known, functional things that are usually in the background, suddenly stand out. For instance a rusty faucet or doorknob no longer fulfill their functions, and are left as frozen references of what they used to be.

"the objects that are gathered as gatherings of history (domesticated objects, such as doorknobs, pens, knives and forks that gather around, by supporting the actions of bodies) are in a certain way overlooked.

What makes them historical is how they are "overlooked".

Seeing such objects as if for the first time (before this is a doorknob, how might I encounter it?) involves wonder, it allows the object to breathe

not through a forgetting of its history

but by allowing this history to come alive: How did you get here?

How did I come to have you in my hand?...

To re-encounter objects as strange things is hence not to lose sight of their history but to refuse making them history by losing sight."

I would relate this kind of realization and foregrounding of the familiar, to what happens in the art space. The art space can likely never achieve the effect of either the everyday space nor the used residual space, because you'll always be aware of entering a different realm than your usual. Your body acts and reacts differently because there's no given, automatic approach to the unknown setting. The art space serves as a platform where confronting and highlighting the factors that make up spatial power, becomes possible. When these factors become distinguishable, they generate a different behavior and pattern of movement. A behavior, which you at that moment, can become aware of carrying out. Some of these aspects are central to the works and words sculptor Robert Morris, who in his texts describes simple, formal aspects of sculpture but always held up against the effects these aspects have on space and on the viewer.

There is a pronounced connection from the makings and thoughts behind Minimalist artworks to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His writings were a big inspiration and reference for Minimalist artists. Most of them were American, so the 1960's translation from French to English of "Phenomenology of perception" (1945) came together with the growing interests in space and body that many had in the period. The book provides an approach and a vocabulary to talk about space and how we perceive it; what is the role of our bodies in such encounters and how to describe the experience and impact space has on us. So the key words here are space and the objects situated within it - both encountered by the viewer's body.

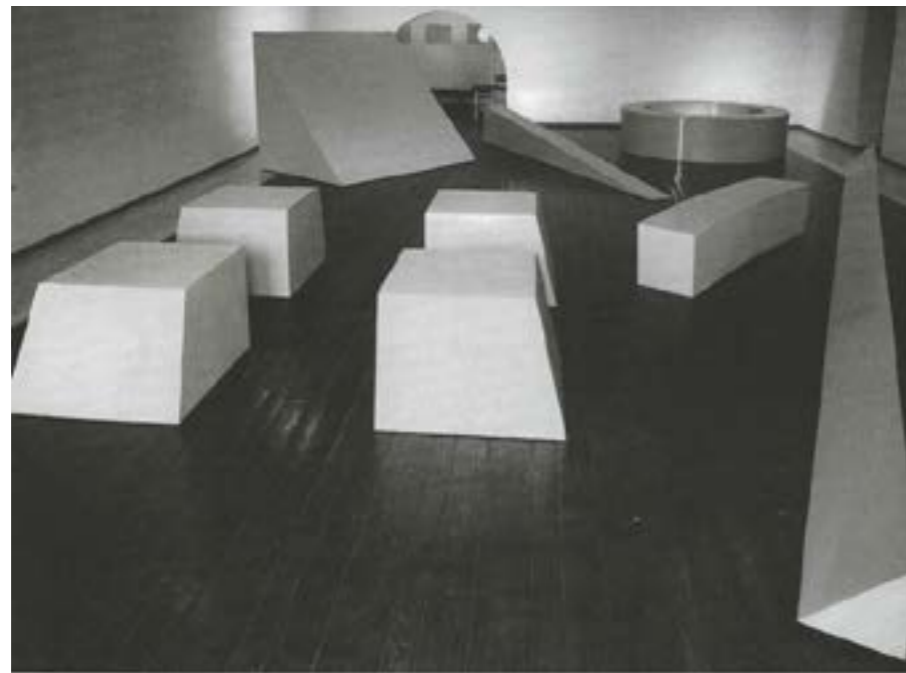
I will explore some of Merleau-Ponty's notions as an entrance to looking at a contemporary example of artists whose work deal with aspects of duration, structure, spatial awareness, the perceptual process and movement of the viewer. They do so by creating situations, juxtapositions of objects or sculptural installations that draw on the architecture of the given space.

My approach to the topic has everything to do with experience, therefore I will use my own viewing of the work "Execution" by Dutch duo Gerlach en Koop (seen at de Appel arts centre in December 2014) as an example. I find this work relevant because I think it facilitates a time-based way of viewing and interacting. I will introduce the work in the text in the same order as it was introduced to me when I saw it, which means that how and when I located the parts that constitute the work can be integral to the work itself.

A MINIMALIST MOMENT

what it is, even that it is what it is

Minimalism, not a unified movement as such, consisted of artists who had an interest in the object, in space and in the viewer's involvement and experience. The sculptor and performer Robert Morris' texts "Notes on sculpture", part 1 and 2 describes some of the aspects that were most important to him. The text clearly conveys some of the common interests and aims of Minimalism, but at the same time it is apparent that Morris' interest lay mainly outside or around the art object; where for instance Donald Judd's focus was on the object itself and on its relation to the two-dimensional surface, Morris was more interested in what the objects could generate. Both artists were interested in reduction; but to Morris reduction was more of a means to neutralize the object, in order to give attention to the surrounding space and the movements of the viewer. Thereby he encompassed the aspect of time in the work and formed what we know today as installation. His texts describe visual, physical properties of the reductive work to specifics, which is valuable when held up next to his works – the example I've included below is from his "One Man Exhibition" in 1966.



GESTALT

The notion of Gestalt was central to his work. Gestalt theory suggests that even though we are not able to see a shape in its wholeness, we still complete the shape in our heads; for example out of the 6 sides of a cube, a maximum of 3 sides can be visible to us at the time, but we still have a mental image of how the other sides would look. Very importantly, this establishes the body, the subject, as the given starting point for perception to take place. That's why Morris' points out his opposition to Cubist work, wherein several views and perspectives from different angles occur in one picture plane.

In the installation view we can see how Morris plays with that mechanism; the sculptures can appear to us as cubes and rectangles, but they are not exact geometrical figures, they are slightly unequal or bending. The switch between our mind's expectations of seeing a cube, as we know it, and the actual shape encountered by experience, is what confronts us with the mechanism of Gestalt psychology.

SCALE

It is an important point to Morris that scale is always defined through the comparison between one's body size and the object. The sculptures have a furniture-like quality to them, putting the bodily comparison close at hand: It's inviting to measure oneself up against the tall triangle or to sit on the circular shape, and to compare one's own body's volume with the asymmetrical squares and rectangles. This happens less in smaller works because they tend to draw the viewer close and examine details. Thereby an intimate relation to the object is established instead of a spatial awareness. Properties like surface, color and material become more prominent in a small work. That isn't desirable because it can "pull him out of the space in which the object exists."²

A larger work on the other hand will take up more space between itself and the viewer because it requires a greater viewing distance. The physical distance, emptiness between object and body, is what emphasizes the space and the situation, and facilitates participation.

In the time when Morris' works were made and exhibited, the predominant art form was abstract expressionist painting wherein the artwork – mainly painting – was understood as a window to another space, focused on the transcendental or contemplative potential of painting. The discourse surrounding these works clearly maps out the strongly conflicting attitudes of the time. Critical essays by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, renowned art critics and lovers of abstract expressionism, became helpful to further define what was the effect of the Minimal works. Fried described how the works changed the viewer's experience and created a sense of theatricality, an aspect that didn't accommodate his own Modernist art view. The discourse extends into writings by Susan Sontag who called for a vocabulary that would enable critics to talk about formal qualities and the experience of artworks; rather than always looking for a meaning behind the work. "The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*."³

In a sense, the text by Morris comes off very dry, which also corresponds with the reception this new form of work got in general. On the one hand the theories and writings served as a tool or even weapon to ignite a change in thinking. On the other hand the aim was extremely basic; to create a kind of pause, a point zero to stop and realize what sculpture actually is and what happens in the experience of it.

To minimize meant to reduce in order to see the properties of the object in clarity; and thereby also to sharpen the awareness of such qualities. That is, what I find, the most revolutionizing aspect of the Minimalist moment.

Whether these same works can have such impact on viewers today is doubtful. I call the emergence and spectacle of Minimalism a moment because the reforming moment is something that only happens once. Today we can only imagine the impact the works made on viewers when they were first confronted with them. The contrast between the minimal works, and other works of that time, lent them an extra concentrated intensity and presence. But the Donald Judd or Robert Morris, that can be seen in most museum collections nowadays, tends to emit a presence and give an experience that is more or less similar to other famous iconic works, and so, they function as references to the art historical images and knowledge most viewers have of them. The presence of the work thereby gets decreased and the sculptures now, serve mostly as reminders of that reforming moment.

The total emphasis on experience in these works involves a very different outlook on the idea of the self and the significance of our own externality; coming from the idea of the internal, hidden, individual psychology of the artist, this new approach implied a total change in thinking. The focus on the viewer also puts spotlight on who the viewer can be, on how we move and why we behave as we do in public space.

HABITATION

There would be no space at all for me if I had no body

Despite their undeniable impact, I find it hard to describe or even fully grasp relations between the spatial and bodily. Merleau Ponty has a way and a language of doing so, that to me feels very present. He manages to put words and detail to experiences that feel inherent and occur so frequently, that they can be hard to discern and single out.

To Ponty, body and space are notions that are closely tied together. The body is not in space but inhabits space. "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them"⁴. Space can never be perceived as separate from the body, because the body is our point of view in the world. It structures how we experience our surroundings.

The body is a co-inhabitant of space alongside with objects, and even though we can dissect the body and know its parts, it can never be completely constituted; this is what makes it different from objects. "It is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches"⁵. The term Double sensation is a way to explain the ambiguous role of the body; when one hand touches the other, the body's ability to, at the same moment be, that which *touches*, and that which is *touched*, becomes evident.

MOTILITY

Motility is my bodily freedom to be active and move spontaneously. My body has a certain power over objects in the way that Motility enables me to move about and navigate around them. To Ponty, Motility has to do with Intentionality because we always move with some degree of purpose or intention. But the Intentionality that has a sense of freedom, he also ascribes partly to biological and culturally learned "habits". For instance typing without having to look at the keyboard, is knowledge in the hands, and when learning to dance the body draws on the movements it already knows, such as walking or running. When the body can make these movements effortlessly, it means that the body has understood them and acquired them as a form of knowledge.

The notion of the habit is developed on by sociologist Sara Ahmed who talks about the effects of repeated movement in relation to labor or to class, gender and race; "Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures."⁶ Even though such divisions no longer exist as officially as they used to, their features can continue to appear because of the unchanged environments. Because the environments have been shaped by an ongoing repetition of certain bodies more than others, and that imprint is cast back at those who will enter the space. The space has taken the shape of a specific type of behavior that continues to guide the behavior of those who follow.

"To move ones body is to aim at things through it"⁷. And this must necessarily mean, that things are our aim – the objects generate our movements and influence our intentions.

So we have the freedom in our Motility to move as we want, but what we want, what we are drawn to and how we behave, all gets influenced by our learned habits, and by what is available to us in our surrounding environment.

STAGES

1 to put to death by order of the law

2 to carry out (instructions etc.)

3 to perform (a movement etc. usually requiring skill)

Entering an exhibition space is something different than entering a post office, train station or supermarket. The art space is in a sense a "useless" space – a space that has no immediate function. How do we approach such a space, if intentionality is what guides our movements as we aim at things? What can be the intention or the habit that forms our behavior?

I will develop a form of answer to this question within the following recount of my own experience of an exhibition visit. The emphasis will be put on how I perceive the space and the objects from the position of my body and I'll try to establish how these surrounding elements may be guiding my movements. To use this method of description means that the elements that constitute the work are not going to be singled out to start with in the text. Elements that are not part of the artwork will also be mentioned; the order in which things are noticed is essential to show how *the seen* through the process of encountering, comes into being as an artwork.

ENTRANCE

A typical time for me to visit de Appel arts centre, or at least the mindset I have for when going there, is on a Sunday. It fits the mode I go into, when I spend time there. A slowness or patience that requires being free from obligation; a moment in between, where I don't have to keep track of time or plan ahead.

I walk into this exhibition without much prior knowledge, other than the design and title on the poster: "When elephants come marching in – Echoes of the sixties in today's art". The title calls to mind psychedelic imagery and somehow builds up an expectation in me of an immersive, colourful and even wild experience. The two first spaces quickly refute that assumption; the first works I meet have a refined aesthetics, where the ideas frame the material, resulting in a sense of sparseness, precision and sharpness.

The 60's associations and references that came to mind before now starts moving into the direction of conceptual or minimal artworks, and I abandon the image of trippy pink elephants.

The two first spaces have a clarity and simplicity to them, posing no great risk of visual overload. I proceed to the 1st floor through the stairs in the middle foyer.

From there I choose to enter the space on my right hand side.

ROOM D

The entrance to the space is a low ramp, that unnoticeably and smoothly leads me to the slightly elevated floor of room D.

So I ascend to the space and the first thing I notice is a tall structure a few meters ahead, which blocks my view of the anterior part of the space. What I do see is that there are many more works in here compared to downstairs, more colors and a slightly chaotic set up. I turn my attention to a grouping of objects in the right side of the space, near to me.

On the floor, there is a rectangular object - it is strangely small in size, considering the centered placement it has. The placement creates an expectation of putting sculptural qualities on display, but the anonymous, odd sized, rectangular object refutes that expectation. Further back, behind the object, there is a tall pedestal placed against the grey wall and painted in its color. On top, at a height rather above my head height and definitely above the standard height of pedestals, there's a figurative sculpture made from what appears to be sand. My eyes glide from that and towards an image next to it, on the wall to the right, an image in corresponding but darker earth colors. I am not sure at which point I become aware of the dark blue wall that's only visible through the corner of my eye, almost behind me, but when I do notice it, its presence in the space is very dominating.



Installationshot by Kristien Daem

My trajectory leads me further towards that right side of the space – a part which has 3 walls around it – one has clearly been built onto the existing architecture in order to make a sealed off space for a video projection behind it. That gives the right part of the room the impression of being a smaller space within the whole. That closed quality, the corner, I think, is what I find inviting.

What attracts my attention first is the tall pedestal with a sand sculpture on top – so tall that the construction simultaneously comes off as a pillar within this quasi architecture. Actually the attempt to integrate the pedestal for this work with the wall by adding a similar baseboard onto it, puts my attention to the fact that all the visible walls are added onto the architecture; thick grey painted panels, that end before meeting the wooden beams in the ceiling. I gently knock on the one before me and it gives a hollow sound.

The intense earthy colors of the image, located on my right side as I'm facing the pedestal, cause me to turn my head and my attention towards it. I am only absorbed with the image for a short while, because its glossy print of appealing textures and colors don't seem to take me in further than to its surface.

When I turn my back on the pedestal and color print to view the other objects, I notice that it loosely takes part in a sort of alignment of rectangular shapes, which connects to the small, centered object, which is actually a pack of A4 copying papers, with a text taped on top of it. When backgrounded by the tall blue wall at the opposite end, the stack appears very low.

The blue wall has a strange role in the set-up because there are marks on it and it feels more integrated in the architecture even though it might be an added panel as well. There is a small, standard, title sign hung on the right side of the wall, which reads "**gerlach en koop**, Execution, 2014".

I step closer to the wall to grasp the details better. It has a small area with clear white scratches and a hole in the middle; these shapes form an irregular rectangular shape. The wall's precisely colored surface clashes with the messy uneven holes, which contradict the graphic, clear appearance of everything around. They seem to be traces of something, that has been removed from that spot.

My next move is back to the stack of wrapped A4 paper on the floor, which, as I'd already noticed in passing, has a text on it. I had reflexively chosen to look at the more immediate elements that attracted my attention before looking further at the text.

The orientation of the letters tells me where to stand in order to read it, so I face the blue wall whilst turning my back on the sand sculpture.

I have to kneel down to be able to read the text:

I have to,
I have to steel myself, he thought, slowly steel myself and face my execution.

He imagined the spyhole in his cell to be the barrel of the rifle and positioned himself in front of it,
three, four meters
[a white envelope will be pinned to his chest]

It's not difficult.
He rehearsed every day: stand up straight – don't move, don't tremble, be restrained and calm,
focus on the hole, concentrate
and wait,
and wait.

After reading, it strikes me that the text is connected to the blue wall with the marks. I am not completely sure because the holes in the wall somehow have an appearance that seems a little too random to be intended as a depiction of the hole mentioned in the text or to be considered as a kind of stage prop.

I feel a strange insecurity at this moment, as if this assumption is my secret and might sound completely unlikely and weird if I share it with someone. The sudden dread and grave seriousness involved in reading about someone who has to face an execution, intensifies the feeling of discomfort and slight perplexity.

I look inside the museum catalog to find answers or confirmation of my thoughts. The material list reads: "Existing drill holes, pack of 400 sheets a4, offset, straight from the printer and unopened"⁸. Proving my theory that the wall in its current state existed prior to the installment of this work.

BLUE STEEL

The text describes something that appears to be fictitious, but at the same time, an element from the text – the hole in the wall - is also visible in the blue wall. This relation establishes a kind of agreement with the viewer; at the moment when a story is integrated, we accept the fiction as a different realm of understanding. The very real and actual hole in the wall helps bridge the fiction with *this* space, even if we know it is not that exact hole the executed was starring at in the story, it becomes a point of relation, of identification even. The reason for the identification, I think, stems from this interplay between the set up in the space and the positioning of one's own body whilst gradually having to make connections between the elements. The word gradual is significant because the realization of how things connect is grasped in stages and very much requires a willingness from the viewer to play along with the idea that the story, the idea, can connect the dots of space – architecture - objects – body – movement. The time/ movement dependency of this work is indicated by the installation shots of it - they can't convey the full understanding needed to connect the elements. You have to kneel down to read the text and you have to be the body positioned across from the hole in the wall – the body is the completing element to make the work.



Installationshot by Kristien Daem

Another form of time than the time of experience and realization is present in the work; the "pack of 400 sheets, A4, offset, straight from the printer and unopened"⁸ contains copies of the text we can see taped on the front, serving as an example of what's inside, which is usually the case when you get a fresh, full, pack of a4 copies. Knowing this brings to mind a slight curiosity towards the process they've gone through, are they really all the same? Are the newest ones at the top and is the ink slightly more faded on those? Either way, the idea in itself establishes the stack of paper as an archiving of the event of copying this text. Such printing paper pack is a very recognizable object that most are used to seeing and handling. The familiarity causes an automatic urge to reach out for a piece of paper. Instead it is attached, sealed and bound to the floor, and if you want to read you have to delve down as the circumstances demand - unlike textworks by Bruce Naumann that come to mind, "Bodypressure" for instance, in which the work is not bound up to one specific space but can be very mobile, since it is simply a stack of pink paper posters offered to the museum visitor, who will typically roll it up and bring it home.

The artists, Gerlach en Koop, call theirs "a hand out that couldn't be handed out."⁹ The reason for this decision is that they "wanted to link the text to the context, the space, the existing hole in the wall, and the exhibition history of the space."⁹

GENERATION

It is interesting to think of "Execution" in relation to the Minimalist notion of presence as rejection of the intimate viewing experience that can "pull" the viewer out of their physical space. Involvement of literature or fiction in a work puts an emphasis on imagination and causes associations that can move far beyond, away from, the present, spatial situation. However in this case, the text at the same time calls the attention back to the physical circumstances, to what's there in the space.

The theme of the exhibition, as a whole, deals with and questions the distinctions between Psychedelia and Conceptualism "The desire for the wild trip seems to be difficult to unite with striving for the pure idea. But is this separation correct? And how do today's artists, consciously or intuitively, handle this double heritage of the 1960's?"¹⁰

I think Gerlach en Koop's work addresses this question quite directly. The "trip" they send the viewer on is perhaps less flamboyant and pleasurable but at the same time more real and embodying.

I would relate such a crossover of formerly disconnected understandings to how Minimalism is always described as being opposed to Expressionism. The distinction was to a great extent connected with the urge to do away with ruling norms, than it had to do with a permanent denial of imagination or emotional content in art.

Morris' dry and formal texts are operating in a manner similar to his sculptures; their simplicity opens up physical and mental space for everything around to play out and unfold – for instance imagination.

The artwork can function as a setting, a proposal, or a stage for action but adhering to the idea of presence doesn't necessarily have to mean that the objects cannot be carriers of some sort of meaning or reference outside themselves. Instead, making use of familiar physical properties like scale, texture, certain sites or settings – serves as invitations to inhabit the work with our own associations, personal background and imagination.

EXIT

FOREGROUNDING

To talk about the work as a background for action as I have done so far, also brings up the question of when the work becomes a design or a matter of staging rather than being something in its own right.

However, to make things with a certain intention, purpose or even functionality in mind is far from new in art. In design, when an object fulfills the purpose intended for it, it is successful as a design. A design that can serve us, not necessarily unnoticed but rather effortlessly, as a backdrop to our activities.

A difference is then, that in art there is a greater acknowledgement of how the object gains a new "life", or addresses us in an unpredictable manner, according to the context it gets placed in. The moment of encountering an uncontrollable or unforeseen factor within the process of making is something to deal with but it is not necessarily ideal to control it completely.

The intention we impose on the objects as we try to shape them into what we want, gets countered by a resistance from the object, as if it has a voice or an identity that suddenly is made manifest. This relationship is exciting, challenging or sometimes frustrating. But it can be the fuel for an ongoing research and result in many strange or rewarding encounters.

In the work "Execution", the hole in the wall is in a way an example of how *that thing* – the wall, whose function should be to serve as exhibition design, to frame the works - instead gets to play a role in the scenario *gerlach en koop* have invented. That is a subtle and powerful example of a thing that positions itself in an ambiguous state between framing/ back-grounding and standing out/acting. The fact that they did not make the holes themselves but chose to use existing ones, I'd associate with a fascination in the manifestation of time, the history in the used, in traces and marks left behind. But not with the aim to discover or uncover the exact history of the object, but rather to re-actualize and thereby re-activate it, using the atmosphere of usage as an essential component of the experience they create. Because, again;

"..To re-encounter objects as strange things is hence not to loose sight of their history but to refuse making them history by loosing sight."¹¹

LOOKS/ IS LOOKED AT - CENTERS/ IS CENTERED

"...more than simply articulating their contingency to the architectural setting, these objects asserted their presentness through the phenomenological encounter with the viewer that Morris had described in "Notes on sculpture, part 2". Morris posited the objects meaning to be dependent on this interactive exchange between it and its viewer. The visitor in the gallery thus engaged in a reflexive process of self-awareness based on the physical presence of that, like another person, shared his or her environment."¹²

This present-ness gives the object a kind of authority. As it is foregrounded and put next to us as an equal actor in the space, it gains a strong position in the encounter with a subject – a human body - a viewer. Not to say that the object gains subjectivity but the situation does change the way the viewer relates to the object, and it can impact the way he/she approaches it. Sensing the object as another presence brings awareness to certain aspects of it, that the subject can identify with - or feels challenged by.

As mentioned in relation to Morris' work and Minimalism, the mechanism of putting emphasis on the viewer's experience also puts the viewer in a position of self-reflection. Is he/she now the performer? What kind of role to assume in such a setting? The objects demand something of you; they can obstruct the route you planned to take, or leave you exposed in the space between them. That becomes a moment to re-consider how you usually inhabit space, how you are influenced by it and how you approach others. And to what extent does the power of having motility and intentionality enhance the receptiveness, sensibility and openness required to experience what is here.

To blindly insist on having that power through exerting dominance onto your surroundings means refusing to learn about the factors that shape you. To ignore the authority of our surroundings is a form of arrogance that potentially leads to a reduction of your freedom. Freedom is gained through the awareness of what has an impact on you, how you act in such a situation. Then, perhaps, it is possible to find out, how to change it.

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