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Yuyay Pallki: Memories and Perception

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Abstract

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The artwork is an exploration of the human mind – a hybrid between a psychological experiment and an art experience. I propose that people’s perception is affected by memory, and depending on the audience’s individual and particular experiences they will see and interpret each space differently. However, the stylistic decisions I have made to decorate each side will generate a trend regarding the audience-generated feedback.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Yuyay Pallki
Memories and Perception

by

Camila B. Quinteros Casaverde

April 14, 2014

The report of the investigation undertaken as a
Senior Thesis, to carry one course of credit in
the Department of Studio Art.

Michael T. Orr
Krebs Provost and Dean of the Faculty

Karen Lebergott, Chairperson

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Dedication

Para esa estrella que me sigue brindando bendiciones.

Para mi mami, quien siempre me amará.

Para mi papi, a quien extraño cada día.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of several people. Beginning with those who lend me a space to work at, their cars, carried wood in and out of places with me, got splinters but didn't complain. To all the people who have heard me speak of this work for months, and some others who have heard me for years. Thank you to all of the inspiring masters that I have met in this past years, who helped me shape up my ideas and bring them to fruition. Thank you to everyone who stayed with me through nights of drilling, plastering, painting and laughing. Thank you to all of you for the beautiful and joyful spirit that surrounded the building and making of *Yuyay Pallki*, because it was truthfully a work made out of pure happiness

It is my belief that different spaces are charged with memories of prior experiences and may have the power to transport an individual from one moment in time and space to another. By standing in a space that reminds us of our childhood home, we might be transported to our bedroom one day after school in seventh grade or if a space reminds you of the kind of dream home you wish for, it might take you back to the time in your life when the wish originated. Architecture is always in context; it is charged with one's individual memories.

Architecture, Memory, and Perception

In the tumultuous 1960s, when society was newly considering the parameters of countless social categories, Maurice Broady advanced the term "architectural determinism" in his manuscript *Social Theory in Architectural Design*. In his manuscript, he describes an ideal for architects and urban planners, namely to envision their work integrated with social consciousness. He explains that architectural determinism is a wish to improve society via means of design: architects and urban planners believe that the placement of buildings and streets affect the way citizens act and feel about their own society¹. A clear example of such a thought process can be found in Daniel Burnham's 1909 *Plan of Chicago*; he proposed six axes of change for the city designed to improve living conditions and consequently eliminate societal ills such as poverty and slums. Burnham, consistent with the Victorian values of the day, believed that by having an influx of wealthier

¹ Maurice Broady, "Social Theory in Architectural Design," in *People and Buildings*, ed. Robert Gutman (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009), 176.

people into the city, the lower classes would learn how to live better by following their example.² However hopeful architects and urban planners may be about the role of design, Broady concludes his manuscript by calling attention to the limitations of architectural determinism, such as not taking into account a series of social conditions that affect the way that citizens relate to the built environment. To exert control over the effects of architecture is impossible because architecture exists only in/only within the context in which our life takes place; therefore, we begin to –subconsciously– associate architecture with ideas, memories, and concepts.

For the purpose of this discussion, we will assume that human perception is, in part, based on memory, and memories shape our view of the world, as they are the base of our personal belief systems and knowledge.³ It is through memories that we are able to learn about history, society, art, and science. Memories are also responsible for psychological reactions, reminding us of painful times, happy childhoods, or incredible adventures. Memories affect our perception and become the glass through which we observe the world; a transparent cocoon getting scratched and marked as time goes by. The smudges and scratches on the cocoon are direct results of the places we have been to, the things we have seen, the smells we have smelled, and the textures we have touched. The glass keeps getting dirtier; the more time passes, the dirtier it gets. As we look through our glass, the smudges

² Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett. Introduction to *The Plan of Chicago: Prepared under the Direction of the Commercial Club During the Years MCMVI, MCMVII, and MCMVIII*, ed. Charles Moore (Chicago: The Commercial Club, 1909).

³ Timothy J. Bussey and Lisa M. Saksida, "Object Memory and Perception in the Medial Temporal Lobe: An Alternative Approach," *Current Opinion in Neurobiology* 15, no. 6 (2005): 730-37.

and scratches we see mark the way in which we see/perceive the world. That glass is our perception, the way in which we observe our surroundings. Our perception is, then, affected by our memories, by the places that we have been to, and by our experiences.

In short, architectural settings, such as urban and suburban landscapes, are the context in which our memories are shaped and ideas developed. As such, architecture has the power to bring up memories from the past and remind us of moments, feelings, wishes, dreams, and past experiences.

Yuyay Pallki (Memories and Perception) provides viewers with the opportunity to experience such transcendental transportation. The difficulty for the artist resides in controlling what might be triggered within the viewers' memories as they experience *Yuyay Pallki*: where will they be taken? What memories will come to mind? Though as an artist I wish to trigger specific memories, it cannot be guaranteed that each individual will respond in the desired manner. Regardless of what kind of emotions, feeling or memories I wish to trigger, there need not be a correlation between my intent and the viewers' reaction. It is only reasonable to assume that our art experiences will be as multifaceted as our individual lives have been. Nonetheless, it is also reasonable to predict an audience's reaction in certain circumstances: placing the viewers in a stylistically controlled environment anticipates a certain correlation to their experience and the choices that I have made.

The *Yuyay Pallki* Experience

Yuyay Pallki is an investigation of the mind, how it works, and whether or not our new memories are condition and influenced by our past experiences. It explores different stimuli that people perceive as they experience two different spaces that are quietly very alike. From the outside, the parallel corridors presented are identical in shape, form, volume, and texture. Their external appearance does not indicate any variation between the two spaces. However, the inside of the corridors are decorated in two different styles: The first is a clean space decorated with metal chrome and advanced technology, and the second space is decorated by furniture made from re-purposed materials; thus, its identity is reconstituted by and via my labor. While these two spaces themselves will not change over time, the perception of them will change as every audience member may perceive and experience them differently.

Yuyay Pallki, installed in the Sonnenschein Gallery, will transform the space into the holder of two corridors. From the outside both corridors look exactly the same; they have the same height, width and length. The two main walls that make up each box –meaning the ones that are the longest– are made out of eight oriented strand board panels measuring four feet by two feet and making up an eight foot square wall covered with simple paint. These two walls are five feet and seven inches away from each other—my height— and attached to one another by three overhead wooden beams and two floor beams. The other two walls are black curtains through which the audience members can enter and exit without difficulty.

The presentation of *Yuyay Pallki* –a large white wall with instructions and two black curtains on each side– prompts viewers to pick one of two corridors, each

decorated with a particular style, igniting a series of memories and altering perception. The audience members are asked to record everything and anything (words, sounds, smells, doodles, etc.) that comes to mind on a piece of paper. Immediately after, they are prompted to experience a second space decorated in a contrasting, almost-opposite style and record everything and anything that comes to mind.

As audience members are recording their experiences while passing through the space, there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.⁴ This idea was first introduced by the great artist and pedagogue Josef Albers who published widely on perceptual effects. According to Eva Diaz, Albers “redesigned the experience of looking at art as one of *direct seeing*, whereby attention to perceptual habits marks routine cognitive associations to be influenced and possibly transformed.”⁵ Albers admitted recognition as a core dimension of perception. The cognitive association that audiences of an artwork are exposed to is closely related to their learned and experienced knowledge and, therefore, their memories. He states that “all group members [the viewers] will have the same visual perception. But still the individual associations and emotional reactions will differ vastly.”⁶ I expect, therefore, the recordings to be as varied as my viewers but still related to the styles presented.

⁴ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 55.

⁵ Eva Diaz, “The Ethics of Perception: Josef Albers in the United States,” *Art Bulletin* 90, no.2 (2008): 17.

⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

In order to explore the concepts of perception, the positioning of furniture and decorations will mirror each other. However, the corridors are clearly different in their stylistic conception – one is made out of new, sleek, self-referential materials, and the second one is outfitted mostly with repurposed elements and older types of technology. In the first space, each piece of furniture is conceived as a mechanized action, removing the appearance of hand-made craftsmanship and, therefore, removing trace of human memory from it as much as possible. In contrast, the materials used in the second space represent a link to the past by reconstructing already existing objects, thus defying the concepts of originality and formalism proposed in the first space.

Influences

The physicality of *Yuyay Pallki* is related to Bruce Nauman's iconic *Corridors* presented at Wilder Gallery in 1970. For this artwork, Nauman employed similar technology as in *Yuyay Pallki*, linking wooden panels with beams. From the outside *Yuyay Pallki* and *Corridors* look alike. Nauman's approach is similar, since he is an artist concerned with phenomenology and sets specific conditions to experience his artworks. He takes great pains to ensure that the participants have the same phenomenological experience time after time.⁷ In *Yuyay Pallki*, all of the elements employed within it are highly intentional. None of the details are meant to show a particular experience but rather a universal memory to which, generally speaking, any audience member can relate.

⁷ Jan Butterfield, *The Art of Light + Space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 66.

Another characteristic of Nauman's is his decision to work as an artist-phenomenologist and artist-conceptualist rather than as an artist-maker. His work is not concerned about looking at much, but rather about thinking a lot about what you see.⁸ As said by Jan Butterfield, "His [Nauman's] structures are functional enough to provide an experience but not so well built that they call attention to themselves. It is not the structures that constitute the piece, but the experiences." For example, in *Corridors*, Nauman placed the audience member as the actor in a space of performance, where they experience a dual reality. As they walk towards two monitors showing them a lagged feedback of themselves walking, they are both getting closer and further from themselves. Here, the artwork itself is a stage where the audience member is placed and forced to perform as part of the artist's proposal. Similarly, *Yuyay Pallki* acts as a stage of interaction between audience members and their own memories.

However, unlike Nauman's *Corridors*, my viewers encounter a white wall with simple instructions. Such instructions prompt them to pick up a piece of paper and write down all and any words that come to their minds as they go through the installation. The white wall reads:

Yuyay Pallki
Memory Perception
← *Pick a side* →
Grab a piece of paper

⁸ Ibid, 67.

Please write down ***all and any*** of your thoughts as you go through the space

Ideally, the viewer will write down words as a stream of consciousness, not as a reflective action. Depending on which side of the work they decide to go through first, a paper will be provided for them with two sides marked as “1” and “2”. At the end of their experience, they will be asked to place their papers in a box from which I will collect the audience feedback at the end of the show. This action departs from Nauman’s approach in the way that I am asking my audience to both interact and record their interaction at once. Whereas Nauman is interested in observing his audience interact with the space, I am interested in analyzing the recording of my audience’s interaction with *Yuyay Pallki*.

Vito Acconci’s installation work has also influenced the conception of *Yuyay Pallki*. In his artistic practice, he is concerned with voyeuristic experiences on behalf of the audience and also, though later in his career, with spaces. The influence by Vito Acconci’s *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?)* (1976), which transformed the Sonnabend Gallery in New York into a large communal table, is multilayered. Acconci’s installation stretched from an inner staircase through an open window. His work transforms the full gallery, as my installation does, and places the audience members as the center argument for the artwork as is my aim to do as well. *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway?)* opens onto questions of the place and public for Acconci’s practice, focusing on the public as a constituency and

space of instantiation for art.⁹ Although Acconci is not the only artist working this way –Nauman is another example– his approach is highly architectonic as well as psychological. Both artists exemplify practices that *Yuyay Pallki* emulates.

For my artwork, I rely on the audience to generate feedback. If the audience does not engage with the piece, then the study of memories and filters is futile; this extreme reliance on audience places them at the center of my artistic practice, mirroring Vito Acconci's installation of *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)*. Acconci 1976 performance represents two decades of viewer-oriented installation art that were inaugurated by Allan Kaprows' Happenings in the late fifties, enhanced by the Minimalism of the sixties, before finally reaching its full bloom in the seventies as Conceptual Art.

Yuyay Pallki aligns itself with the idea of performative spaces –particularly with Nauman's approach– as a stage in which the audience is art. *Yuyay Pallki* is a space that just barely convinces the viewer that they are in a different space, one that belongs more to a home than a gallery. This illusion is realistic enough to allow the viewer to write down feedback as if they were in an actual inhabited space rather than a purely artistic sphere, such as the Sonnenschein Galley is. Here, just like in Bruce Nauman's *Corridors* or Acconci's *Where We Are Now (Who Are We Anyway)*, the audience member is the main subject of the artwork. However, it is important to understand what formal elements I use in order to generate such reactions. I will now define the concepts of Modern and Postmodernism in relation to the decisions made for each space.

⁹ Suzanne Hudson, "Vito Acconci and the Space of His Public," *Critical Matrix* 14 (2003): 10.

Stylistic Organization of Spaces

In *Yuyay Pallki*, one space is decorated in a sleek, formal manner, recalling the highly simplified design aesthetics of modernist movements such as Art Deco, Bauhaus, and the International Style. The second space is decorated in what I call a “postmodernist” fashion. While I recognize that “postmodern” is a contentious term that evades a single explanation, for the purposes of my project, postmodernism will refer to the ambiguity of historical reference. Thus, this space may incorporate some elements of modernism but appeal to different historical traditional and trajectories with equal force.

The postmodernist corridor will interrogate the cardinal principles of modernism through such topics as authenticity and originality, whereas the modernist corridor will treat the audience member as a memory-less spectator.

The modernist corridor is decorated simply and minimally: it contains a chrome metal stool, a monochromatic metal desk, a computer monitor, and two white paintings. The flooring is clear carpeting, and the space includes chrome metal lighting fixtures. The second structure, the post-modernist space, contains a sofa made out of reconstructed shipping wooden pallets, a table made of recycled cardboard, cork, and glass, mirror paintings, and a vintage computer. The flooring is dark wood, and the light fixtures are theater lights. Here, I seek to draw a clear relation between the two modes of decoration and discourses about class. The modernist space hides the labor necessary to produce the artwork, erasing all traces

of labor during the aesthetic experience.¹⁰ Modernism was advanced by the originality sought by the avant-garde, who avoided incurring in historical references and memories, as those two worked against the idea of originality. It is modernism's intentional and abrupt gesture of breaking with history that makes it memory-less.

In contrast, postmodernism is less concerned with newness as it uses past artistic proposals as a stage for commentary. Postmodern artists may use a known painting in order to raise criticism to what it might stand for. Postmodernism proposes a certain attitude towards life that is self-referential, ironic, and critical of its surroundings. Postmodernism relies on memory in order to relate to other areas of life.¹¹

I propose, as postmodernism does, that the audience members are memory-charged and that their previous memories influence their perception of each space. It is by their experience of passing through both corridors that their memories and actions will influence their perception of the space.

Modern Space

Beginning with the modern space, modern architecture is not usually associated with domesticity, however it is connected to avant-garde movements. The main exponent of the modernist movement was Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier. His architectural style and writings highly influenced

¹⁰ Art Berman, *Preface to Modernism* (Chicago: An Illini Book Criticism, 1994), 285.

¹¹ Dave Hill, *Marxism Against Postmodernism in Educational Theory* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2002), 4.

modernist design, and he was known as its spokesman.¹² His ideas of mechanization and industrial processes influenced the way that art and architecture and art developed from then on. In the 1960s, artists such as Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Richard Serra, among others, found themselves involved with Minimalism. The monikers “ABC art,” “Primary Structures,” and “literalist art” all refer to Minimalism, beginning at a time when many artists were testing the limits of modernist practice, eventually opening up a new field of art, even within its apparent restrictions. Minimalism is at the edge of modernism, bringing about conceptual provocations as it breaks with the transcendental space of most modernist art.

Minimalism has a lot in common with (purely) modernist art; it is self-critical, and, as any late modernist art, concerned with the artwork itself and its formal qualities; nevertheless, it challenges central positions in modernist aesthetics in terms of expression and formality.¹³ Robert Morris, in “Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2” (1966) writes that minimalism is both a contradiction of sculpture to the modernist pure object and an expansion of sculpture beyond recognition.¹⁴ This development is because Minimalism is interested in the use of concepts as part of the art-making. Whereas more purist modern artwork is concerned with a sublime experience of the aesthetic aspect of art, minimalism brings about a series of questions of the art-making process; it stands undefined, and, as Sol LeWitt claims,

¹² Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 8.

¹³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996), 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

no one ever defined what it means or put any limits to where it [Minimalism] begins or ends, what it is and isn't.¹⁵ Therefore, Minimalism is a shifting signifier, which relies on context to be defined.¹⁶ Minimalism stands at the edge of modernism and the development of postmodernism; this is to say that it may follow certain parameters of formal modernism, labor-less and sublime; however, it does concern itself with its audience as a memory-charged individual. It is because of this position, or crux, that minimalism stood as the right movement to pursue visually when I was conceptualizing the design of the modern space.

My intention for the modernist space is precisely that: a space that is perceived as new, not interacted with, and almost memory-less. However, *Yuyay Pallki's* viewers will not come from a modernist culture but rather from one where context and concepts are highly considered when appreciating art. Because of this reflective exercise, the viewers crossing through the space are bound to impregnate it with their own memories, perceiving such space from a postmodernist culture.

Postmodern Space

The postmodernist space is almost entirely made out of re-purposed materials; therefore, it is defying what each element was in the past, therefore challenging its authenticity converting it, mutating it and re-interpreting it. The

¹⁵ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* Summer (1967): 79-83.

¹⁶ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 213.

object then carries a double meaning with it, as well as it is layered interpretations and multiple pasts. The object as such is an embodiment of the postmodern proposal. The materials used for these objects emulate Arte Povera, an Italian movement concerned with the use of available materials for artists. The Arte Povera movement emerged from the desire of young Italian artists to use “poor” materials in order to challenge “high” art exposed in galleries during the 60s and 70s.¹⁷ The movement excelled in its desire to recycle used materials, and it is a gesture that the postmodern space aims to emulate. Using only available elements and denying myself the ease to buy materials, the postmodern space defies Capitalism in this respect.¹⁸

Working within a range of postmodern techniques, *Yuyay Pallki* is interested in stories, in memories, and in history brought into its performative space by audience members. However, this is not its only link to postmodernism. *Yuyay Pallki* title is written in Quechua, the language spoken by a large portion of native Peruvians before colonization and throughout the South American territory of the Incan Empire. When considering the Quechua language, later stripped and robbed from its territory by colonizers, the load of historical charge it brings with itself cannot be ignored. The word *Yuyay* means “memories,” and the word *Pallki* means “ideas”. Memories and Ideas, spoken and expressed in a marginalized language, defy to the status quo of the Peruvian territory. It takes the idea of the Spanish language as a language spoken by the powerful and rich, comparable to the position of

¹⁷ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005): 17.

¹⁸ Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, 9.

modernism as high art, and smudges it by celebrating its existence in a gallery foreign to the Peruvian reality. The simple action of naming *Yuyay Pallki* in Quechua places the piece in an overall postmodern sphere.

The Post-experience Project

However, this thesis is not primarily concerned with the spaces but with the reactions collected. For this reason, a post-experience project is necessary to express the findings in feedback, in order to see if they fit my assumptions of being related to the decoration of each space and the memories those bring about or not.

Yuyay Pallki is concerned with how perception is skewed by experience. In order to show such assumption, I propose to display the findings in the feedback box by placing the words provided by the audience between Plexiglas sheets. I will create two pieces, one in which all of the words for one space is displayed, and a second for the other. Each piece of Plexiglas will have a highly transparent aerial photograph of its respective space imprinted on it, and behind that image individual cards with words found in the feedback box will be displayed. I will hang those pieces by the side of each space by April 30th in the Sonnenschein Gallery, at the time of the Senior Show opening.

If my theory is correct, and the stylistic choices I made in the decoration of each space affects the viewers' perception, then a certain relation between words should be apparent.

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