

Sensory Events: Body site and the evental
Amy Miller

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	p.3
2. BATHING [body of water]	p.5
3. EVENT	p.10
4. EATING[food for bodies]	p.13
5. SITE	p.18
6. DREAMING [dreaming the body]	p.20
7. SENSATE BODY	p.25
8. [The disappearance of the event]	p.28
9. Conclusion	p.29
10. Reference list	p.33
11. Bibliography	p.35
12. Appendix	

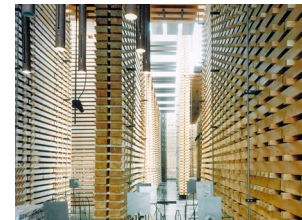
Introduction

The research discussed in this essay centers around ideas of site, event and the body, with a particular focus on sensory experience. These conditions are explored through design, via a series of experiential explorations focusing on the body and the senses touch, taste, smell, sight and sound. This essay proposes that spatial design is the design of sensory experience, rather than the manipulation of architectural space, and explores this through a series of evental experiments. The first experiment, grouped domestic objects associated with bathing rituals on the temporal edge of the sea. The second event consisted of two light tables one held a hot tomato soup and the other, a cold boysenberry sorbet. This was situated in the middle of an urban eating strip. The third event explored dreaming as experience on a raft in the Wellington Harbor. The experiments explored the idea that the sensate body experiences events and the site itself has evental qualities, these are explored in parallel with the bodily experience through the event.

This essay begins by exploring the notion of the event as a shifting and unpredictable condition, which involves the public and community and evokes a reaction. Site is then discussed as a mode used to further understand the event as site-specific work, which relies on the immediate site to drive the issues explored. The third and final condition discussed in this essay is the sensory body. It becomes apparent that the body is the most important of the three conditions explored, without the body, there is no event, as there is no receptor to witness, process and react. The body is framed here as the “physicalised body, aware of its surroundings, a body of

heightened critical acuity”(Meyer, 2000, p.26). The research process is established as the development of site-specific events which engender a heightened critical acuity. James Meyer’s theory of the ‘Physicalised body’ establishes the theoretical basis for this project upon which a definition of the body and a theorised process can be formed. These experiments were performed and have long since disappeared. This thesis does not in any way attempt to preserve the performances, but rather explores these as disappearing acts (Phelan, 1993, p.148).

Architect Peter Zumthor describes the event *Swiss Sound Box*, a temporary installation for the Swiss expo, as being a Gesamtkunstwerk; “A total work of art. The combination of art and daily routine, of relaxation and inspiration, within a performance that maintains its creative tension throughout the duration of the exposition” (2000, p.96). The notion of Gesamtkunstwerk establishes a research design strategy for this research project. This forms the basis for experiments that test the sensory role in an event. These experiments set out parameters in which to base design experiments upon, by incorporating the key words used to describe Gesamtkunstwerk into the experiments. These are *daily routine, relaxation, inspiration, performance, duration and exposition*. These experiments will be used as an engine to later design an event that ultimately explores the notion of Gesamtkunstwerk.



Swiss sound box, Peter Zumthor, 2000

BATHING [body of water]

A cast iron bath filled with fresh water, heated by a hot bed of embers nests in the stones of Makara beach, co-existing with the landscape. Rolls of fresh white towels stacked beside the bath provide comfort and luxury. A clothes rack offers an assortment of bathing suits. This experiment invites the public to use and experience the bath. The event occurred over the course of a day between the hours of 9am and 5pm. An event of flow and change, the wind, bath water, towels and tidal shifts all become an entropic reduction. The bath is not only a place of relaxation and inspiration but a social vessel to converse, laugh, meet and greet. To onlookers, the bath and bather become a spectacle, as the boundaries of bodies, bath, ocean and landscape become a blur. The bath offered intimacy and warmth, in contrast to an expansive and cold landscape. Not only was the bath utilised all day, participants respond to it in an intimate way, at times staying in as long as an hour and in other cases not requiring a bathing suit at all. The towels and bath define or frame an area on the shore as an event. The bather responds viscerally to the spatio temporal environment by, smelling the smoke, hearing the waves and turning stones, tasting the salt spray, feeling the hot water and crispy towels and looking out to the horizon. The sensate body has become a medium by which to experience or measure spatial conditions.



BATHING



BATHING



BATHING



BATHING

EVENT

An event is often understood as a monumental happening, for example the birth of Christ, or more recently the Twin Towers disaster that shook the world in 2001. This is because these are events that shift the way in which we think, act and live from then on; they are catastrophic events that change the way we behave. Yet an event can also be a daily action which becomes an aesthetic event constructed by framing an action as a set of conditions, as an event and therefore something which shifts the way we act or use space. Performance design theorist Dorita Hannah states, “to display is to self-consciously make a show of something, aware of the aesthetic charge elicited by an act of revelation.” (2008, p.14) Here Hannah, speaks about the way in which an event can evoke a reaction or surprise, similar to the Twin Towers disaster. The quote underpins ideas of display or making a show of something (an event), as a happening, because the performance or performer is aware of some kind of reaction before they have even started.

[Evental as a temporal condition]

Evental theory plays a large part in this research. Small events are conducted as a means of exploration and experimentation. These explore ideas of the everyday, using rituals as a way of framing the experiments. The event is a fleeting moment, it is temporal in nature, and the three events explored rely on trust and guidance requiring control and order. Zumthor states, “Being host and welcoming visitors were key aspects in the development of the concept. Visitors to the expo should be greeted with a palette of stimulating possibilities that appeal to all of the senses and offer rest and relaxation” (2000 p.113). “Switzerland is not on show and does not talk about itself – its presence consists of being a host and offering

hospitality (p.186). Zumthor writes on the importance of the host in an event, and in the three experiments it becomes crucial that there be a host to guide the event, inviting the participation of the public and community. The host helps to identify and frame the happening as an event. Gay McAuley states, “being an event rather than an object, performance is radically unstable in the meanings it generates and in the activities it engages” (2000, cited in Hannah, Harslof, 2008, p.11). Here McAuley explains how two performances are never alike as they generate different meanings and actions each time. This notion further explores the way space is understood, through the event as a shifting and unpredictable condition. Evental practice is performative because “stories are told, forces are harnessed and roles are played out” (Hannah, Harslof, 2008, p.11) Through the event communities and people are brought together able to watch and participate in an unfolding event.

In my work, ideas of the evental are evident in all three experiments. To have a bath is an event that at some stage will draw to an end, and more so when placed on the temporal edge of the sea. The bath is not fixed to the shore, as it is plumbed in a domestic setting. In ‘BATHING’ the ocean plays out evental behavior as the tides shift and change over the course of a day, the sea is in constant flux, persistently reminding us of the ephemeral nature of the ocean. The temperature and colour of the bathwater is in a constant state of change. The body’s experience of the event is perceived through the sensorium, as the bather watches and feels the evental being played out.

When consuming food it becomes apparent that eating is an unsustainable event and a disappearing act, as is any performance. In ‘EATING’ the chosen site of the city provides an evental landscape to work from. The site is a place of flow and change, figures and bodies become a blur of action as they step in and out of the event, some stop, taste and simply move on, whilst others stay for several servings and converse with others engaged in the event. The containers, the soup and the sorbet engage in active participation as they are raised, lowered and sipped from. The tables of edible color slowly fade to empty vessels signifying the event is drawing to an end.

In the third and final event entitled ‘DREAMING’ ideas of the evental are drawn out. The event occurred on a constant shifting site of water, where the lagoon fills and drains as the tides change. The wind agitates the waves oscillating the raft and the event unfolds over the course of a day. The raft is embodied by the participant for a serving of time, entirely up to the individual. When the participant wishes to return, they ring a bell, signifying an end. A dream is a subconscious shifting event performed inside the sleeping mind. When listening to dreams described by others, they act as a series of small events played out in the larger, (the raft on the lagoon).

EATING (food for bodies)

Two light tables stand in Cuba St, a hot tomato soup steams in the light, while a frozen boysenberry sorbet slowly defrosts. Bodies bend down and sip from a white straw, a hot red liquid slips past their lips and over the tongue. Glancing across the narrow table, eyes of strangers meet. A less-intimate encounter unfolds on the boysenberry table, as one places warm fingers on the ice-cold container of the sorbet and brings it up to the mouth. A cold snow like texture is felt for a moment, before dissolving into an explosion of flavor. The contrasting temperatures, flavors and ways of eating make this a heightened experience, and the participant becomes more sensually aware. Surrounding sounds and smells from the site underpin the event as they reiterate the notions of dining and the eating culture in the wellington city. 'EATING' was an event which drew in members of the public to participate, as in the bathing event, here the participants become active inhabitants. Temporality emerged out of this, and parallels with the bath can be drawn. Over the course of the night, the soup and sorbet slowly leave traces, the food diminishes and the conflicting temperatures, tastes and smells of the food become not so conflicting. Thus this contrasting event slowly melts and smears to become a blur. The site reiterates the notion of dining and demands the corporeal body responds through the sensorium, by tasting and smelling savory and sweet. In the way that the participants drink the soup, they also consume the object and the light, these sensate experiences are crossing over here and it becomes apparent that through this orchestrated event both the sensate body and site become mediums to experience.



EATING



EATING



EATING



EATING

SITE

A site is an area of ground on which a town, building, or monument is constructed, or a place where an event or activity is occurring or has occurred. Sites have specific qualities which site-specific work attempts to draw out or build upon. This research explores three sites through site-specific events.

[Site-specific work and event]

In spatial practice and event design, a site-specific work informs the object or event in the chosen location. This is because a site holds information that can relate directly back to the object or ideas concerning the event. Site-specific design is used in the three experiments explored to further understand the event, associations and ideas based around that. Sculptor Richard Serra asserts that “To move the work is to destroy the work”(1994 cited in Kaye, 2000, p.2). In other words, to move a site-specific work is to re-place it, to make it something else. A site specific work can articulate and define itself through properties, qualities or meanings produced in a specific relationship between an ‘object’ or ‘event’ and the position it occupies.

Theorist Miwon Kwon writes on site-specific art and locational identity, in *One place after another*. “Emerging out of the lessons of minimalism, site-specific art was initially based in a phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site, defined primarily as an agglomeration of the actual physical attributes of a particular location” (2002, p.3) - here Kwon describes the way in which a site cannot only inform, but can also be interpreted through the sensate body. She speaks of the knowledge of a site as a collection of all the physical attributes of the location. The event in a

site-specific context is experienced in the here and now, through the bodily presence of each viewing subject. This is evident in the three experiments explored where the events were assimilated with the environmental context. The events were formally determined and directed by the site, through a sensory understanding of spatial extension and temporal duration. This was achieved by situating the events in sites that dealt with the environmental components of the given space such as the temporal nature of the sea in 'BATHING'.

[Primary and secondary site]

A Primary site is established as the body, and a secondary site can be recognised in the actual physical site situating the body in space. This is evident in 'BATHING' where bodies become submerged in the warm bathwater and render qualities of the bath and physical site through the sensorium. The body takes on qualities of the object and becomes the site in which the event is played upon. The ocean becomes a secondary site in this research as a shifting condition that situates the body in space and time. In 'EATING' the urban site was enlivened by the temporal pulse of the city and the bodies extended out into the site. Finally in 'DREAMING' the body is the site in which the event is carried out. The body responds viscerally to the voices in the dreams and the rocking effect of the raft. Secondary to this is the actual physical site, the lagoon and sea, which floats the raft and makes it rock and sway. This furthers ideas of dreaming, enforcing the feelings of weightlessness, floatation, unpredictably and spontaneity.

DREAMING (dreaming the body)

The timber raft, floats on the water of a windswept lagoon. A soft, stone grey mattress cradles the body and a large pillow soothes the head and neck. A small brass bell is suspended within a timber board and a red chord hangs by its side, when pulled it sounds a calm ring. This experiment invites the public to lie down on the raft and float out into the middle of the lagoon, attached only by a submerged rope. One places an ipod in their ears and as they float away, they begin listening to dreams described by others. A feeling of weightlessness begins to relax and seduce the body into a dream-like state. The body floats on a bed of air, at the end of a rope. When hoping to return to reality the bell is rung, and the raft returns home. With no perception of time, on return, participants are disorientated and confused as if waking from a dream. Some stay on the raft as long as fifty minutes, whilst others only ten. The raft defines and frames the body of water in which it rests upon, as an event. The dreamer replies viscerally to the spatio temporal environment by, smelling salty air, hearing the voices describing dreams, tasting the cold wind, feeling weightless, and floating on a soft bed of water, looking up into the sky as the clouds race by, or for some seeing the red light beneath the eyelids. The body has become the site, a medium by which to experience or measure spatial conditions. The secondary site acts as a carriage for the raft, floating and subliminal.



DREAMING



DREAMING



DREAMING



DREAMING

SENSATE BODY

The sensate body is to be able to perceive with the senses, a faculty by which the body perceives an external stimulus; the faculties of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch, from Latin *sensus* 'faculty of feeling, thought, meaning,' from *sentire* 'feel.'

[Body and the sensory]

Throughout this design based research the sensate body is used as a mode to better understand space. Peter Zumthor speaks of space as something that is engrained in his memory as experiences; he then uses those experiences to design sensory architectures. "There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it. Sometimes I can almost feel a particular door handle in my hand, a piece of metal shaped like the back of a spoon. I used to take hold of it when I went into my aunt's garden. That door handle still seems to me like a special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells" (1998, p.7). The sensate body is a human condition used to perceive. When sensing an event we recognise it, and become summoned by it, a synesthesia between different sensory organs occurs, resulting in heightened experiences. The layering of sensory perception in evental and spatial practice makes the senses a key faculty for understanding the conditions under which the body interacts with the event. (Banes, Lepecki, 2007, p.2)

[Body as site]

The event and site are measured through the body. Therefore the event does not exist without the body as a receptor. Nick Kaye writes of works by, artist Dennis Oppenheim and states that "... these artists addressed the

work's relationship to its site through a construction of the performing body itself as means, material and *place*" (2000, p.151). This is evident in Oppenheims *One Hour Run*, 1968. A six-mile continuous track was cut with a snowmobile that repeated a continuous route for an hour. Oppenheim inscribes a signature mark on the landscape, and paints a picture with the actions of his physical body. Here the actions of Oppenheims body marks space and therefore the body becomes the site.



One hour Run, 1968

The body of site exists in these experiments only when they are perceived. This leads on to more specifically the mode in which we perceive, our senses. This is particularly relevant in site-specific work where the body becomes a responsive and engaging faculty of the event. Theorist James Meyer claims, "The body of site specificity was a physicalised body, aware of its surroundings, a body of heightened critical acuity"(2000, P.26). Here Meyer speaks of the body as being a detailed and accurate receptor of the surroundings. The body becomes aware of its surroundings and therefore becomes an active critic to the work.

In the three experiments played out, BATHING, EATING and DREAMING a strong focus on the sensory body was established. The events were designed specifically for the body, not just the physical body but moreover

the sensate body. The body is explored as a primary site to the event. This is apparent in 'BATHING' as the body is exposed to the elements of the site and understands the event through the bodies' mode of perception. In 'EATING' the bodies consume the object and play a role in becoming a mode for which the work is sited on. The participants drink the soup and eat the sorbet; they become active inhabitants on the site because the event is designed with the body's response in mind. Dreaming is similar in the way that the body lies on the raft becoming one unit. The body obviously uses its sensory faculties to grasp a better understanding of the event. This notion reflects Psychologist J.J Gibson's view that " ...our senses, taken as a whole, are really an integrated information-seeking mechanism that functions without any mediating cognition" (1966, cited in Malnar, Vodvarka, 2004 p. 42). Gibson describes the way in which sensory experiences are in the human mode of being. In the three experiments the bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment, the world and the self redefine each other constantly.

[The disappearance of the event]

What has become evident throughout this paper is that spatial design is a shifting and changing condition resulting in a disappearing act, capturing the event as it unfolds through the sensory. Performance studies theorist Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked, the politics of performance*. Phelan writes on performance as being nonreproductive asserting that "performance's only life is in the present" (1993, p.148). She talks about the way that a performance occurs over a time which will never be repeated. If performed again this repetition will make it different. Although these events can be documented through the camera, this only asserts that it can help to re-stage the effort to remember what is lost. The disappearance of the object is fundamental to event specific performances as this is what makes it unique and other to art practices like photography, or architecture where works consist of a fixed state. The fact that an event is unsustainable makes the experience unique to the one who remembers. Phelan asserts that "Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (1993, p.148).

The idea that an event-specific performance is unique to the individual within a specific time frame with no visible trace becomes relevant in the three experiments undertaken within this research project. This notion can be assimilated to a spatial practice that is concerned with designing temporary spaces and event-specific performances that are unsustainable and disappearing. The three experiments discussed in this essay, BATHING, EATING and DREAMING have now disappeared, they were events which occurred only the once. Each experiment was unique to the individual and

there are no traces left behind. All that is left is the memories in the mind of those who participated. When attempting to write about these undocumented events, I am contradicting the above statement, and in doing so, I am altering the events. However it is of no use to refuse to write about the events, as it is an inescapable transformation. Rather than writing in preservation, I am writing in favor of disappearance, as we must remember that once an event has dissolved it is the experience of the individual that is subjective to its self. (1993, p.148)

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to closely examine event, site and body through design-based research to formulate theories within spatial design. The body becomes key to understanding site, as a physicalised body. The conscious body begins an investigation into the site and draws its own conclusions. My design work centers on the body as a primary site for the event. What has become evident throughout this process is the manner in which spatial practice is focused and framed around the sensory body, the medium through which we experience and measure space. I assert that spatial design is about creating experiences. All design-based experiments undertaken have explored the event as a temporal shifting condition able to locate one self in space and time. The body is established as a primary site in all experiments. This idea of the body acting as a site is evident in the events constructed. The body becomes the key element to the event, as it is based on experience and without the body there would be no event. Secondary to this, site-specificity has occurred in each of three events where the site can be used to inform the event, for example in 'BATHING' the ocean became an extension of the bath. This reiterates the meanings within the event. Lastly

the Sensate body fabricates a visceral response to the event and the body becomes a medium in which to measure space. My spatial practice aims to create experiences for the body as a mode to measure space through a physicalised body which creates heightened acuity and perception.

AMY MILLER

Reference list

Banes, S. Lepecki, A. *The senses in performance*. New York: Routledge.

Hannah, D. Harsløf, O. (2008). Introduction: Performative expressions across disciplines. In D. Hannah & O. Harsløf (Eds.), *Performance Design* (pp. 11-14). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Kaye, N. (2000). *Site-specific art: performance, place and documentation*. Oxon: Routledge.

Kwon, M. (2004). *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*. England: MIT Press.

Malnar, M. Vodvarka, F. (2004). *Sensory Design*. U.S.A: University of Minnesota Press.

Meyer, J. in Suderburg, E, eds. (2000) *Space Site Intervention, situating installation art*. U.S.A: University of Minnesota Press.

Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked, the politics of performance*. London: Routledge.

Zumthor, P. (2000). *Swiss Sound Box*. Boston: Birkhauser.

Zumthor, P. (1998). *Thinking architecture*. Switzerland: Birkhauser.

Bibliography

Banes, S. Lepecki, A. *The senses in performance*. New York: Routledge.

Hannah, D. (2006). Orphic feast at play. In D. M. Hannah (Eds.) *Orphic Feast Exhibition Catalogue*. Paris: Galerie Fraich Attitude.

Hannah, D. Harsløf, O. (2008). Introduction: Performative expressions across disciplines. In D. Hannah & O. Harsløf (Eds.), *Performance Design* (pp. 11-14). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Kaprow, A. Watts, R. (1999). *Experiments in the everyday*. New York: Wallach Art Gallery.

Kaye, N. (2000). *Site-specific art: performance, place and documentation*. Oxon: Routledge.

Kwon, M. (2004). *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*. England: MIT Press.

Malnar, M. Vodvarka, F. (2004). *Sensory Design*. U.S.A: University of Minnesota Press.

Meyer, J. in Suderburg, E, eds. (2000) *Space Site Intervention, situating installation art*. U.S.A: University of Minnesota Press.

Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked, the politics of performance*. London: Routledge.

Searle, Adrian (2005-12-20). "Secrets of the forest". The Guardian. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2005/dec/20/photography.secondworldwar>. Retrieved on 2009-01-31

Zumthor, P.(1999). *Kunsthaus Bregenz, Archiv Kunst Architektur*. New York Distributed Art Publishers.

Zumthor, P.(2000). *Swiss Sound Box*. Boston: Birkhauser.

Zumthor, P. (1998). *Thinking architecture*. Switzerland: Birkhauser.

I propose to design space that engages and celebrates the sensate body. This will be manifested through a public event which will be sited on the Wellington Harbour during summer, as a temporary architecture. I intend to design beautiful spaces for the body which occur in spatio-temporal environments.



"The body of site specificity was a physicalised body, aware of its surroundings, a body of heightened critical acuity" (Meyer, 2000, p.26).

6. ORIGINALITY DECLARATION



Written assignment originality declaration (Each student to complete for every written assignment)

Student ID: __ 06097392 _____

Surname: ____ Miller _____

First Name: ____ Amy _____

Paper Number: 224.451 _____

Paper Title: ____ Spatial Design Research and Development ____

Assignment Title: _____

Declaration

- I declare that this is an original assignment and is entirely my own work.
- Where I have made use of the ideas of other writers, I have acknowledged (referenced) the sources in every instance.
- Where I have made use any diagrams or visuals, I have acknowledged (referenced) the sources in every instance.
- This assignment has been prepared exclusively for this paper and has not been and will not be submitted as assessed work in any other academic courses.
- I am aware of the penalties for plagiarism as laid down by Massey University.
- A copy of the Assessment and Examination Regulations can be found under the Statutes and Regulations section on the Massey University website (<http://calendar.massey.ac.nz/>)

Student signature

Date

Attach this originality declaration as an appendix to your written assignment.
An assignment without this declaration will not be accepted.