

New Life Residency – Manifesta 8 - *poesia domestica*

As contribution to Manifesta 8, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, The Danish art collective Wooloo organized the NEW LIFE RESIDENCY, which was announced as the world's first non-visual residency program for artists. The setup was such that, for one week each, five artists were selected to live and work consecutively in a completely dark exhibition space. To support them in their life and work, the artists were each collaborating with a local Murcian assistant who was blind. In cooperation with the assistant, each artist was to use the one-week residency to create a guided experience of the non-visual space which was open to the biennial audience on the last day of the residency.

towards a non-visual architecture

Architecture commonly relies heavily on visual information. Compelled by the challenge of the residency my project proposed an investigation of architectural thinking that excluded the visual element. The means and methods of communicating ideas in architecture are dominated by diagrams, plans, sections and renderings, and the prevailing dominance of the visual in the perception of architectural form is well captured in LeCorbusier's paraphrasing of architecture as "the magnificent play of masses seen in light". So what happens if we pull the plug? Does architecture lose its poetry?

As a conceptual starting point the project derived its working title *poesia domestica* from a quotation of Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura*: "La pittura è una poesia che si vede e non si sente, e la poesia è una pittura che si sente e non si vede." The quote suggests a closed circuit relationship in content between different art forms that differ only in their manifestation as they relate to our senses. Architecture is much less a pure art form relating to only one set of perceptive means as it is infused and polluted by the practicalities of the everyday. Architecture has to cater to the whole range of human existence as it relates to space. The project hypothesis was that by eliminating the visual component other aspects of architecture may manifest themselves in surprising and unexpected ways, bringing the "dark matter" of architecture to the forefront.

To achieve this a simulated and condensed design trajectory was proposed, that followed the generic steps in the production of architectural space: Starting from an analysis of the existing site, a range of initial design ideas were to be developed, and the preferred design would finally be built and inhabited. A simple domestic program was chosen as frame of reference for a domestic context: cooking, eating, reading, living and sleeping. The process would be contained within the residency space, which would remain in complete darkness at all times.

double handicap

Day 0 - Sunday night before the start of the residency

Arriving after about 20 hours of travel and little sleep I settled into my dark space and into my bed which was in the furthest corner and behind a separate wall of the approximately 20x30x6m measure of darkness. A sudden spout of curiosity and sense of adventure made

me get up again with the intention to explore what would be my new kingdom for the coming week. Lack of sleep were probably to blame as well as the lack of visual orientation, for venturing out into the dark I got thoroughly disoriented and lost. It seems handicaps have accumulative tendencies, and more accumulation would follow over the course of the week. Both the (mental) image of being lost naked in the middle of a pitch dark room not finding my bed, as well as the adjoining sensation of terror and thrill provided a perfect starting point for the week to come.

Day 1 – getting to know Patricia and getting to know the space

Patricia is a student of Psychology and local to the region of Murcia. She is blind, and she had agreed to assist me in the project. Patricia does not speak English. And I believe I forgot to mention that I do not speak Spanish. Consequently, the two interns from Wooloo, Giovanni and Mikkel, found themselves interpreting for the project to soften the language barrier. This introduced an other productive handicap: all verbal communication was formalized and simplified through the filter of translation.

We met at the local branch of ONCE, the Spanish association for the visually impaired. After an introduction on what it means to be blind and on how to interact with blind people, day 1 was supposed to provide us with basic knowledge about the existing space, or more technically a *field survey*. Measurements were taken by touch and measuring techniques relating to body measurements, and then translated into a scaled relief “drawing” that could be accessed through touch. This base “drawing” served as basis for the design process and as means of communication with my assistant.

Day 2 + 3 – designing a dark domestic environment

While my assistant Patricia was involved in all aspects and throughout the project, her main part was to act in a client role, i.e. to enforce and ensure a non-visual mode of design thinking and mode of communication that does not rely on the visual, and that would check my own assumptions. After two days of discussion on the basis of relief “drawings” and a verbal dialog filtered by translation we arrived at a simple layout with a centrally located kitchen and four rooms fanning out in all directions. Think of an X with a small square in the center, which represents the kitchen, and you will get an idea of the plan layout.

Day 4 + 5 – building in the dark

Along with what was dubbed the global financial crisis - a merry-go-round of throwing public money at the bankers of the world - the cultural coffers of Spain were depleted and, alas, the material budget for the project had vanished. So we had to look for free materials somewhere in a city unknown. With the help of the Wooloo crew, a local wood shredding company and a fellow artist we ended up with a car load of long and thin wood slats, and the construction commenced more akin to a light-weight bamboo construction. This turned out to be advantageous for building in the dark, as no power tools were needed and the structure turned out sturdy but flexible – that is: if one would run into a wall in the dark, the structure would actually give way, softening the impact.

Day 6 – inhabiting the space

While in fact most of the time during the week was spent in the gallery room, the space was less of a living environment but rather akin to a work in progress with a corner to sleep. On the last day of the residency, however, the space was to be complete and open to the biennial audience. An important part of measuring the success of the project would be how visitors would interact with the spaces, and if they would feel invited and comfortable to stay in the environment for an extended time to socialize and explore.

The 5 spaces were arranged with a choreographed experience in mind. As the visitors entered the dark space they were greeted and oriented as to what to expect by Patricia, whose role switched from client to host. The kitchen was the only room not publicly accessible to the audience and was located in the center of the space. Fanning around this center the visitors encountered the following spatial sequence:

1. *The Reading Room*: A niche space with a comfortable sofa and a small table with documentation material on the process and generation of the project, such as relief “drawings”, as well as books in Braille that were important to Patricia. This room was concerned with the cognitive experience of information transmitted through touch.
2. *The Living Room*: A larger space which took as conceptual point of reference an aspect found in the typology of the living room: the accumulation of memory. The framed photographs of friends, family and important events often displayed in living rooms were translated into 5 distinct sound points with recordings of the most important audio references to Patricia's life. The recordings were the sound of the braking waves on the beach near her sister's home, her child talking, her favorite square in the city, a shopping mall, and a children playground. In the center of the space was a small table with objects with similar memory quality.
3. *The Bed Room*: A niche with a bed and soft covered walls. This “soft space” provided a secluded abode to relax.
4. *The Dining Room*: A larger space with a long table and 12 chairs where the visitors could gather and socialize. Throughout the event food and drinks were served from the kitchen, where I spent the day cooking. The home-cooking added sound, smell and taste to the sensory environment of the domestic experience. As I had hoped many of the visitors felt comfortable to stay for an extended time, eating food they couldn't see, and talking to people they couldn't look into their eyes.

afterlife

Short lived projects require documentation to extend their critically beyond the moment. The central question of the work was in which way the sensual, cognitive and intellectual content would be altered throughout the design by eliminating the visual in the design process. The cognitive content of the space was limited to the haptic, aural and olfactory sensorium; the social component introduced a gustatory element. Documentation of a spatial and social experience in a dark space is decidedly difficult to document visually. What remains are narratives - such as this - and memories in the 100 or so visitors that experienced the project. However, even in such circumstances the power of the visual remains pervasive, so on Day 7, which was not part of the residency, but cleaning up and demolition day, I kept the door

open and snapped some pictures. But be aware, the following is not the project – it's just how it looked like (in a reverse building process).

