

# Architects of Air: An Experience

Yi-Fu Tuan and John Dewey investigate the experiences of human beings and therefore they both part from the relationship between the subject and his environment. Dewey states that we have to return to the life of animals on a human scale and affirms it is the human's loss of connection with their environment we have to blame for people's alienation from their own experiences. He considers this loss both in time and space and pretends, just like Tuan, that the artist can liberate us out of this alienation. This article connects the theories of these two famous philosophers with Alan Parkinson's work and his artistic brainchild Architects of Air.

## 1 Art as Experience

### 1.1 John Dewey

American philosopher and educationist John Dewey, who died in 1952, is known to have written about almost every aspect of (American) society. He is the most important representative of pragmatism, the first real American contribution to philosophy, that was founded by Charles Sanders Peirce and Dewey himself. Pragmatism is a branch of philosophy that presumes a radical pluralism and could be placed somewhere in between realism and relativism. Insights from different points of view are used without sinking into a relativism and the focus is put on the human as an acting being. Pragmatists believe that the human being acts and thinks in function of the problems that he is confronted with and that a theory is only valuable under the circumstances in which it proves to function. In 1934, when Dewey talks about 'Art as Experience', it is the first time (with the exception of a few cases) that Dewey forms a concrete opinion about art.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, these statements perfectly fit in his complete discourse and the experience of a piece of art even turns out to become the final piece of his complete oeuvre.

Broadly, we can deduce three important conceptions from 'Art as Experience' at which the pragmatic philosophy differs from the analytical philosophy. Firstly, we mention Dewey's thesis of continuity, that advocates for a continuity between the esthetical experience and the regular forms of life. The next thesis follows the outlines of the first and pleads to abolish the discrepancies between art and other disciplines, including science. Lastly, we notice that Dewey resists the altruism of esthetical appreciation, and more specifically rages against the theories of Immanuel Kant.<sup>2</sup> The next chapter mainly focuses

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<sup>1</sup> In 1925, 'Experience and Nature' was published, in which Dewey dedicated a remarkable article to the arts.

<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, we have to determine Dewey's misinterpretation of Kant. He should rather have criticised Arthur Schopenhauer, since it was he who radicalised altruism. Closer investigation leads us to believe that the ideas of

on the first two conceptions, which will lead us eventually to the difference that Dewey draws between experience and 'an experience'.<sup>3</sup>

## **1.2 Continuity between art and life**

Dewey, following Cynthia Freeland's footsteps, criticizes the existence of museums. Freeland goes into the compartmentalization of art and in the first chapter of her book 'But is it art?' she talks about the downfall of the relationship between art and society.<sup>4</sup> The museum as an absolute temple desecrates the spontaneity of folk art and thus changes our experience. She also criticizes the fact that each important city in the world needs to have a museum on its territory, just for the prestige of it.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon of the 'new rich' who increasingly buy more pieces of art for their private collection, evokes feelings that differ from the pure art experience. The pleasure gained out of collecting, exposing and possessing art is just a simulated esthetical enjoyment, while the real experience of a piece of art can not be collected nor bought.

Dewey roughly follows this discourse, yet he goes a little further. Dewey states that the experience of a piece of art is impeded by the single fact this piece of art exists.<sup>6</sup> Since a work of art does not only exist internally but also externally, an obstruction is being formed to theorise about the piece of art. And on top of this, the prestige of some objects, or 'products' as Dewey calls them, as it were blinds the spectator and in this way impedes him to reach refreshing insights. In his opinion, we should approach a piece of art through a detour. We have to forget the work itself for a moment in order not to be tempted to worship the object and base a whole theory on that particular worshipping experience. According to Dewey, the spectator will always be influenced by his feelings and once he undergoes the confrontation with the object, he will no longer be a neutral spectator. Human beings are being influenced by the fact that art is that what is being defined as art, and Dewey says that mostly the things that are less related to art are the ones that have the biggest impact on people; a newspaper, a trendy song, a movie and even a scene on the street. Art, in Dewey's opinion, is too often related to a museum or a gallery and the existence of the object of art forms a barrier when we are talking about the experience of art.

Dewey's critics on such artistic institutions are based on the fact that the museum evokes people to separate the experiences lived there from their daily experiences. As a

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Dewey and Kant are in fact much closer in this aspect than one would think in the first instance. We opted not to go deeper into these problems in this article and to only mention these facts when necessary.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey talks about the difference between 'experience' and 'an experience', the first term indicating daily experience and the second one being closer to a feeling or esthetical experience.

<sup>4</sup> FREELAND, Cynthia, *Maar is het kunst?: Een inleiding in de kunsttheorie*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2004, pp. 13-36. (English translation: *But is it art?: An introduction to the theory of art*)

<sup>5</sup> FREELAND, Cynthia (2004), pp. 88-114.

<sup>6</sup> DEWEY, John, *Art as Experience*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1958, pp. 3-6 en pp. 82-105.

consequence, he pleads for a continuity between the esthetical experience and daily life. It is not that Dewey resents the museum 'in se', but we must bare in mind that the objects exposed in the museum have their origins in daily life. The works encountered there should always be seen within the specific context in which it was born in the artist's mind. Art, to Dewey, is not a collection of objects, linked to a certain prestige or not, but it is an innate practice of a community, in daily life:

Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They 'are' the earth in one of its manifest operations.<sup>7</sup>

He refers to the ancient Greeks and the origins of the theory of mimesis when affirming that art is interlaced with life itself. The language of art is the most universal language to Dewey and he poses that art can bring together no matter what kind of people.<sup>8</sup> Dewey draws a difference between 'products of art' on the one hand and 'works of art' on the other. To him, the 'products' are the physical objects, while the 'works' refer to the practice and the active, working and dynamic processes. As seen before, we have to approach the work of art through a detour and forget the object for a moment.

To experience in an esthetical way, according to Dewey, you have to return to animal life on a human scale. In the first chapter of 'Art as Experience', Dewey searches the source of an experience, and we clearly notice an influence by the works of Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. Life on earth is characterized by different forms of evolution, but also by the practice of continuously adapting. All animals, including people, need to adapt themselves constantly to their environment in order to survive. According to Dewey, the 'I' does not finish at the proper skin, but also presumes a relationship with the environment in which is lived. This way of contact with the world forms the basis of the esthetical experience and Dewey describes this as 'rhythm'. The natural and social life of a person is characterized by certain rhythms and art is one of the ways to cope with this rhythm. As Dewey poses, the source of every experience is sheltered in the interaction between a living being and his environment. However, in the case of the human being, Dewey notices a break in this interaction with the environment. This break is not only considered in space, but also in time. Dewey mentions many examples of animals that are in direct contact with their environment and postulates that they still live in harmony with their environment, because they do not accumulate experiences but are living in the 'here and now'. Whereas the animal still uses the past and the future in the present, we notice that in case of the human being, throughout centuries, a break has occurred between the individual and the environment. Humans pile up their experiences and no longer dare nor are able to express themselves in the present. They have created a situation for themselves in which the present is haunted by missed

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<sup>7</sup> DEWEY, John (1958), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> We need to remark that Dewey overlooks the fact that art is always inherent to different cultures. Yet he does point out that the contact with other cultures can enrich the proper culture.

opportunities from the past and is threatened by preoccupation for the future. This situation results in an alienation from the environment in which the human being resides. Due to this, the human being ends up in a situation of continuous desire to restore the union between one's self and the environment. One has to let his experiences free again and not pile them up as is the case now. To experience in an esthetical way, according to Dewey, we have to revert to the bestial inside ourselves. We have to support our experiences by pulling force from the past and reviving the future in the present. To Dewey, art is, just as science, an attempt of a human being to cope with the rupture between him and the environment and the esthetical experience is seen as the liberation from all ballast that the experience kept hidden.

Dewey's vision of an esthetical experience has its implications on the entire human life and also for the interpretation of his own philosophy. At the end of his book, Dewey wipes all kinds of oppressive art theories off the table, that often part from a certain form of compartmentalization, and he states that art should be considered as an attempt of finding a way to cope with reality again.<sup>9</sup>

### **1.3 Experience and 'an experience'**

In the first three chapters of 'Art as experience', Dewey indicates his vision of the concept of 'experience'. The idea that life is set in a certain environment in which the human being fulfils a double relationship towards this environment, is put central. On the one hand, we are open to the caprices of the surrounding world, the rhythm of life; this is what Dewey refers to as the 'undergoing'. On the other hand, we struggle by showing resistance to this environment and we learn by 'doing'. This dissension creates a 'rhythm' characterized by a sequence of disturbance and equilibrium that can evoke experiencing and even 'an experience'. So the everyday experience can provoke 'an experience', but the contemporary human being can no longer fully develop this first type of experiencing. Life at automatic pilot in a fast society leads humans to suffer an institutionalised alienation from their own experiences. Humans have increasingly been living on impressions as a result of which regular experiences receive an unaware and shredded realization and are torn down way too quickly.

Dewey often mentions the senses as one of the connections between these experiences. Hereby, it is important bearing in mind that Dewey in no way is talking about seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling or feeling which occurs through daily actions.<sup>10</sup> In his theory, the senses, because of their stimulating character, are always subordinate to the

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<sup>9</sup> DEWEY, John (1958), pp. 272-297.

<sup>10</sup> When Dewey talks about 'sense', he refers to both the use of the senses as the felt immediacy of sense.

bigger whole of the experience. Dewey considers the problems of contemporary society in the following way:

We see without feeling; we hear, but only a second-hand report, second hand because not reinforced by vision. We touch, but the contact remains tangential because it does not fuse with qualities of senses that go below the surface. We use the senses to arouse passion but not to fulfil the interest of insight, not because that interest is not potentially present in the exercise of sense but because we yield to conditions of living that force sense to remain an excitation on the surface.<sup>11</sup>

Dewey states there exists a difference between the regular experience and that which he describes as 'an experience'. What he exactly means by this, is explained in the chapter 'Having an Experience'.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the regular experience is soaked in confusion and distraction, we notice that 'an experience' is characterized by a certain continuity. To undergo 'an experience', anticipation, tension and emotional intensity are crucial. 'An experience' is the intense and completed manner of experiencing, where the whole is aware and purposeful and one supposes a desire towards meaning and significance. It is a process of impulsion, with an opening and closing between different phases. The beginning and the end are continuously mixed and this creates certain resting points, and it is important bearing in mind there is a continuous tension. An impulsion evokes a disturbance in the equilibrium with the environment and some sort of propulsion comes into existence. Dewey calls this first phase, where we are obligated to focus ourselves, the 'seizure' or 'impulsion'. The territory is fenced off which intensifies the propulsion and the level of action rises. The instant the propulsion finds its direction and goal, it receives extra energy. Subsequently, a relation is being established with the past ('mind') and this leads towards 'imagination'. 'An experience' is a moment of reaching perfection, so it is always important to look forward to the eventual result. In this vision, Dewey quotes the example of the falling rock that looks out and focuses on the end of the slope. 'An experience' distinguishes itself from daily routine because of its 'quality' and 'intelligence' and 'undergoing' certainly is not something to be called passive. There needs to be worked on.

Emotion acts in this complete process both as the propulsion and the linking factor. They talk about a mutual influence of emotion and thinking, where Dewey states that there does not exist a real difference between this emotion and reason. Both are just a way of handling all those things that come to us from the world. The emotion functions as a signal of the fracture in the rhythm that is needed to fill in the mere shock and possibly to transform this into the interest for certain objects. Dewey hereby pretends that art can occur in an incomplete world, but still has a certain aspect of stability:

There are two sorts of possible worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally is it true, however, that a world that is finished, ended,

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<sup>11</sup> DEWEY, John (1958), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> DEWEY, John (1958), pp. 35-57.

would have no traits of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for resolution. Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfilment.<sup>13</sup>

According to Dewey, the artist occupies a special place regarding reality since he is capable of cultivating fractures in the 'rhythm' of life through certain works of art, and not objects or products. Given that thoughts and feelings are strongly embodied in esthetical works, the artist is able to evoke 'an experience' and to share it with others. Obviously, there are stimulating circumstances in which 'an experience' can occur. First of all, there is the work of art itself that is responsible for the kind of experience and its duration. The work of art can choose whether to dialogue with the environment or not. We can deduce from Dewey's philosophy that when a work of art enters into a deliberate interaction with the environment, and the same counts for all forms of art outside the walls, it will be easier to make the first step towards 'an experience'. The environment itself is the second important factor that will determine the experience's circumstances. In this way, it will be easier to reach 'an experience' when the art happening occurs in a quiet place, rather than in the everyday rush we move ourselves in. Also the moment when we are at a certain location will influence the way in which we experience the work of art. The last and actually most important factor is the proper individual. The spectator has to be open to the experience and must adopt a positive attitude. He must keep focused on the esthetical activity and can not wander to daily worries. As seen above, the esthetical experience works in a constructive way, so it is impossible to reach a type of cyclical climax if this construction is constantly being interrupted. It is crucial that the spectator works on his own experience for the experience to succeed. You can not obtain 'an experience' just by 'undergoing'. 'Doing' is just as important for the interaction with the environment to be successful.

## **2 Space and Place**

### **2.1 Yi-Fu Tuan**

The Chinese-American professor emeritus Yi-Fu Tuan always has had a fascination throughout his rich career for the effect that space causes on the human consciousness. His basic work 'Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience' develops his theory of 'space' and 'place' seen from one single perspective: the perspective of experience. This work, in which Tuan uses numerous examples from different cultures and a great amount of linguistic deductions, shows three main patterns. First of all, the author pays attention to the biological nature of the human being and his development since birth. Next, he defines the concepts of 'space' and 'place' and their inner relationship. Finally, he goes deeper into the experience and knowledge of human beings through different models of experience.

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<sup>13</sup> DEWEY, John (1958), pp. 16-17.

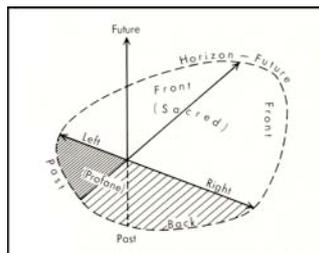
## 2.2 Space and Place

'Space' and 'place' are both segments of the environment and they also belong to the 'common experience'. However, we need to point out that humans consider them to be obvious and do not even, or barely, give them a moment's thought. Parting from a biological point of view, he already shoves forward the first difference very early in the book:

Spaces are marked off and defended against intruders. Places are centres of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied.<sup>14</sup>

This definition counts for all types of animals, humans included, but we need to remark that in case of the latter a much more complex situation is at hand. Whereas 'space' is synonymous for movement, 'place' is seen as a pause in the temporal current.<sup>15</sup> 'Space' is very abstract and undefined and turns into 'place' as soon as we get to know it better. A statement like "it takes time to know a place", according to Tuan, relates to the fact that the senses have to be able to adapt.

'Space' is an abstract term referring to a complex whole of ideas, and this notion can be classified in different ways, depending on the culture we find ourselves to be part of. The human being organises his notion of space in two ways. On the one hand, there exists the experience with the own body, like the biological need and the proportions of the different parts of the body and limbs. On the other hand, there are the experiences this body has with other bodies through certain social interactions. The pure 'body' is seen by Tuan rather in the sense of an object, while he considers the human being as a person ('man') as an organism that resides in the world. Typical of this human body is its upward position. It is because of this posture that the 'space' in the human body opens up and the human being is able to act.



Positioning of the human body in relation to time and space.<sup>16</sup>

As soon as the human being has mastered this upward position, he is in command of space and possesses the notions of 'in front of, behind, left, right, under and above'. Tuan considers the 'front' to be mainly visual, clear, worthy and in some cases even holy. The

<sup>14</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, London, Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1977, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> The relation between 'space' and 'time' is discussed by Tuan in a separate chapter. Since 'space' presumes movement, and this movement is characterized by a certain lapse of time, it is closely linked to the notion of 'time'.

<sup>16</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 35.

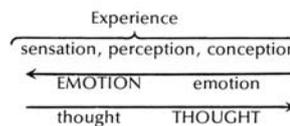
'back' he sees as non-visual, dark, earthly and profane. Through some examples he poses that the right represents the superior, the place of honour and heaven, while the left stands for the profane, the impure and the underworld. The future lays ahead and 'up' and the past lays behind us and 'below'. Of course, the body is also mobile so that everybody is "at the centre of his world".<sup>17</sup> By turning you change your body's position, so also the relation of this body to the surrounding space. As soon as the body seeks the horizontal position again, we return to the situation where only the pure body exists. When sleeping, the body becomes an object again that does not perform any other action besides occupying space.

Tuan considers 'place' as a special type of object: "It is an object in which one can dwell".<sup>18</sup> Both the object as the notion of 'space' define the eternal 'space'. The newborn child finds himself in a situation where these two concepts do not exist and he tries to survive by taking hold of the mother figure. 'Place' and the object represent stability, peace and protection in a world that gets overwhelmed by the immense 'space', especially during the first years of a human life:

An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 Common Experience

The positioning of the human body in 'space' and 'place' is determining for our experience of reality. Yi-Fu Tuan takes advice from Michael Oakeshott when he puts forward his definition of what is an experience:



Experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste, and touch, to active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization.<sup>20</sup>

It calls our attention how emotions colour all types of human experiences, the higher regions of thoughts inclusive. Tuan also notices that the concept of 'experience' evokes a connotation with passivity and is often used when referring to undergoing certain matters. Nevertheless, he postulates that we should also learn something from our experiences by mentioning the German 'erfahren', which he translates to 'to find out', 'to learn' and 'to experience'. He also affirms that we must dare to search new things in an experience, and does so by referring to the shared origins of the words 'experience' and 'experiment'.

<sup>17</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 8.

Tuan believes that the senses can evoke experiences by means of their intuition of space and spatial qualities. In this case too, it is crucial to exercise, so that the child, which is actually blind at birth, can grow into a fully developed being that uses all his senses. The different senses built on and reinforce each other, yet we need to conclude that contemporary society is almost exclusively focused on the visual aspect. Tuan suggests that the other senses can actually expand and enrich the visual space. In this way, sound can 'show' the space behind the head and it can, for example, dramatise the spatial experience. Also in the following extract, Tuan shows how, by means of this study, he wants to react against a world where the visual, and the linked rational part, occupies a way too prominent place:

Life is lived, not a pageant from which we stand aside and observe. The real is the familiar daily round, unobtrusive like breathing. The real involves our whole being, all our senses. (...) Seeing has the effect of putting a distance between self and object. What we see is always "out there". Things too close to us can be handled, smelled, and tasted, but they cannot be seen – at least not clearly. In intimate moments people shade their eyes. Thinking creates distance. Natives are at home, steeped in their place's ambience, but the instant they think about the place it turns into an object of thought "out there". Tourists seek out new places. In a new setting they are forced to see and think without the support of a whole world of known sights, sounds, and smells – largely unacknowledged – that give weight to being: vacation areas, however delightful, seem unreal after a time. (...) Seeing, like thought, is evaluative, judgmental, and conducive to fantasy.<sup>21</sup>

## **2.4 Intimate Experience**

Just like Dewey, Tuan notices that, apart from his 'Common Experience', there exists another type of experiences. At the end of his book, Tuan goes into the intimate experiences that can occur when we are in a 'place'. The 'place' clearly functions here as a moment of pause in all the movement, where peace, stability and protection are crucial. Animals pause in their 'place' to quench their biological needs, but in the case of humans this pause can also bring up sentimental and caring feelings. Because of our nomadic way of life, people have a smaller need to link these feelings to a certain place. As a consequence, they often substitute this spatial area by an object, like an article or a song, or by another person, such as a lover or the own child. This way, humans are able to 'nest' in the 'other' and we notice, mainly in case of young children, that the parent functions as a primary 'place'.<sup>22</sup>

Tuan remarks how, in general, it results to be difficult for human beings to describe these intimate experiences, and it is even more difficult to surrender to them.<sup>23</sup>

Intimate occasions are often those on which we become passive and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, exposed to the caress and sting of new experience.<sup>24</sup>

According to Tuan, children open up spontaneously to all sorts of new experiences, while adults have more difficulties in 'experiencing', because they are scarred by life. Walter Van

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<sup>21</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 138-139.

<sup>23</sup> Even though it is difficult, Tuan affirms that art can still make an attempt to show the intimate experience through this theory. His book 'Place, Art, and Self' goes deeper into the matter.

<sup>24</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 137.

Wely, founder of the performance theatre company *Warner & Consorts*, explains from his own experience why the street, or more exactly, the space outside the walls, can be of help. According to Van Wely, the public space is not really the only place for experiences, but it is easier to not hold back in a natural and anonymous atmosphere:

Because of the masses in the streets, people can easily let themselves go in extreme expressions of experience. To laugh, whistle, shout remarks, stand still very attentively, take a deep breath. Surrounded by the emotions of other people, nobody needs to hold back. The others function as a 'mirror'; a feeling of conspiracy is born.

And he continues:

This does not mean that all those people in fact have the same experience. The emotions that emerge are for every person different in associations, memories and interpretations.<sup>25</sup>

Tuan mentions the example of some trees that are planted in a urban environment to indicate the importance of spontaneity and coincidence in the intimate experience. Apart from their esthetical characteristics, the planted trees offer a scenery where 'warm human encounters' can take place. He affirms it is not the large buildings or monuments that make a city beautiful, but rather the intimate spots, the sunset or a unexpected encounter:

Intimate experiences, not being dressed up, easily escape our attention. At the time we do not say "this is it", as we do when we admire objects of conspicuous or certified beauty. It is only in reflection that we recognize their worth. At the time we are not aware of any drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted.<sup>26</sup>

We can also deduce a clear warning out of this extract. It is inherent in a human being to, as soon as he feels at home (when he feels to be in his 'place'), consider things as being evident and take them for granted. Daily worries gain importance and we have to drag ourselves through life at automatic pilot. And then the artist shows up as the most adequate person to reopen our eyes, and more importantly, all the other senses.

### 3 Architects of Air

#### 3.1 Alan Parkinson

Alan Parkinson studied photography and film and after his graduation, he worked a while as a photography teacher. He quickly shifted jobs to join a social project that works with inflatable objects. Around 1980, he began experimenting with inflatable structures and in 1985 he started building his so-called 'luminaria'. In 1990, a first structure called *Archipelago* travels around the world and this would soon be followed by the series of *Luminarium*, which contain five structures in total. In 2001, he creates *Levity* which is inspired by a Persian Karavanserai, and in the same year *Arcazaar* sees the light. Both structures are a result of his study trip to Iran and this leaves its marks in their design. *Arcazaar* is inspired by the

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<sup>25</sup> VAN WELY, Warner, *Theater in de openbare ruimte*, Warner & Consorten, 2003, pp. 31-33. (English title: *Theatre in a public space*; quote translated)

<sup>26</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 143.

Persian bazaar and its internal space can contain a greater amount of visitors on the same surface as the earlier structures. The whole is much wider and seems to be, in comparison to his earlier designs, a lot more organic seen from the outside. For his next design *Ixilium*, he does not change this structural method neither the surface of the 'luminarium'. At the moment, there are still circulating four structures: *Levity II* and *Levity III*, both based on *Levity*, the smaller *Amozozo* and the newest structure *Amococo*.<sup>27</sup>

Parkinson seeks inspiration in cathedrals and mosques, but he also uses more contemporary influences such as Buckminster Fuller and Frei Otto. He builds on natural shapes and geometrical masses to obtain new inflatable forms. To build these structures, an ingenious method is needed. His fundamental idea combines the conventional drawing methods with a great insight in deforming flexible materials. In this way, he obtains a vocabulary of shapes that are familiar to him and which he enjoys working with. When talking about his works, he is often being compared to the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi since he too used very old techniques and insights to obtain a contemporary figure.

But what are we actually talking about? The structures often appear at cultural happenings, musical events and festivals of street performance. Nevertheless, we find it difficult to categorise them under 'street theatre' and we find it better to talk about an 'installation' or 'inflatable structure'. More concretely, these are pneumatic plastic structures that consist of different segments and colours that cultivate some sort of play between light, sound and architecture. The installations can cover more than 1000 m<sup>2</sup> and can reach heights of 10 m. The plastic is cut and glued in an old little factory in Nottingham, England. The structure consists of parts that are easily portable and that are zipped together on the site. Thanks to this flexible, modular structure there is no problem to work around trees, lanterns and statues. This way the structures can be set up at a lot of places, such as an urban plaza, at a more historical context like a castle or a fortress, but also at natural spaces such as a beach or a wood. Hidden microphones spread a tranquillising, floating sound in order to mask the ventilators' buzzing. Since one structure has an average lifespan of four to five years and touring in winter is limited to the southern hemisphere, they attempt to construct a new and unique structure during this winter period. But all of these technical aspects are in fact of secondary importance. This is not the real issue. From the outside, a 'luminarium' may look like a giant bouncing castle, but we will see that there is a lot more to it. Or not? Because actually, there is nothing physically present in this type of structure.

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<sup>27</sup> [www.architects-of-air.com](http://www.architects-of-air.com)

### **3.2 Searching for 'an experience' in a cathedral of light**

According to Dewey, the artist is the most adequate person that is able to create breaking points in the rhythm of human's daily existence. Parkinson was originally attracted to the medium of PVC because of its subtle, yet astonishing way to spread light and colour.<sup>28</sup> He wants to describe these sensorial experiences in an architecture that even intensify them. The beauty of the interior is shaped by the natural illumination angle that diffuses the light once it passes the coloured PVC. This 'cathedral of light' is a type of visual work of art which can be entered. The natural illumination angles determine the gamma of colours on the inside. Especially in the late afternoon and the early morning the colours are at their best. However, we better refer to it as a total experience than something purely visual. It is more of a sensorial experience full of unexpected, visual effects. It is a game of frontiers; frontiers between inside and outside, between light, sound, feelings,...

If we concur with John Dewey's theories, artistic and esthetical qualities are inherent to all normal experiences of daily life. It is important not to forget that this life takes place in a certain environment and this is exactly what the structures of *Architects of Air* use in trying to evoke a certain effect. The interior is being shaped by the natural illumination angle that outlines the range of colours on the inside. People who are inside the 'luminarium' notice the subtle differences in the range of colours when a couple of clouds float over or when the dusk introduces the evening. Different moments of the day result in totally different experiences at the inside and confirm once again the temporal character of perception. In the same way, visitors can only comprehend the shadow that a couple of trees that stand closely by the structure draw on the membrane because they know from before how a tree casts off a shadow. Almost all elements from the outside world are filtered through the membrane, and this also counts for the sounds, as Jonathan Romney writes when recalling his visit to *Levity*:

What I especially like about *Levity* is its precariousness. The sounds of the outside world are filtered out, but only just: you still hear the odd plane overhead, or a church bell ringing.<sup>29</sup>

So the structure is linked to his environment and interacts with nature. It provokes the visitor to be conscious about the experiences that in normal hasty life are always overlooked.

Everybody can explore the 'luminarium' at his own pace, walking, strolling, or even sitting down or lying down in one of the pods. Some meditate or perform yoga, but most visitors simply enjoy their visit. The ephemeral structure makes us think of some sort of chill-out zone that is often associated with the thoughts of the sixties. It is a type of instant, public, indoor plaza where people can escape the rush of contemporary society for a moment. It is a place to reload, that is at the same time disorientating and comforting. Hugh Pearman gets

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<sup>28</sup> Conversations with Alan Parkinson between 2003 and 2008.

<sup>29</sup> ROMNEY, Johathan, 'A very odd inflatable. The mothership has landed', in: *The Guardian*, 21 juni 2000.

into a somewhat romantic mood after a visit to the Edinburgh Festival when he describes the effect of a structure:

The luminaria are successful precisely because they have that Le Grand Meaulnes quality of transforming a place, making a magical event, then disappearing before anybody has time to ask any questions.<sup>30</sup>

*Architects of Air*'s 'luminaria' completely fit into the discourse of people like Dewey and Freeland who affirm that the contemporary art scene is overwhelmed by simulated forms of esthetical pleasure that impede the real experience of a work of art. *Architects of Air* can not really be called an art product since the structure is already impossible to buy. The object has disappeared completely and the only thing the visitor can do is experience the whole. The ephemeral structure evokes in the visitor an 'intangible, irreproducible and inalienable moment' that strongly reminds us of Walter Benjamin's 'aura'. Benjamin attributes to this 'aura' a certain religious value and neither in a structure of *Architects of Air* we can not escape this impression. Nonie Niese wand describes the structure after a visit as "a phenomenon of radiant light and colour, such as you experience in a cathedral, providing the same kind of stimulation or peace".<sup>31</sup>

Visitors often describe the interior of a 'luminarium' as the inside of a squid or the human corpse. Even more frequently it is described as a labyrinth and, in fact, we often see a group of people that has lost their track for a moment as soon as they have entered such a structure. Yi-Fu Tuan considers this being lost or going astray as something positive:

The human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space. Most of the time he is not aware of it. He notes its absence when he is lost.<sup>32</sup>

When you get lost, references (in front of, behind, left, right) lose their landmarks and they become useless. In daily life, people treat this complex notion of space that the human being possesses in a nonchalant way and it is only at these unique moments that people really start to appreciate them again.

Most visitors of a 'luminarium' are able to orientate within ten minutes and perfectly know where the entrance and the exit are located. Allow us to follow a group of visitors from the moment they enter a structure and to make use of Tuan's terminology. Everybody takes off their shoes and then they enter the first door and gather in the airlock.<sup>33</sup> After receiving a short introduction, the group passes the second door to enter the first big space. At this point, most people are overwhelmed by the colours that are present, the difference in temperature and the soft music that is playing. The group separates and starts exploring the structure through different aisles that always end up in another, and even higher, space. The inner

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<sup>30</sup> PEARMAN, Hugh, 'The great inflation', in: *The Sunday Times Culture*, 30 augustus 2001.

<sup>31</sup> NIESEWAND, Nonie, 'Light, air and PVC', in: *The Independent*, 30th of August of 1999.

<sup>32</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Since the structure functions on a system of permanent overpressure, this airlock is the most important component to guarantee the whole's stability.

room represents at this moment a 'space' for these people. The space is unknown, seems to be eternal and everybody walks around with their head in the clouds so only after a couple of minutes they realize they can not really locate the entrance and exit. We also notice that every person keeps on moving during his expedition. Gradually, they start seeing a pattern in the enormous space and distinguishing the different spaces more clearly.<sup>34</sup> Inspired by Warner Brown's spatial experiments, Tuan affirms that "when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place".<sup>35</sup> At this moment, visitors stand still, both literally as figuratively. The movement stops so the light, the colours, and the warm feeling can have their effect on the human body. Tuan postulates that the senses are able to evoke certain experiences and change the unknown 'space' into a comforting 'place'. The visitors choose the space they like the most and carefully let themselves slide on one of the pods. These more intimate spaces are used by one or more visitors, often a couple or a small family, to isolate themselves from the new group of visitors that has just entered the structure. Whereas the newcomers are still in a unknown 'space', our group has already nested in their 'place'. They allow the space to affect their bodies and the ratio is almost completely turned off. The visitor's initial timidity drains away and many visitors admit they kind of re-experience being in the womb.

As seen before, also Warner Van Wely indicated that the space outside the walls can convince humans not to hold back. To switch off the rational, stiff and correct behaviour for a moment and to loose control in an experience that can be completely different for each person. Jonathan Romney describes the Londoner's changed behaviour at *Levity*, one of the structures of *Architects of Air*, in the following manner:

Levity was only in town for four days but over a longer period you wonder what social rituals might evolve around it. People behave differently, slower perhaps, once they take off their shoes and walk inside – not least because the high concentration of oxygen in the pumped air makes them a little spacey. Men in white shirts and braces sit cross-legged in the coloured alcoves or slide gently down the glowing walls. A group of young design types spread out picnic-style and hold a business meeting. Several people sprawl in erotic-infantile reverie: one woman curls up with a soft toy, out for the count.<sup>36</sup>

A 'luminarium' receives daily a couple of thousands of visitors. It is obvious that at the busiest moments of the day it can become quite crowded both in- and outside the structures. Parkinson chooses consciously for a calm atmosphere at the inside of the structures so that the experience dominates. The stewards that are present see to it that there are never more than eighty persons at the same time inside the structure and that the atmosphere remains calm. Eighty persons for such a big surface may seem little, but this is related to our own perception of space. Tuan goes into this problem in the chapter 'Spaciousness and Crowding' and says:

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<sup>34</sup> These 'landmarks' are crucial to accept a space as being a 'place' and research of labyrinths shows that the entrances and exits are the first to be assigned.

<sup>35</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> ROMNEY, Johathan, 'A very odd inflatable. The mothership has landed', in: *The Guardian*, 21 juni 2000.

Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free. Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act.<sup>37</sup>

Globally seen, space does not only refer to the purely physical space. An environment creates a feeling of spaciousness and this often depends on the space where one finds himself in. A child will always be inclined to start to run in a corridor, and badly enough also in the different tubes of a luminarium. An open space, such as the fields in the Medieval Age, can be related to vulnerability, the bad and the dangerous, while a 'place' is linked to a quiet centre with established values. Tuan affirms that every human being, except from the agoraphobics and the claustrophobics, both needs 'space' and 'place':

In open space one can become intensely aware of place; and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence.<sup>38</sup>

As soon as we are no longer alone in a certain space, the opposite of 'spaciousness' can occur: 'crowding'. Other people can restrict our freedom and deprive us from our space. Again, we must not see this in a purely physical way, but we must consider crowding in a wider perspective as the "awareness that one is observed".<sup>39</sup> We notice, referring to the example of the structures of *Architects of Air*, how, despite the presence of more or less eighty people in the same 'luminarium', a situation can be created where this aspect does no longer matter. The amount of visitors is strongly limited and from the instant that people individually or together with their beloved one seek their own pod, most people no longer care about the other visitors. The 'other' is at that moment reduced to an object and will not be a reason to be bothered. Crowding can also be seen in a positive way when talking about the cosy fuss of a market, a café, a concert or a (street theatre) festival. The music that is playing or the art that is present is often not the only attraction of such a gathering. The mass itself converts the whole into a unique experience, which is also part of the attraction. People are social beings and prefer the company of their own species. However, Tuan remarks that this appreciation is strongly dependent on the culture and also the form and duration, proper to this presence, define to what extent the closeness of a person is accepted. Extra people can cause more cosiness, but can also just form an obstacle as objects:

The world feels spacious and friendly when it accommodates our desires, and cramped when it frustrates them.<sup>40</sup>

A concert can create a large feeling of togetherness because all the people in the public sing along the same songs, but just half an hour later the same people will be very annoyed that there is a big traffic jam on the way home. When a structure of *Architects of Air* is placed at a 'peaking location', such as the plaza in front of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, we can experience these two types of feelings in a short span of time. The queue of some hundreds

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<sup>37</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 54.

<sup>39</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> TUAN, Yi-Fu (1977), p. 65.

of people that are waiting creates a feeling of crowding, but once you have taken off your shoes, you have passed the airlock and found a little space, you can enjoy the spaciousness around you.

## **Conclusion**

The furtive structures of Architects of Air are actually objectless works of art that succeed, in a astonishingly easy way, to confirm the continuity between art and life. The 'luminarium' sets up a relationship with the space where it is located and in this way forces the visitor to focus again on his own environment. Something that, because of the contemporary hasty society, has grown to be strange to people. Over a few minutes, the initial overwhelming 'space' that is experienced when going inside, changes into a comforting 'place' and the structure itself can evoke the undergoing of an intimate experience or 'an experience'. The different structures of Architects of Air confirm every single time that the artistic and esthetical qualities of all normal experiences are inherent to daily life. Consequently, the 'luminarium' offers the visitor an experience that will evoke a long-lasting effect, even after the structure has left.

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