OUTPOST

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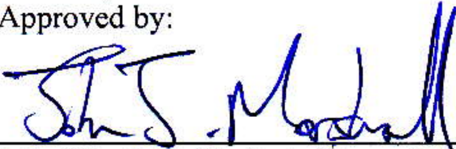

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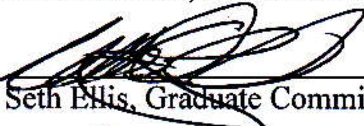

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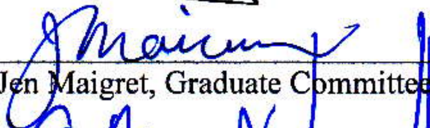

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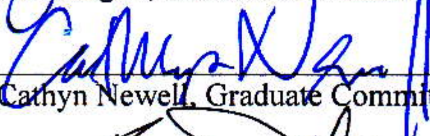

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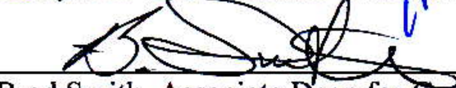

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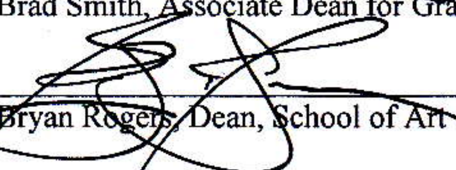

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OUTPOST

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ABSTRACT

Outpost is an installation exploring the tenuous grounds of perception in the remote wilderness environment. Built as a room within the gallery, the interior hut-like space is dim, lit only by points of light found within crevices in the walls, floor, and ceiling of the space. The crevices mysteriously transcend the apparent architecture of the hut, extending deeply through the walls, floor, and ceiling, evoking wonder and fear through an encounter with the sublime.

Outside the hut, collections of artifacts and data attempt to describe the experience of remote isolation in nature, marking place, conditions of environment, and qualities of human experience. These remnants and suggestions of the experience stand in contrast to the encounter within the hut, and suggest the impulse to measure the immeasurable – the futile attempt to capture a powerful, visceral, and emotional experience in words and numbers.

With an attention to lightness and darkness, this work brings the audience into a more intimate awareness of their own observation and understanding of physical phenomena. *Outpost* extends the boundaries of our inhabited world, the perceptions we may have of it, and the means by which we make sense of it.

KEYWORDS

Installation, sculpture, architecture, light, darkness, recursion, space, place, isolation, environment, nature, perception, phenomenology, anxiety, sublime, romanticism

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INTRODUCTION

The creative work and research I have completed during the last three years has developed from direct, personal experience with anxiety, and from the objective to understand the varieties, catalysts, and nuances of this experience more fully. In the Spring of 2010, I began investigating these ideas by mapping and categorizing characteristics of personal anxiety experiences, and suggesting relationships between situation, physical symptoms, beliefs, and fears (Figure 1). I co-located the anxiety experience in physical and psychological responses to my immediate environment, and in imminent and imagined perils in nature.

In seeking a greater understanding of the anxiety experience, I embarked on a journey into Greenland, a remote and unfamiliar environment and, for me, both symbol and example of an inhospitable wilderness rife with peril. This undertaking was key to developing existing questions on how a powerful and mysterious non-physical experience might arise out of the physical, and on how this kind of experience may be translated to, described in, or provoked by a work of art. Over the last two years, I have used these questions to guide experimentation with tools and materials, and with constructions of space and phenomena that might stimulate the non-physical, emotional and psychological responses, and I have used them to develop my way of describing and conceptualizing my relationship with my environment (i.e.: immediate surroundings) and with nature (i.e.: the natural world as I imagine it without human beings). I have researched other artists who have dealt with similar themes, as well as how other disciplines, including philosophy, psychology and cognitive science have addressed these questions. The results of this creative research include several works of sculpture and installation that culminate in my thesis project, *Outpost*.

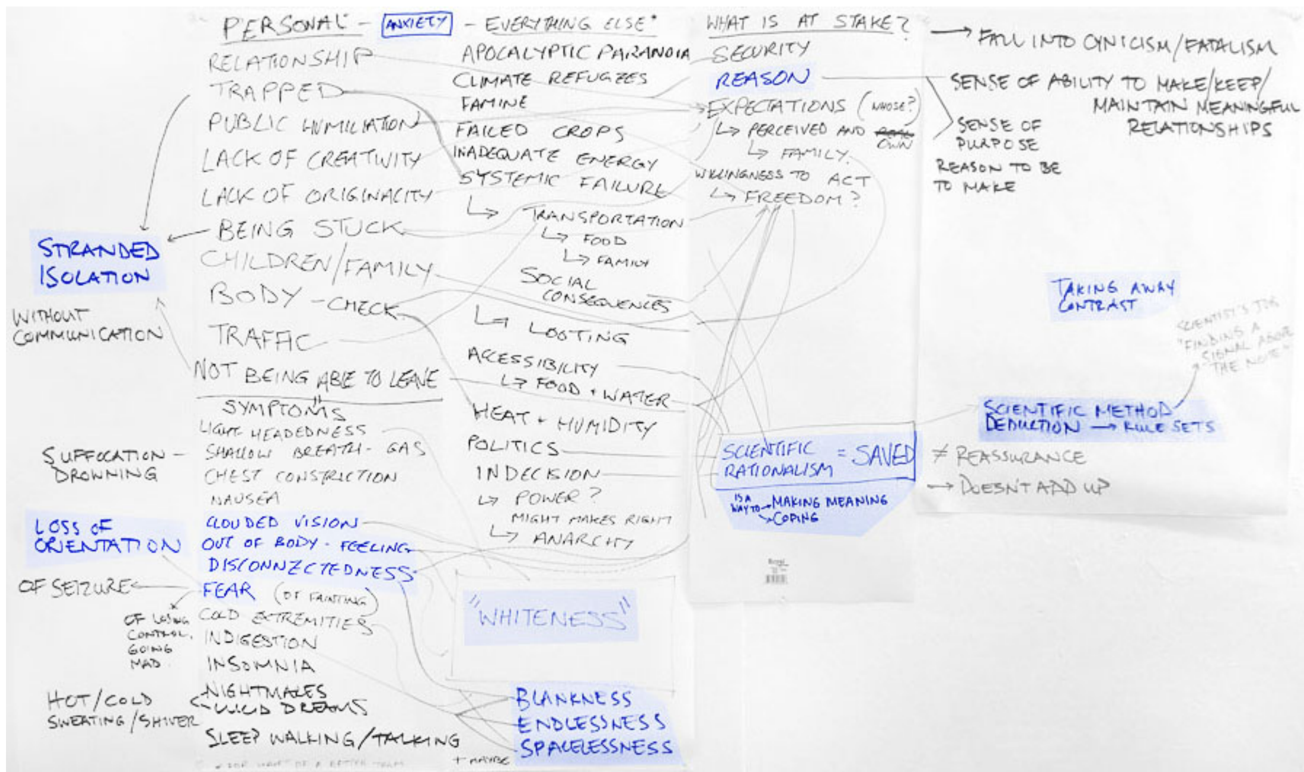

Figure 1

THE EXPERIENCE

In the Summer 2010, I set out for five weeks of camping in Greenland, with the objective to make myself uncomfortable in a harsh and unfamiliar environment. One of the most isolated regions on earth – only 15% of Greenland is habitable land. This small area of land is located along the coasts, and is rocky, treeless, and sparsely dotted with settlements, each usually numbering less than 1000 people. There is no road infrastructure linking settlements in Greenland because the surface melting of the permafrost in the summer prohibits the building and maintaining of road systems. It is the least densely populated country in the world.

Prior to traveling I expected that isolating myself in a vast, bleak landscape, with 24 hours of daylight and far away from the built environment and routines of home would be an intense and direct experience with nature, one that would trigger a response of panic and fear. I also anticipated that it would cause me to feel anxiety in the form of claustrophobia—feeling trapped away from familiar routines, with few activities or distractions to fill the long days, and without means to leave or modify prohibitively costly travel plans. I would be entirely subject—physically and psychologically—to this harsh and inhospitable place.

This willful expedition into an isolated wilderness allowed me the opportunity for a deeply meaningful confrontation with my fear and anxiety of being located in remote nature. I had experienced recurring anxiety for several years prior to the summer in Greenland, mostly relating to situations that suggested real or imagined spatial isolation, immobilization, and lack of means to escape. These experiences were characterized by extreme and disorienting fear, a distrust of my faculties of perception, my ability to move my body, to see clearly, to know and understand my surroundings. Responding to this psychological condition, my physical body underwent changes: my heart rate would quickly increase, my fingers and toes would turn cold and numb, my muscles

would become rigid. In traveling into Greenland, I sought to initiate these anxious responses through a direct encounter with nature in a vast and unfamiliar environment.

Figure 2

While in Greenland, I adapted to a lifestyle of tent living, cooking with few items and utensils, and wearing the same clothing items day after day, effectively reducing the number and complexity of daily decisions to the essential minimum. Simple daily routines emerged – collecting snow to keep food items cold, pumping water from spring melt-water streams, stuffing my sleeping bag with the sum of my clothing items to create insulation at nighttime, and walking to travel from one place to another. Mid-way through the trip, I hiked along a fjord for a few days and stayed in a one-room hunter's hut located on a winter dogsled route, situated on a small inlet opening out onto the fjord. I witnessed a dramatic change in seasons. With the sun circling in the sky, never setting, snow that had accumulated over months of winter melted in just a few days, and grey frozen lakes fractured to reveal opaque turquoise bodies of water. Mosquitoes appeared in swarms and plant growth developed at a rapid and noticeable rate. These environmental indicators made me aware of

the extremes of light and dark, and the subsequent rapid shifts in seasons that take place in the Arctic region.

My time in Greenland felt slightly askew to life back in Ann Arbor. I perceived that days in Greenland did not follow the same structure and rhythm; the sun did not set for several weeks, taking time for sleep was more difficult and seemingly arbitrary, and I could be outdoors and active at any time during the 24-hour sunlit day. My sense of orientation was changed and unbalanced. I visualized longitudinal lines converging, time zones shrinking and collapsing on each other. It was difficult to orientate myself to cardinal directions – I imagined that more of the world was south than ever before – that the world spread out more in one direction than in another. But I knew, logically, that this could not be true.

While in Greenland I established routine data collection that fostered an attention to daily natural processes through observation and record. Using a few simple tools – a weather station device, global positioning device, thermometer, and pulse oximeter, I monitored and recorded environmental conditions, as well as my own physical and psychological/emotional responses within the arctic environment. Data included heart rate, temperature, blood oxygen levels, quality of sleep, as well as fluctuations in feelings of detachment, anxiety, and stress, sunrise and sunset times, temperature, visibility and humidity. I intended to draw connections between the individual human experience in the Arctic, and the structure and rhythm of natural processes, hypothesizing that there could be a relationship between, for example, a drop in the outdoor temperature and a fluctuation in my perceived feeling of anxiety. As I collected data, I encountered difficulty in making distinctions between quantitative and qualitative data, between my subjective experience and an objective account of the environment and its conditions.

On May 28, 2010, I was camping a few miles outside the coastal settlement Sisimuit. My body temperature was 97.2°F, pulse was 71 beats/minute, there was very good visibility, and I was recording very low levels on feelings of anxiety and dislocation/detachment. My notes read: *I take*

many, many readings with my devices now—they seem to be all over the place with numbers. Two days later a journal account includes: *Weather device says 60°F but it feels like 40° and foggy.* I was beginning to distrust the system that I had set up, doubting the verity of the instruments, and perhaps even the method.

Figure 3

In the end, the expectation and anticipation of the travels in Greenland was far more disturbing and anxiety-provoking than the experience itself. Imagining the possibilities of what the experience could be, and all its potential perils, elicited intense fear and excitement. The on-the-ground reality was a mostly calm and unburdened travel experience that helped me to slow-down and take time for observation and reflection on the environment I was in. I developed an acute awareness of my surroundings, and of how I perceived time and space during the 35 sunlit days and nights. The experience of the place over time, shifting from anxious anticipation to a calm awareness, led to feelings of wonder and uncertainty in terms of my ability to really understand my experience of this isolated place.

QUESTIONS

In the creative work that followed my research in Greenland, I began to question if the quiet but powerful emotional and psychological content of the experience was lost in the cool, rigid analysis and calculated methods of observation and record that I practiced both leading up to and during my travels. In reviewing the data and journal entries after the trip, I began to understand how "measuring something can actually change its physical condition, [and that] this is where the subject becomes part of the object."[1] The compulsive note-taking and data collection affected how I was responding to the environment, and in recording these conditions, I was no closer to a factual experience of anxiety and fear, or to a direct experience of isolation in nature than I had ever been before. I was merely capturing and recording aspects of the experience, "bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker."[2] Instead of elucidating the experience of fear, wonder, and isolation in Greenland's wilderness environment, these bits of collected information suggest the impulse to measure the immeasurable – the futile attempt to capture a powerful, visceral, and emotional experience in words and numbers.

The questions that emerged and developed before, during, and after my travels in Greenland deal with the physical and visceral aspects of non-rational, non-present, and intuitive responses like anxiety. I wanted to know what intuition is made of, and to better understand how fear, wonder, and astonishment are called forth. I sought to understand how non-physical responses may arise out of the physical environment, and how I could build a physical space in which these responses and interactions may take place.

[1] Grynsztejn (29)
[2] Didion (136)

CONTEXT: THE SUBLIME + ROMANTICISM + METAMODERNISM

Inquiries into the creation of fear, astonishment and wonder, and how the mind may experience these intuitions in response to physical conditions led me to the concept of the sublime. In my quest to locate and provoke an experience of wonder and anxiety in the harsh and inhospitable Greenlandic environment, I was seeking the sublime. It is a quality of experience that exists within the mind and at the edge of the human ability to comprehend. The sublime is something that is beyond our expectations and beyond our ability to imagine or conceive. In encountering the sublime we experience something that is unspeakable, and untranslatable. It is a feeling of magic and wonder that is accompanied with a degree of fear and distrust.

Artists and philosophers often attribute the sublime to aspects of nature. They find the sublime in the vastness, complexity, and magnitude of the raw natural environment. It is incorrect though that the sublime exists *in nature*, rather it is these qualities of nature that elicit a feeling of the sublime in the human mind. The mind encounters such difficulty in comprehending these qualities of nature, as they are so distant from and unlike the scale and scope of human experience. As Kant describes, "Everything that excites this feeling in us, *e.g.:* the *might* of nature which calls forth our forces, is called then (although improperly) sublime."[3]

It is in part the inability of our mind to fully comprehend nature that prohibits us from constructing an understanding of nature that is coherent. This significant gap between what we can only begin to imagine, and what may actually exist is what elicits the sensations of awe, wonder, and fear of the sublime. In these terms, the sublime is actually an indication of a feeling of inadequacy, and a realization of the limits of human's perception, understanding, and experience.[4] In this way, my sense of mental disorientation in the Greenlandic landscape was an experience of the sublime –

[3] Kant (77)
[4] Morley (13)

as I attempted to visualize the space I was in, and to match it to my understanding of the globe, to longitudinal lines and time zones. I came up lacking in a coherent understanding, and felt a sense of awe for this place that seemed to operate outside typical bounds of space and time, where a day drew on for weeks.

Artists have addressed varieties of the sublime experience for centuries. In response to the austerity and logic of neo-Classicism, the rigidity and rationality of the Enlightenment, and to the growing capitalism brought on by the Industrial Revolution, 18th Century Romantic artists, writers and philosophers emphasized direct experience with nature in its most raw form, valuing the encounter within distant wilderness and the accompanying response of fear and awe. The Romantics embraced emotion, stressing the individual's experience as primary,

> "[they] sought to express ideals which could be sensed only in the individual soul and lay beyond the bounds of logical discourse… The Romantic followed a 'mysterious way' which 'leads inwards' – and sometimes to solipsism."[5]

Exemplifying the inward-looking reflection on the natural world, 19th Century German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich blurred the strict distinctions between landscape art and religious art, creating artworks that engaged mythic archetypes of nature that, in Jung's terms, "are necessarily imprinted on the deepest psychic structures of the human persona."[6] In *Monk by the Sea* (Figure 4), Friedrich depicts a solitary monk, facing away from the viewer, looking out over a boundless expanse of sky and sea. The figure appears merely incidental within the picture, alienated within the vast landscape, suggesting a powerful emotional condition, rather that a mere literal or decorative depiction of landscape.[7] In Friedrich's romantic view of nature the "ordinary,

[5] Honour (16)
[6] Schama (209)
[7] Miller (206-207)

commonplace, and the familiar collapse into mysterious particles" that convey man's unfulfilled longing to be united with God and nature.[8]

Figure 4

In the sense that I am attempting to instill mystery in the ordinary and to unite the finite with a sense of the infinite, I am romanticizing the environment by dealing with or describing it in an idealized or unrealistic fashion.[9] As a 21st Century Romantic artist, my work is subject to the complexities surrounding contemporary ideas of *nature*, that which exists prior to or despite human activity, and *culture*, that which was created by or resulted from human activity. I acknowledge the ambiguity in this definition, given that *wilderness* does not exist without humans framing it as such. However, even though nature does not locate or name itself, it acts

[8] Grewe (133)
[9] Oxford English Dictionary

> "as muse or foil… [and] continues to loom as the elusive, originary Other—a system we are fundamentally native to, but unavoidably separate from; one that produces us, even as we (physically, conceptually, discursively) produce it."[10]

This complex relationship, in which humans are neither entirely part of nor apart from nature, intensifies contemporary anxiety and foreboding on the future of the natural environment and humankind. A booming global population, concerns of climate change, and rapid advances in technology elicit fears and expectations that accompany an expanding sense of environment, entirely new frontiers and unprecedented human habitats – from ocean-based cities to colonies on Mars. In this context, the word *sublime* takes on new meaning. Derived from Latin, *sublimis*, meaning "high" and from *sub-* meaning "up to", and *limen-* meaning "threshold" or "lintel", the threshold of the sublime vis-à-vis the notion of *accepted reality* (within the limits of human understanding and experience) is increasingly transgressed by art, technology, and science today as *potential realities* (beyond the limits of human understanding and experience) become ever more apparent. I aim to make work that hovers and shifts at this threshold, blurring boundaries between the known with the unknown, balancing between the real and the imagined. I engage with a more historical and nostalgic view of nature, in terms of romanticizing wilderness and constructing spaces that are made of and a part of the physical environment, but I also take advantage of technology to produce illusory, mysterious phenomena that I integrate into the physical environment. Responding to direct experiences in isolated nature, and working with both analog and digital tools to assemble conditions for an experience that may elicit physical and psychological responses, I am situating myself in a dialogue between nature and culture, not to intensify an obsession with looming environmental crisis, but to locate and bring awareness to the mysterious tensions and anxieties in this human-environment relationship.

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[10] Kastner (14)

In positioning my work in regards to contemporary theory and practice, neo-romanticism, and 21st Century contexts of culture and technology, I identify with characteristics outlined in the theory of Metamodernism. Metamodernism suggests that many contemporary artists oscillate between ideals of Modernism and Post-Modernism, between naïveté and skepticism, hope and melancholy. In making work, I aim to summon the lightness, airiness, and cerebral characteristics of non-representational modernism, within the context of the gritty, raw materiality and texture of ordinary experience. I engage the concept of Metamodernism that makes

> "efforts to present the ordinary with mystery and the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar it exposes itself less spectacularly as the unsuccessful negotiation between culture and nature. But both these practices set out to fulfill a mission or task they know they will not, can never, and should never accomplish: the unification of two opposite poles."[11]

In encountering nature in my research and practice, elevating it and abstracting the experience in my work, I attempt to create a bridge between humans and nature, a path into a direct experience of the natural environment. However, I realize over and over the conspicuous gap that remains between human culture and nature, between the direct experience of nature and the attempts to represent or embed it in a diagram, a sculpture or a physical installation. Nevertheless, I continue these futile exercises, for however feeble or inaccurate, there is some quality of experience and understanding—an opportunity for wonder—expressed in the making and experiencing of the work, and this is why I persist in the practice of making it.

[11] Vermeulen (7-8)

RESULTS

In the Spring and Fall 2010, before and after traveling in Greenland, I initiated a series of experiments dedicated to inquiries into light and space. I focused on two primary themes: the direct experience of light, and suggestions of infinite space using the effects of recursion. My intention in these investigations was to move away from an experience of artwork based on imagery and the viewer's projected associations that accompany it, to an experience based in the physical energy of the work, in the practice and awareness of perception. In developing this work, I relied upon past experiences of anxiety in which I have experienced extreme, immobilizing fear, distrusting my own faculties of perception, my ability to move my body, to see clearly, to know and understand my surroundings. I was seeking to bring the viewer into a physical and psychological state of feeling, without telling them, literally, how they should feel. I used the characteristics of the anxious experience as guideposts, comparing and contrasting them to the mental and emotional responses that myself and others experienced in encountering my work, intending to more closely realize the nature of the anxious experience through careful and calculated construction of situation and phenomenon.

Experience of light

In my exploration into the experience of light, I began with investigating ideas on white blindness, the loss of visual sensory information, and the anxiety that accompanies loss of vision. Visually and spatially, my objectives for the creative work related to effecting whiteness, an empty space—a visual, perceptual void—and the reduction, distortion or elimination of sensory input. Using the mind map of anxiety that I developed in March 2010, I drew upon my own experience of the physical symptoms of anxiety, specifically: clouded vision, loss of orientation, blankness, endlessness, and spacelessness (see Figure 1). I researched Ganzfeld experiments and anechoic

chambers – both situations in which sensory input is diminished or deprived. A Ganzfeld is a visual field in which there are no objects that can be distinguished by the human eye. It is a continuous, 360 degree, homogenous field of visual information that produces an effect similar to sensory deprivation.[12] Similarly, an anechoic chamber eliminates all audio and visual input, subjecting the participant to total soundlessness and darkness. Testing these conditions during the late 1960s Art and Technology collaboration sponsored by LA County Museum of Art, artists Robert Irwin and James Turrell, along with physicist Ed Wortz, described being inside an anechoic chamber, experiencing of retinal replay, perceiving the sound of electrical energy in the brain, and most dramatic, they recalled that upon reentering the outside world after spending several hours inside the chamber, their perceptual abilities were heightened and altered, "the world did not look the same, it was very, very noticeably altered."[13]

With the goal of building a physical space in which the viewer could attain physically altered perception that replicated the blurred, vibrating, fuzzy vision that I had experienced during anxiety episodes, I developed *Quiver/Shutter*. The installation was made of thousands of small, overlapping and illuminated pieces of white paper attached to the walls and floor, situated in the corner of my studio space (Figure 5). I experimented with fans, working to achieve a subtle, continuous, fluttering movement of the pieces of paper. Adding multiple light sources situated on each side and the top and bottom of the installation, I wanted to achieve an evenness of illumination, so that the light lacked directionality, and shadows were diminished, working to obscure depth and expand space. The installation is intended to assume the viewer's entire field of vision, effectively creating a vibrating visual field of white noise (Figure 6).

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[12] Weschler (134)
[13] Ibid (133)

Figure 5

Figure 6

While effective in creating an energized visual field of whiteness, *Quiver/Shutter* was visually flat—it did not achieve a sense of endless depth and space. Undermining the objective for visual disorientation, the eyes could discern visual information, reading edges and surfaces, estimating scale and depth. Further, what effect the installation did achieve depended on the viewer's body, head, and eyesight being located in precise, stationary positions, making the work largely inaccessible to most viewers.

In an effort to move closer to a complete, saturated visual field of whiteness and lightness, I built a wearable Ganzfeld experiment. *Light Goggles* fill the viewer's visual field in light diffused from two 30-watt equivalent compact fluorescent light bulbs located inside an apparatus that attaches to the viewer's head. *Light Goggles* achieved a sense of visual disorientation, and the viewer's eyes experienced retinal replay both during and after time spent wearing the goggles. The goggles also suggested a disconnect between the eyes and the rest of the body, that heightened the

sense of an out-of-body feeling, but also fell short of a total body experience. In making and responding to the work, I discovered that I wanted to extend the totality of the visual experience within the goggles to the rest of the physical body.

Figure 7

As I developed both *Quiver/Shutter* and *Light Goggles*, I began experimenting with electrical wiring and prototyping in simple materials, like paper, light bulbs, and wood. These projects represent experiments in which I was more interest in the phenomenon an object or situation produced, instead of the object of situation itself. The works themselves begin to function as "phenomena-producers" that like stage-sets, produce phenomenal effects in a more or less illusory ways.[14] From this point on, the idea of the phenomena-producer characterizes the efforts of my creative projects to date.

Following my research and travel in Greenland, in which the sun did not set for more than twenty-five days, I began to focus on the subject of the daylight phenomenon. I became interested in

[14] Grynsztejn (14)

how I might describe and differentiate the experience of daylight across multiple geographic locations on earth. Working from the idea of the 24 hour sunlit Greenlandic summer landscape, I built *Light/Latitude* as an extension of the light goggles and Ganzfeld experiments, intending to come closer to a whole-bodied experience of light (Figure 8). I also set up small models for experimenting with how I might map varying daylight experiences over geographic space and time (Figure 9).

Figure 8

Figure 9

As I was building models and experimenting with how light from light bulbs interacted with various fabrics and papers, I was also investigating how I might incorporate and visualize the daylight experience in other ways. I returned to the data that I collected in Greenland, and focused on sunrise and sunset information. I expanded the data set to include 365 days of sunrise and sunset

information for precise locations in Greenland, my home in Michigan, and for the southernmost place I have inhabited: the equatorial island of Zanzibar. I made drawings that experimented with how this data might translate into physical form (Figure 10), and eventually designed and constructed *One Year Daylight*, a light tunnel that reflects in its form the increase and decrease of daylight hours for Ann Arbor (at 43°N) over the 2010 calendar year (Figure 11).

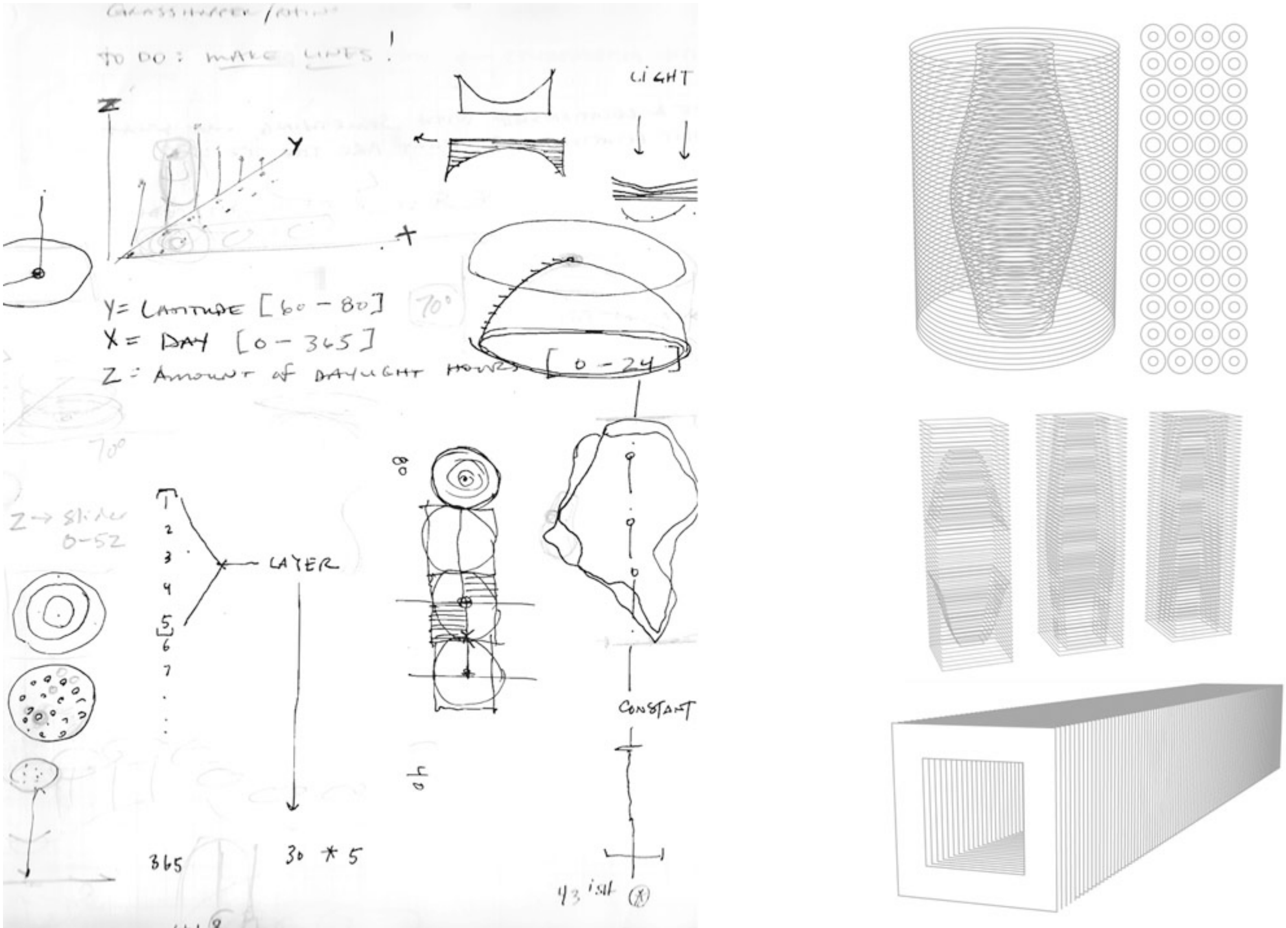


Figure 10

Figure 11

In developing *One Year Daylight*, I revisited questions that address the potential for data to describe experience, and on the multitude of decisions that are made in the interpretation of data. While the numerical sunrise and sunset data set that is represented in *One Year Daylight* dictates the resulting physical form, and the viewer-audience may perceive this form as an indication of gradual change, the viewer will likely not know the exact numbers that are represented in the sculpture. In responding to this project, I questioned if meaning was lost in the translation into this physical form, and if the loss was significant to the viewer's experience.

While developing the *One Year Daylight* project, I researched other artists who use data to drive physical and formal aspects of their work, and was influenced by the work of Nathalie

Miebach. In her work, *Antarctic Explorer – Darkness to Lightness*, she translates a range of weather data, daylight information, tides, and moon phases into a complex and coded woven sculpture. She describes the weather content she draws upon as "an amalgam of systems that is inherently invisible to most of us."[15] She expands the language of science to include a newly invented vocabulary of understanding, in her own words, "offer[ing] an alternative entry point into the complexity of science."[16]

Figure 12

I am intrigued by the way Miebach creates a meticulously descriptive sculptural work in which the viewer may intuitively understand aspects of and relationships within the data represented, without necessarily knowing what content the specific elements of the sculpture represents. Her projects engage questions that I had developed in Greenland, on the potential for data to represent or

[15] Miebach
[16] Ibid

translate experience. As forms of scientific visualization, *One Year Daylight* and Miebach's *Antarctic Explorer – Darkness to Lightness* embody reduced, abstracted representations of reality, of scientific concepts and physical phenomena,

> "relaying to the observer the facts and phenomena of a certain portion of reality which… would [otherwise] remain beyond our conscious awareness."[17]

Suggesting access to the unconscious through visualization references Jung's definition of intuition as "perception by way of the unconscious, by one's ability of representation, of perceiving everything imaginable, and everything in images."[18] Jung suggested using visual and sensory perception as a starting point, to bring forth ideas, images, and possibilities to overcome mental obstacles, by way of the unconscious. The process of visualization in making creative work is therefore a process of intuition and a tool of reasoning, of the construction of knowledge. It is the process of forming mental images, and organizing and interacting with facts and experiences in novel ways. I continue to work with questions on data and representation, and engage visualization, as a mode of conceptualizing and experiencing my creative work.

Suggestions of infinite space

In my exploration into the expansive and infinite spaces, I started with working with ideas recursive, repeating spaces. Returning to the mind map of anxiety, I drew on the ideas of isolation, disorientation, endlessness, and disconnectedness (see Figure 1). As I developed these explorations, I was intending to suggest endless space to the degree that merely conceiving of the space becomes disorienting for the viewer, in that it seems to defy logical understanding of their immediate environment. This idea of the boundless and infinite is part of Kant's description of the sublime in

[17] Vargas-Quesada (5)
[18] Leeming (443)

nature—our inability to measure the boundlessness of nature, to imagine the outer limits of the universe, elicits this feeling of the sublime.[19]

With the objective to amplify and extend visual sense of space, I began working increasingly in darkness so that I might minimize or eliminate visual boundaries (i.e.: walls, floors, and ceilings) that would counter a sense of the infinite. I experimented with setting up recursive spaces using video loops. In *Recursion*, I used a surveillance camera focused on a scrim wall that showed the projection of the recorded image, which was then re-recorded and re-projected, ad infinitum. While the project was successful in representing the effect of recursion, showing projections nested within projections, and was engaging to the viewer in terms of pulling them into a physical relationship with the projection, it did not seem to physically extend the space. The scrim wall appeared flat, and the objects of the recursion that were projected appeared as images in two-dimensional space, not as the original objects extending into three-dimensional space.

Figure 13

While working with video loops, I was also experimenting with mirrored planes facing each other, so that any object that entered the space between the mirrored planes repeated, seemingly

[19] Budd (238)

infinitely, in the illusion of space within each mirror. The conditions for this kind of recursion are found often in everyday situations, they are common in dance or yoga studios, in dressing rooms or bathrooms—any situation in which two mirrors are on parallel planes, the space between the mirrors seemingly extends within the space framed by each mirror. While experimenting with mirror-based recursions, I learned about *Infinite Cubed,* a project developed by the artist and architect team Rejane Cantoni and Leonardo Crescenti.

Figure 14

Figure 15

The work is a constructed cube space, measuring approximately 10 feet in height, length and width, with mirrored planes covering the six interior walls. Viewers enter through the opening of a hinged wall, into a space in which all six walls reflect and seemingly extend the interior space in an endless three-dimensional recursion. Challenging Kant's view on the impossibility of grasping infinity, Cantoni and Crescenti describe the experience,

> "the sensation of a closed space exploding to the infinite invokes thoughts of dimensionality. Understanding the infinite is possible. Infinite cubed is merely mathematically impossible."[20]

[20] Infinite Cubed. http://www.cantoni-crescenti.com.br/infinite-cubed/

I was intrigued by Cantoni and Crescenti's work, however, after building *Recursion* and observing the viewer's recognition and fixation with the image of their own body within the recursive space, I became interested in constructing a recursive space in which the viewer's body was *not* the object of the recursion. I visualized an infinite cube, like Cantoni and Crescenti's, in which the viewer entered and witnessed the extending space, without seeing their reflections in the surrounding mirrored planes. A solution to this spatial puzzle was found in the addition of a two-way mirror, and with striking a precise balance between lightness within and darkness outside the recursive space. Using plywood, aluminum, acrylic one-way and two-way mirrors, a light source, a battery, and glass forms, I built the first light tunnel in January 2011.

Figure 16

The light tunnels are placed on the floor and are to be viewed in complete darkness. As the viewer approaches the work, they perceive a tunnel or shaft-like space that recedes deeply into the ground, eventually disappearing into darkness. In responding to the work, viewers described feeling apprehension, uncertainty and fear in approaching the work and looking into the tunnels, as well as a sense of vertigo or fear of falling into the apparent hole created by the illusion.

The first version (Figure 16) measured 24 inches square and was 6 inches in depth. I experimented with different forms inside the light tunnels—each transmitting and scattering the light to differing degrees, while also obscuring the specificity of light source—in an effort to emphasize the phenomenon over the object presented. I used acrylic rods, paper, and glass to conduct the light, and stained the interior wooden walls to achieve varying degrees of darkness inside the tunnels. I tried varying the size of the light tunnels, as small as 6 inches square and ½ inch deep, up to 48 inches square and 4 inches deep. I set up the light tunnels in various configurations, from a single tunnel to 32 tunnels in an array, testing and responding to the experience of encountering the tunnels in different situations and conditions.

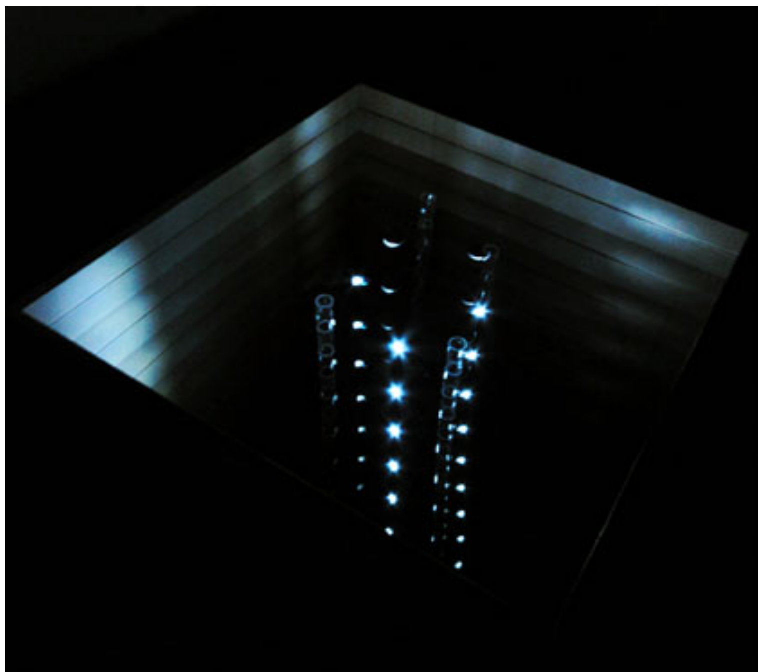


Figure 17

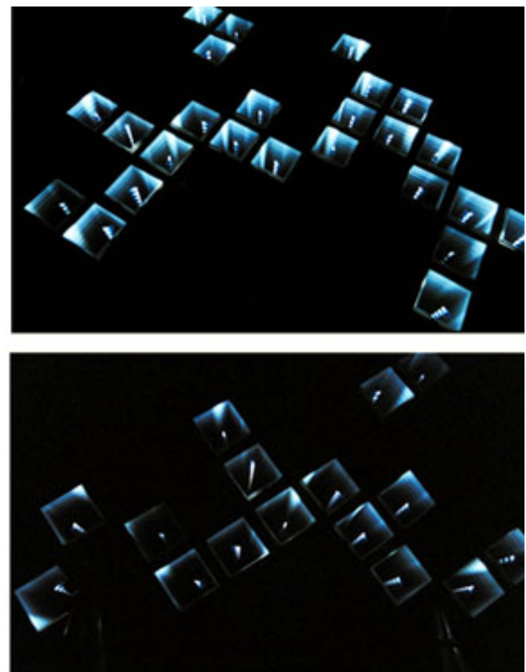


Figure 18

The light tunnels are a carefully calculated, constructed phenomenon that has the potential to elicit a mysterious, powerful non-physical experience out of the physical. Effectively engaging viewers in an experience of astonishment, fear and distrust, they contradict the viewer's expectation of the limits of their physical environment. The results are compelling psychological and physiological responses in the viewers that, to my estimation, approximate aspects of my own experiences with anxiety, in which I have distrusted my own faculties of perception and my ability to know and understand my surroundings.

In realizing this work and its potential to call forth a startling experience, my attention shifted to the environment the light tunnels were situated within. I expected that powerful, non-physical experience might be even more vivid and astonishing if the situation within which the phenomenon is experienced was more carefully, intentionally designed. I became interested in how the viewer might approach and anticipate the work, and what visual and sensory associations might accompany the encounter.

OUTPOST

Outpost developed with the goal of eliciting an experience of wonder and astonishment in the viewer, and the suggestion of the experience of the sublime in nature. My objective was to describe this experience in two ways: (1) through setting up a phenomena-producing situation in which the viewer may undergo a non-physical experience derived from direct perception, and (2) through a narrative, fact-based account of the experience of isolation in nature. These two modes of description represented the methods of processing experience that I have practiced in making creative work during the last two years, incorporating aspects of research in Greenland, of the *One Year Daylight* project, the light tunnels, as well as other site-based light installation projects not mentioned here. Sharing the same gallery space, I intended for these approaches to construct a dialogue between (and imply relative strengths and weaknesses of) two ways of reasoning through, and constructing meaning from, direct experience.

Design and materials

The design and layout of *Outpost* structure extended directly from iterative trials of the light tunnels in various sizes and arrays, and from the ambition to embed the light tunnels within a built floor and enclosed, darkened room space, creating conditions for direct perception of immediate environment. In envisioning the experience of the space itself – the darkness, the surfaces of the walls, the creak of floorboards, a low entrance and exit – all aspects of the space were to contribute to a sense of uncertainty and a feeling of anticipation. Drawn to light in the dark room, viewers would encounter the tunnels and pause to perceive and relish in the mysterious quality of space and light within the infinitely receding holes. Together, I intended for the light tunnels and dark room to offer an alternating experience of fear and awe, trepidation and wonder, entirely capturing the attention of the viewer audience and suspending them in the moment of perceiving.

Figure 19

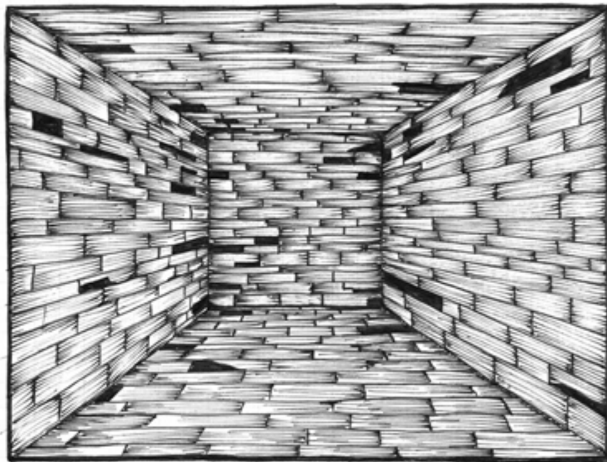
As plans for *Outpost* developed, I was drawn to using rough and salvaged wood planks for finishing the interior surfaces, referencing a sort of rustic, cabin-like interior. I also moved toward irregularly sized and intermittently placed light tunnels with long, rectangular plank-like dimensions, and I opted for degrees of warm white light inside the tunnels, suggesting fire or candlelight, as opposed to the cool white of previous light tunnel iterations. I intended for the threshold into the room to transport the viewer audience to a space far away, wholly different, and remote from its surrounding gallery environment. In making these decisions, it became clear that the space was to stand as a sort of wilderness hut – a vulnerable shack meant to provide some shelter to humans in a perilous environment. I recalled the one room hunter's hut that I hiked to in Greenland, along with other memories of huts encountered in Greenland, Finland, and the Sierras in eastern California, and

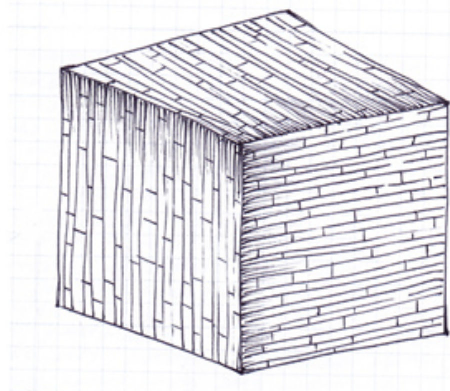
linked these structures to the sense of physical and geographic isolation. These memories became visually and emotionally associated with the design and development of the structure.

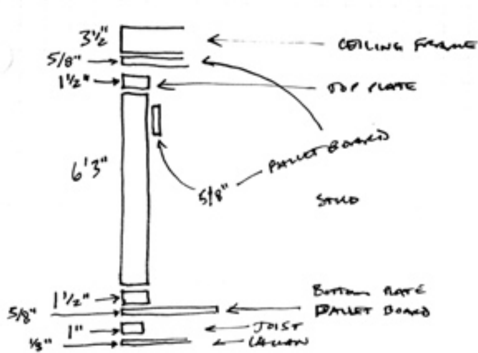
As I constructed *Outpost,* I delved deeper into the structures that Arctic peoples' build and depend on for shelter. Up until the mid-20th Century, houses in West Greenland remained largely unchanged. The typical floor plan consisted of four walls in either a rectangular or trapezoidal format, built as freestanding structures, or built with the back-end adjoined to a hillside. Rows of hardwood, collected as driftwood (as there are no forests in Greenland), formed the interior walls, floor, and ceiling, and sod was sometimes added to increase insulation.[21] While not intended to be a historical representation of an early Inuit home, *Outpost* references the low ceilings, found wood, and long, narrow floor plan that are characteristic of Greenlandic Inuit architecture. It represents the human impulse to build shelter and seek safety in a perilous environment.

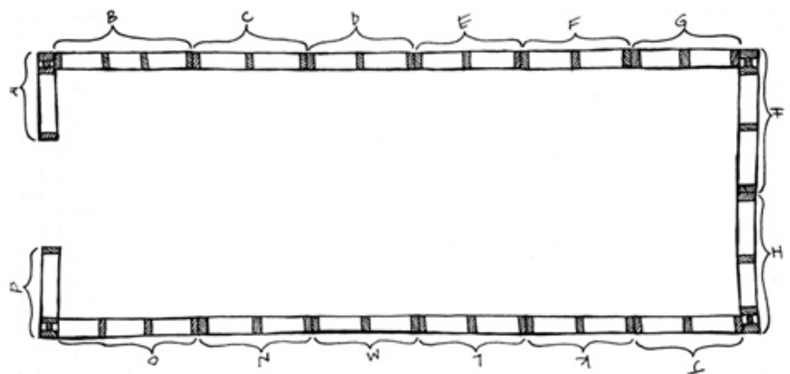
The physical structure of the *Outpost* hut developed in drawings and scale models (Figure 20), and includes a built floor, measuring roughly 8 x 20 feet and 1-¾ inches in height. The ceiling of the hut is 77 inches in height, and the height of the door is 66 inches. The structure is modular; it was originally constructed at the University of Michigan's School of Art + Design graduate studios in Ann Arbor in thirty-two pieces: ten floor units, sixteen wall units, five ceiling units, and one entrance ramp unit. It was then disassembled, transported to Detroit by truck, and reassembled in the WORK:Detroit gallery space. Details of the hut space, including the framing and finishing of light tunnels, electrical wiring, drywall installation and painting all took place during the three week installation phase in Detroit.

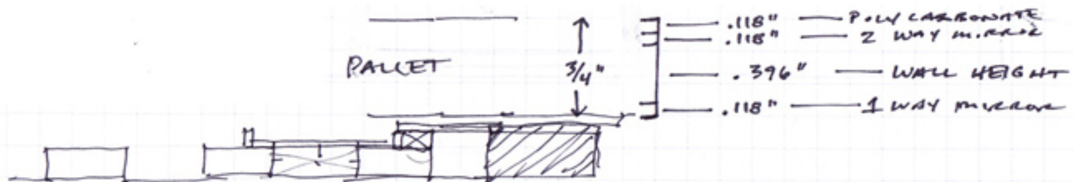
[21] Lee (13)

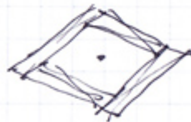












can (Z) be equal to the depth of the pallet wood planks?

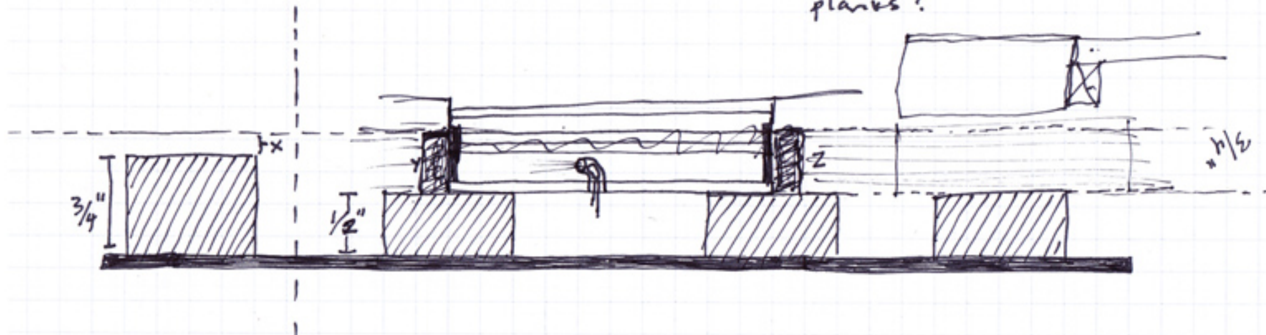


Figure 20

As I disassembled the seventy-five shipping pallets that would produce the salvaged wood interior of *Outpost*, I began to research other artists who addressed concepts of primitive shelters and shacks in their work. Alice Aycock's, *Low Building with Dirt Rock (for Mary)*, is situated in the farmlands of Pennsylvania and constructed using wood, earth, and stone (Figure 21). It references shelters built by 19th Century settlers in the same region, and invites the viewer into a low, confining space, sunken into the earth.[22] *Outpost* references Aycock's work in the sense that I intend it to be a "psycho-physical" space, derived from known, pre-existing, primitive shelters, that must "be penetrated to experience the psychological effects of enclosure" and isolation.[23] Art historian and critic Suzaan Boettger describes Aycock's practice of bringing the viewer into uncomfortable spaces as "compelling in its experiential perversity."[24] This suggestion of an experience that is both compelling and perverse—a situation in which the viewer is simultaneously captivated and repelled—is a condition that I sought to incorporate into *Outpost.*

I also connected with Cornelia Parker's description of her work *Cold Dark Matter* (Figure 22) as a "psychological state, an inner explosion." An installation constructed from a shed blown apart and meticulously reassembled in the gallery as a system of fragments hanging from wires as if caught freeze-frame in the process of explosion, *Cold Dark Matter* balances between alternating states of "transformation and stasis, peace and violence."[25] Parker uses a sense of implied movement to create energy in her work, and uses raw materials, like the charred wood, that give the work a visceral grittiness. Describing *Heart of Darkness,* another one of her installations made of hanging shards of wood, she says, "there's a sinister aspect to the work… There's definitely an anxiety there."[26] In referencing Parker, I aim for the viewer's experience inside *Outpost* to engage

[22] Risatti (28)
[23] Ibid (28)
[24] Kastner (32)
[25] Tickner (370)
[26] *Independent* (12)

Figure 21

Figure 22

with the rough, heavy physical materials of the structure—creaky, uneven floorboards and weathered wood planks—in balance with the poetic weightlessness of the light tunnels and specks of light that seem to float in space. I intend for the juxtaposition of these physical conditions to strengthen and refine the non-physical experience, oscillating between calm and trepidation, wonder and fear, certainty and distrust.

Phenomenon and atmosphere

All characteristics of the physical atmosphere of space shift as the viewer enters into *Outpost*—the floor becomes less stable, boards bow and creak slightly under foot, and the sound of footsteps change from the solid, dampened sound on concrete to the hollowed sound on the planked floor. The exterior surfaces of wall, floor and ceiling are conventional for the gallery space, white-painted drywall; the interior wall, floor and ceiling surfaces are rough and uneven wooden planks. The light changes from the calculated diffuse white glow of the gallery into an enveloping darkness, punctuated by points of warm yellow light, trailing off into the depths of the walls, floor and ceiling.

The atmosphere undergoes a subtle shift, from the cool, clean, known exterior to the dim, rough, unfamiliar interior.

The energy inside *Outpost* is focused within the light tunnels that give dim light to the deep, narrow room. In cutting into the walls and inserting tunnels that seem to mysteriously hover in space, I changed the spatial dynamics of the room, and make reference to the work of James Turrell. Using light as material in order to engage direct perception, Turrell expertly crafts immersive spaces in which light transforms into a solid, physical presence, changing the perceived architecture of the space.[27] In his work, *Ganzfeld APANI,* a rectangle of light initially appears as a large projection onto a flat wall. With patience and curiosity, the eyes adjust to discover that the light is actually emanating from a hole cut into the wall, large enough for the viewer to enter, and inside which light is emitted from a mysterious and unidentifiable source. The even, diffuse quality of the light makes it nearly impossible to determine the depth, outline, or contours of the niche, lending a sense of wonder and uncertainty to the entire experience of the space.

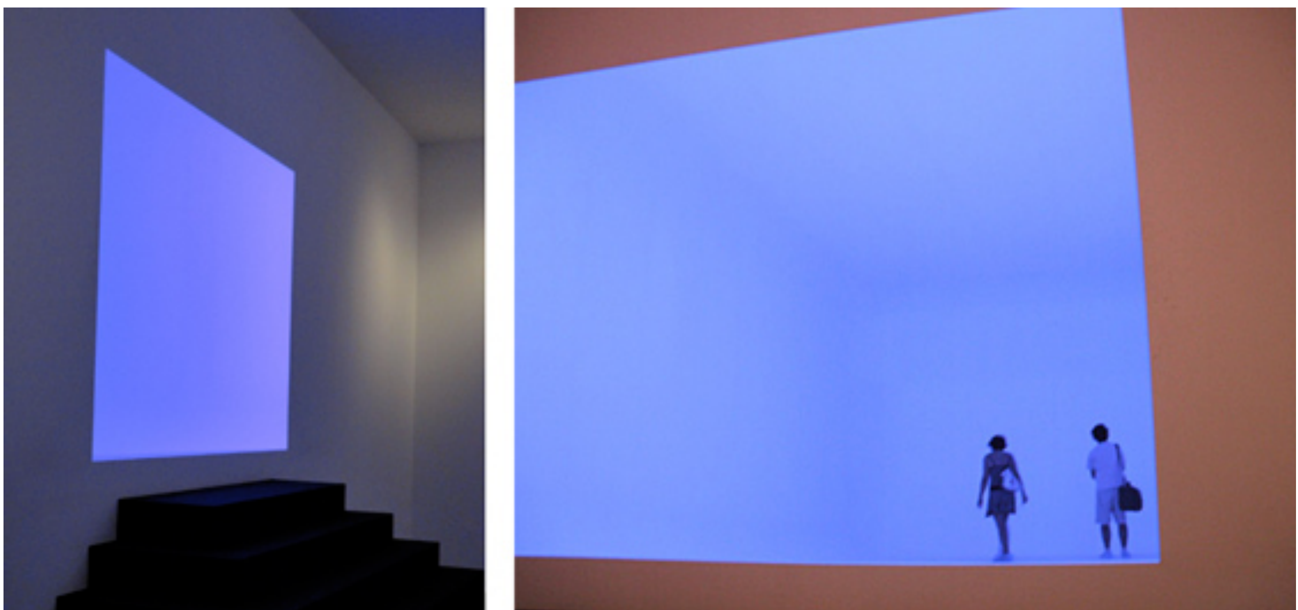


Figure 23

[27] Lindner (103)

Adapting the ambitions of Turrell*,* I aimed to give a sense of mysteriously materiality to the specks of light inside each tunnel within *Outpost*, while at the same time obscuring the source of the light. I scratched away the mirrored surface of the back of each tunnel's two-way mirror, and attached the LED light source directly to the back of the mirror, so that the glow of the light leaked through the scratches into the interior of each tunnel. The result was a hovering, glowing speck of light, energized by the implied movement of the tiny lines of light extending from the locus of each speck (Figure 24). The glowing light is not intended to illuminate the interior hut, rather it aims to engage energy, physical matter, and design to produce three-dimensional and experiential effects.

Figure 24

Also resonant with Turrell's *Ganzfeld APANI*, depth is a crucial aspect of the viewer interaction with *Outpost*. Within the interior space, depth is simultaneously the space between the viewer and other visitors, the distance between the viewer and the surface of the space, the distance of the space from entrance to back wall, the thickness of the walls, floor, and ceiling, and the depth of the light and space that exists in the tunnels in the walls, floor, and ceiling. The perception of these various depths within the space shape the experience, and influence the viewer's sense of isolation, confinement, orientation and safety. I intend for the depth of the long room to pull the viewer audience into the space. The apparent perception of the depth of the walls, as the viewer audience understands the structure from the exterior gallery space, contradicts the perception of the depth of the tunnels that appear to recede well beyond the limits of the floor, walls, and ceiling. I aim for this push and pull between expectations of the space and perceptions of it to bring attention to the act of perceiving and to destabilize the certainty of the viewer's perceptions.

Figure 25

Darkness is another critical component of *Outpost*, as it is intended to support and enhance the viewer's experience of uncertainty and apprehension as they enter into and move about inside the hut. In entering the hut room, viewers' body movements tended to be slow and timid. As their eyes adjusted to the dark conditions, they searched for the visible extents of the interior space, and for the outlines of other bodies inside the room. In this way, darkness is intended to visually simulate or enhance a sense of isolation—if the viewer does not see other humans in the space, they might feel more alone. Darkness also defines and distances the viewer's experience of the interior of *Outpost* from the exterior gallery space. It is intended to be a sort of atmospheric boundary between outside and inside, reaffirming the intention that the interior hut is a distant space, removed and isolated from the surrounding gallery environment.

Figure 26

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

Artifacts of research vs. Direct experience

Located on the walls adjacent to the *Outpost* structure, small photos, maps, drawings, data records and journal entries acted as visual and textual reference for the experience of isolation in nature. I selected the material from the research and field notes I accumulated in Greenland. While dwarfed in scale by the large *Outpost* structure, the documents of research located on the adjacent wall attracted viewers much more readily than did the entrance into the dark hut. Representing methods of processing experience, (1) the phenomena-producing interior hut space, and (2) the narrative artifacts of research, these differing modes of constructing meaning follow the outlines of embodied reasoning and abstract reasoning, respectively.

Embodied reasoning is a complex process in which "our entire bodily constitution and senses 'think' in the fundamental sense of identifying and processing information about our situation in the world, and mediating sensible behavioral responses."[28] Entering into *Outpost* directly engages the viewer's body and sensory organs. Visually perceiving darkness, the viewer may subsequently experience apprehension, and feeling floorboards shift and bow underfoot may elicit uncertainty. The *meaning* of the hut interior is not explicated in a wall text, rather it is *sensed* through the direct experience of perception.

In opposition to the hut interior, the research materials hung on the adjacent walls suggest meaning that is "systematically assembled out of meticulous observations, drawn up within a mathematical order of abstract reason, or serendipitously manifested in an unmediated glimpse of truth."[29] While seemingly more explicit in meaning and implying some verifiable truth, the artifacts of research are unavoidably simplified via abstraction, and effectively distance the viewer from a direct experience. The *feeling* of isolation is relegated to the imagination; the opportunity for *sensing via perception* is diminished.

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[28] Pallasmaa (116)
[29] Steen (197)

Figure 30

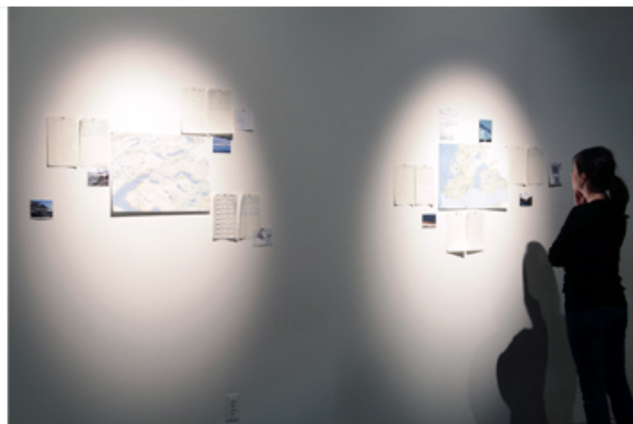

Figure 31

In his writings on phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that humans are enmeshed within the physical world and describes an "intentional arc which project round about us our past, our future, and our human setting."[30] He affirms that perception takes place in constant feedback, looping between the subject and object (not simply an distinct behavior within the subject).[31] As a reflection on physical experience and non-physical response, on understanding and translating meaning and experience, *Outpost* elucidates Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, and acts as evidence that all past experience returns in present experience, and that the best, most vital and essential representation of the world is the world itself.

[30] Dreyfus (373)
[31] Förster (854)

CONCLUSION

Aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics—these matters of value, Wittgenstein agreed, lay in the realm of the unutterable. But it was natural and inevitable that men should speak of them, and much could be learned from the way in which people went about their foredoomed task of trying to say the unsayable. Moreover, it would not be clear where the boundary of sanctioned speech lay until an attempt had been made to cross it and that attempt had failed. Such efforts Wittgenstein regarded with benevolence. He treated them as reconnaissance expeditions, perilous to be sure, but well worth the effort expended on them.

- H. Stuart Hughes, The Sea Change

Almost three years ago, I began a journey of assembling meaning through creative research and work that has culminated in my thesis exhibition, *Outpost*. Originating in the impulse to explain anxiety, I set out to provoke it in the wilderness of Greenland, to catalogue it in data entries and journal accounts, and to reconstruct it in immersive installations. In a sense this process is a closed loop—beginning with questions on the nature of perception and experience, and returning to the same questions with new perspective. I have wondered on the purpose of these exercises, and have discovered that I am satisfied only with the notion that a magical, mysterious experience—the wonderful and fearful sublime—cannot exist, not even in my imagination, unless I operate under the assumption that it is possible to construct, purposely call forth, and realize the experience of it.

In designing and constructing *Outpost*, I sought to call forth the experience of anxiety and the sublime. I set up the physical space and conditions so that physical and non-physical interactions might take place, and in doing so, developed a sense of strategy in terms of how I might intervene in or draw upon situations in the physical environment in the future. As I neared completion of the *Outpost* installation, I began to visualize a myriad of alternate spatial configurations that might enhance a sense of isolation and disorientation within the space. Also, my understanding of material and surface expanded; I began to imagine the potential to incorporate new materials, sourced from the environment, to readdress and refine the feeling of direct experience with the natural

environment. I sense great opportunities for further developing the key issues and objectives that were presented in *Outpost* in future projects situated outdoors, in both urban and rural, isolated environments.

So I continue to pose questions on how non-physical responses may be stirred by the experience of physical space, moving further into the practice of searching for answers, and along the way find satisfaction in some quality of experience and understanding—in rediscovering an opportunity for wonder.

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