

The scenography of sublime spaces: a spatial methodology

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Abstract

This paper serves as a contextualisation of the artistic project entitled “Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.” which entailed a working period and an exhibition in a disused chapel. The entire project (working process and exhibition) has been translated into a book, which is entered into the conference as a physical exhibit as well as a PDF file. This text should not be read separately from the book it describes. Using the book as a case-study I will illustrate how it functions as a methodological tool that helps to unite theory and practice within one conceptual space.

KEYWORDS: sublime, methodology, books, map

Introduction

The project “*Nothing will come of nothing, speak again*” has been realised as part of a practice-based PhD in architecture entitled: “The scenography of sublime spaces”. The main focus of this PhD is the translation of the philosophical concept of ‘the sublime’ into a spatial form. This challenge requires both a philosophical and historical reading of the sublime as well as the creation of works and installations within the context of an artistic practice. Finding a productive interaction between these two extremes is one of the most important (methodological) challenges of the research.

Even though this paper focusses on analysing the book/exhibit in relation to the method of the research, it seems relevant to briefly discuss the theoretical context of the sublime to illustrate the gap that exists between theory and practice with greater precision. The sublime has a rich history and in current discourse is a concept that appears to be looking for a context (Morley, 2010, p.21). The pre-Romantic sublime placed an emphasis on the physical object as a trigger for (sublime) experience. Since Kant the focus has shifted towards a more cerebral approach. Not the object, but the mind itself became the focus of describing the structure of the sublime. In the postmodern accounts of Derrida and Lyotard, the sublime seems to have been completely adopted into an endemic philosophical discourse, with an emphasis on the lack in language and thinking itself.

My own artistic practice started in the field of architecture, or rather as an exploration of the limits of the architectural discipline. It has embraced 'other spaces' and a non-traditional approach to planning (or indeed, not-planning) an environment. Under the influence of a 'Taoist' acceptance of the way things are, my practice will always approach the sublime from a more modest angle. The scraps and refuse that are present in the margin, rather than a distant grand design of heavenly light. It is in the gaps and the coincidence, the abandoned moment or the possible event that my practice would seek the sublime.

The extensive discourse on the sublime is something that certainly cannot be ignored and that demands a certain amount of discursive interaction. However, at times this contemporary cerebral approach seems to be caught up in its own complexity, reinforcing its own disciplinary boundaries (the domain of philosophy) instead of inviting an interaction with other fields, or even with any real-life experience. Engaging too directly with this abstract philosophical complexity brings with it the risk of underappreciating the physical and corporeal aspects of the sublime that in fact lie closest to an artistic practice. There are a number of ways in which an artistic practice can interact with this hermetic nature:

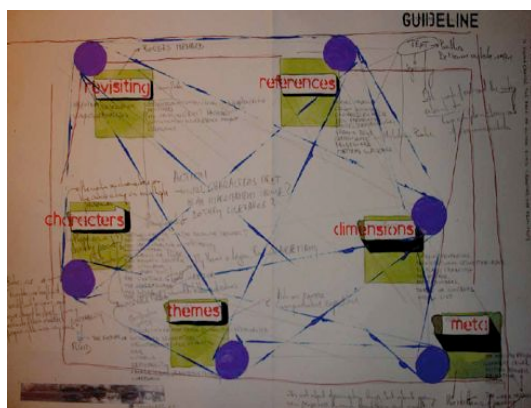
The first is to treat theory as a separate domain and bridge the gap using discourse and logic. A distant theoretical formulation then becomes a stable contra point to the artistic practice, that is tied to it by logical, closed arguments. The relationship between theory and practice would then seem to be coherent: the theory raises a question or lack which the practical work answers, completing the circle. The discourse would support the work and vice versa without any tension or sparks between the two. This is not an interaction that I feel is of added value to either field. It is my opinion that it remains necessary for practice and theory to converse with each other about where this transition between the two might lie. This questioning should be a continuous vicious circle.

Another scenario for interaction would be using the theory of the sublime as a source of inspiration while making practical works. The theory would be equalled to many of the other influences and coincidences that find their way into a work. In fact this disarms the discourse and reduces the project to a postmodern collage, which may yield interesting results but does not do justice to the conceptual richness that the discourse on the sublime contains. The vicious circle should not be limited by logic, but should at least attempt to interact with the arguments it chooses to adopt.

I therefore propose a third scenario, which entails a more complex and unstable relationship between theory and practice. In a manner of speaking this third scenario forces both theory and practice out of their respective comfort zones into a new ‘common ground’. From the very start of the project I saw the need to define this common ground and turn it into a productive oscillating space, rather than one of binary opposites. An important factor in allowing this oscillation to take place is to develop a certain flexibility in language (text).

Finding a suitable ‘subjective’ approach to texts (both of a theoretical and reflective nature) and finding a ‘right’ way to structure it, is something many artists conducting research are confronted with. There are two artistic researchers that have stood out for me with regard to the role and potential of text and structure in a practice-based PhD. The first is Katja Tukiainen, a Finnish artist who has adopted a completely personal web of language that incorporates her work, her inspirations and the way her thoughts jump between them. She has devised an alphabetical system that offers a semantic framework that structures the research and hints at what the finished PhD might look like. (Tukiainen 2010a) Each exhibition is given a sequential letter of the alphabet which is preceded by the prefix *Paradis*. It started at *Paradis a (Petit l’objet a or America)* and will finish with the yet unknown *Paradis z*. Each paradise becomes a constellation of subjectively linked words and works, the final PhD might be some sort of map of all these places (Tukiainen 2010a), with her reflection as a personal guide book. At a presentation held during manifesta 8 she said that there are enough good philosophers and art historians and that she will write from her work from within, as she is the only one who can assume that position. (Tukiainen 2010b) The subjective structure she devised to realise this is very convincing: the text is dragged into the rich, associative domain of the arts.

Figure 1



Bart Geerts, map of PhD research

A second example with regard to the role and potential of text and structure is Bart Geerts, who defended his doctoral research entitled ‘*The painterly revisited*’ in January of 2012. Geerts has a background in literature as well as fine arts and it comes as no surprise that his approach to the PhD revolves for a substantial part around text. Inspired by narrative texts like George Perec’s *La vie mode d’emploi* and Mark Danielewski’s *House of leaves* he proceeds to construct his own textual research space. The various components of his research assume imaginary roles in the textual theatre that Geerts constructs. Figure 1 shows one of his maps at an early stage in the research process. In the end the growing complexity made him decide to represent his final thesis in five essays (Huybrechts & Peeters 2012), but with headings

like “poetics of the local” and “architecture of the archive” the spatial complexity is still amply represented, even if it is in a clarified/purified form.

Both examples are very different from the content and context of my own project, however at a conceptual and methodological level they offer two extremes for which I admire their respective methods. Tukiainen unites the text with the work and in a way becomes the text herself. Geerts creates a layered textual architecture that literally gives form to the research. An important difference shared by both examples is the fact these are doctoral theses in the fine arts, concerning their own field: painting in both cases. My research, because it is conducted in the field of (interior) architecture as opposed to fine art, needs to at least define its position in relation to a civil or spatial ‘functionality’ or ‘use’. It is precisely this external ‘functional’ requirement of the project that I will attempt to converge with the notion of the sublime. My research should attempt to explore a possible use of the sublime (space). My explorations thus lie simultaneously inside and outside the discipline. They are concerned with a personal artistic practice but are also concerned with a conceptualisation of the sublime within the common space of society. The (theoretical concept of the) sublime lets me position my work within the world. Jeroen Boomgaard in his essay *The Chimera of method* stresses the importance of formulating a research question that lies at the core of the discipline and that can be answered separately by both the practical as well as the theoretical components of the research, as the two can never converge (Boomgaard, 2011, p.66-67). In my approach the artistic and the academic do not converge, but they are locked into a room together to fight out their differences. The sublime explores its value for a spatial practice and spatial practice attempts to embed a sublimity into the functional space of everyday society.

Dérive through an interior

The methodological device I have constructed to work with these opposites is literally a middle ground; it is the conceptualisation of the entire project *as* space: a space in which practice and theory are both (re)presented.

The ‘research space’ is conceptualised as an interior, the limits of which are determined by the disciplines and the subject-matter of the research: (interior) architecture, art and the sublime. The definition of a conceptual interior allows for a wide field of research, whilst simultaneously forcing delineation. In doing so the middle-ground unites academic requirements (like rigour and limiting the scope of the research) with the tendencies of my own artistic practice (the necessary freedom required in any artistic practice). The middle ground is literally expressed in terms of the discipline of the research: interior architecture. It is neither a practical, physical space, nor a mere theoretical or abstract concept. It manifests itself precisely in between the two.

Theoretical and practical explorations can be seen as (simultaneous) walks within this interior space. Because the theoretical concept of the sublime is so multifaceted and an artistic practice is in a sense unlimited, the exploratory and whimsical paths might be best described as *dérives*: subjectively determined routes within a larger structure. The *dérive* is a method developed by the Situationist International in the 1950s. It is defined as:

“a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.” (Debord, 1956, p.22).

The S.I. attempted to approach urban space in a different way, with an emphasis on (new) experience as opposed to following the conventional and supposedly pre-determined ‘meanings’ of the city. The situationist experience of the *dérive* was simultaneously a game and a means of studying the urban milieu. (Andreotti & Costa, 1996, p.86) The method often balanced between the given, objective nature of a city and its subjective ‘alternative use’.

“The spatial field of the dérive may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the activity is aimed at studying a terrain or at emotional disorientation. It must not be forgotten that these two aspects of the dérive overlap in many ways so that it is impossible to isolate one of them in a pure state.” (Debord, 1956, p.24)

This seems a suitable analogy for the position of an artistic researcher, walking between the integrity of his own practice and relevance for a larger, external context. Partly playing, partly gathering knowledge on the terrain. The fact that this knowledge is of an ‘alternative’ nature than that of everyday, efficient, productive disciplines confirms the suitability of the method for artistic endeavours.

Account of a first *dérive*

“Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.” is the title of a working period and the resulting exhibition, which I collaborated on with Sara Bomans in the Gasthuis chapel in Borgloon (Belgium). It was the first artistic project that was part of my PhD and as such can be seen as a first *dérive* within the newly formulated research space. Besides retracing its own steps this *dérive* describes how the artistic process has helped the translation of the abstract concept of an interior into a (practical) method, using books as an intermediary tool.

The start of the project mirrored the intimidating emptiness of the start of a PhD: Sara and I decided to use this void and set out from the status quo of the (empty) exhibition space. The method of the project was itself a spatial and temporal *dérive* as is characteristic of my artistic practice. Coincidence and acceptance of ‘the way things go’ were the starting points for approaching a (sacral) sublime. We constructed an exhibition out of the spaces, objects, encounters and fragments we found (and manipulated) on our path during the two month working period. During this time we visited a series of other churches in the Borgloon area that were all dealing with radically shrinking congregations and in a way mirrored the emptiness of the exhibition space in the chapel. The project was incrementally constructed around those journeys and the people we met in the churches.

We documented these journeys with photographs. Initially they were meant to memorize the locations and capture the spaces and details that drew our attention. As the collection grew, we realised that the images in themselves contained a part of what the project was about. They seem to describe an abandoned sublime, scattered amongst everyday objects and banal situations.

We ‘mirrored’ the experience that is shown in the photos in the empty chapel in a spatial way. Using materials that were present in the adjacent storage room I constructed a series of installations that organically grew into the environment that was finally exhibited. Sara translated snapshots of the installations in-progress into life-sized paintings. This emphasised the relevance (and beauty) of each step in the process and accentuated the temporary nature of any fixed or final configuration.

Figure 2



Photo of storage room before exhibition

Figure 3



Photo of storage room and exhibited book during exhibition

Figure 4



Installation view of the chapel

The ‘final’ presentation consisted of three installations (‘altars’ constructed out of everyday objects out of the storage room). The altars also contained small paintings and video projections of their own creation and other previous spatial actions in the chapel. The large canvases that Sara painted were positioned opposite the altars in such a way that the

paintings showed a previous incarnation of the physical altar. In the emptied storage room, not usually accessible to the general public, a book was presented on a plinth and a sound piece was played: an eternally repeating choir rehearsal that we encountered in one of the visited churches.

The role of the book grew incrementally. Initially it was meant to be used as a (private) logbook to track the process and collect all the images in one place. Only when the importance of the process and the 'value' of the images became apparent did we decide to develop the book as a separate work. The second book (which was presented as a work) contained a series of photographs of the visits to the other churches as well as a visual registration of the parallel spatial experiments that were conducted in the chapel. There were also two interviews in which Sara and I bilaterally questioned each other's points of view on what we were doing. These interviews were conducted halfway through the working period and helped us to better understand the partly subconscious path we had taken thus far.

The creation of the second book revealed the potential of this medium to capture the *dérive*-like process that was at the heart of the project. The interaction between the visits to the different churches and the constructing of multiple installations within the chapel could be clearly represented in book form. The 'visual essay' of this process together with the two interviews created precisely the conceptual spatiality that I had described in my methodological integration of theory and practice. The book became a palimpsest of physical space and time that re-presented a collection of previous configurations. It was presented in the storage room as a separate work. After the exhibition closed, images of the final installation were added to the last (third) version of the book, together with additional reflective texts that attempt to position the project in relation to the sublime and the conceptual interior of the research.

Reflection on the first *dérive*

The S.I. did not solely use the *dérive* to explore the city, they also employed it to question and perfect their own techniques and methods. Likewise, I would like to summarise my first experiences with this method and explain why and how I intend to continue working with the book as intermediary tool in future projects and what the relation to a final form of output might be.

The reflective component in the book identifies three concepts related to the sublime that are both addressed in the work as well as by the translation into book form. The first is the notion of immanence (Bomans & Roes, 2012, p.393). The installation revolves around a series of acts of immanence but these can only be perceived through the collected images and a reflective text in the book. The book offers an essential insight into the methods and content of the work. This role of the book can be linked to the second concept, that of the *parergon* (Bomans & Roes, 2012, p.384), which places the book precisely on the border between being defined as a mere by-product or as a work in itself. The book collects (and translates) the fragments of the entire project into one physical form. This collection is all that is left after the exhibition but it can never realise a precise representation of the actual

show. This brings us to the third concept of the ‘constellation’, which is reflectively linked to the Lacanian lack at the core of signification (Bomans & Roes, 2012, p.378).

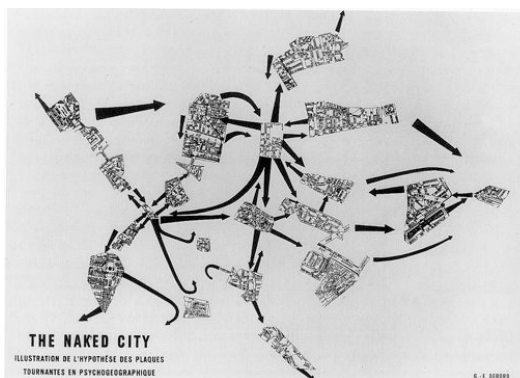
In light of these concepts the strength of the book as a physical middle ground between theory and practice becomes clear. The medium allows the capturing of time intervals. As opposed to a physical exhibition space, it allows for multiple actions and (contradictory) events to take place simultaneously. By being browseable it re-presents a series of disparate (spatial) actions in a way that is close to their actual manifestation in physical space and time. However, the book also allows for commentary and emphasising certain episodes whilst ignoring irrelevant or uninteresting episodes.

Similar arguments describe why a book is more suited to the task than a website. First of all, a book has a permanence and definitive nature whereas a website is perceived as continually updateable. A website would be a virtualisation of the project instead of a distilled description or re-presentation. The act of re-presenting allows for contemplation of the artistic and theoretical *dérives* and offers a first step towards delivering ‘useful components’. A second advantage is that a book is a physical object, it shows its limits and can be read or browsed intuitively without the risk of technical complications. The spatiality of a book is more corporeal than the (virtual) space of a website. The physical experience of an amount of empty pages cannot be achieved in the same way on a website. A final advantage is the definitive nature of a book allowing for interim summaries of sections of the research. In my artistic projects the process is often open ended and continually shifting. Working with a static medium like a book forces me to create (temporary) closure on past projects.

The book as intermediary (spatial) tool

The book can be compared to an account of a *dérive*. It re-presents a section of the research and describes the issues and connections made during the creative process. It is a logbook that describes both the artistic process and the theoretical connections. The uncovering or identifying of combined clusters (‘turntables’ as the S.I. named the crucial areas on the map) of practical and theoretical reflection is what makes the book a description of a spatial journey.

Figure 5



Guy Debord, *The Naked City*, 1957

Figure 6



Madeleine de Scudéry, *Carte de Tendre*, 1653

Accounts of the *dérive* can be seen as an intermediary state between the actual walking and the ultimate mapping that takes place afterwards on the basis of multiple *dérives* and which describes the landscape on a more generic and less subjective level. A single account is often highly detailed and personal whereas the map offers a systematic overview and discloses the relations between other parts of the city as a whole. The duty of the map is to relate the subjective wanderings to an (external or common) context and to perform an abstraction and meta-analysis of the individual nature of the *dérives*.

It is precisely this kind of relationship that I think the books might have towards the PhD as a whole. Future books will fuel the further development of thematic ‘turntables’ within the research constellation, a skeleton which is already present. The map, unlike the books, offers a level of abstraction, an overview of the whole and it discloses each stage of the research ‘as it happens’. To do this requires a flexible form to which a website seems most suited. I am currently exploring this by developing a website structure (based on the Google maps template, supported by a database of content) in order to start mapping these turntables as they gain weight and texture. Like the *Carte de Tendre*, a metaphorical map referred to in a 1959 article in the journal *Internationale situationiste*, the mapped research landscape might ultimately embody the sublime spatiality that lies at the core of the project.

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