TACTILE
IMMERSIVE
LIMBER
ABERRATION
Suvi Saastamoinen

T.I.L.A - A Study on Embodied Space

2015 | Master’s Thesis in Environmental Art
Aalto University | School of Art, Design and Architecture | Department of Art
INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, as everyone, I created imaginary worlds for myself. Back then I didn’t know that I would become an artist or a landscape architect, yet the need to create spaces, a place around me, existed. This need never went away.

I work with ‘space’ as my medium in the fields of urban planning, architecture, landscaping, and performance and installation art. This thesis is a study to evolve my conceptual understanding of architectural space into an embodied understanding of space. Choosing ‘space’ as a starting point for my artistic research felt familiar at first, but every step down the line widened this abstract concept further and further. Space is a culmination point for a set of complex theories and viewpoints and these theoretical perspectives open up many valuable insights into the possible readings of space.

The first part of the thesis deals with the concept of architectural space and how it’s dis-embodiment led me to study the perceptual process. Through a short research in psychology I explain my understanding of embodied space. The second part explores the idea of embodied space in applications of art by others and myself. The last part focuses on my thesis artwork, a temporary public installation, which studies these questions in practice.
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Abstract / Tiivistelmä

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01

from
drawing
to
being
ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Architectural design often revolves around the sensation of sight. How shapes fit together, how harmonious colours are and what messages do visual objects give to people. In architecture, how things look has a certain emphasis. Many times a design never even sees daylight: it exists as beautifully visualized perspective pictures, diagrams and site plans. Many times architects design pictures, not spaces. That drawing of space has to be considered a concept of space, rather than an actual perceptual copy of it.

James J. Gibson has noted: “--the concept of space has nothing to do with perception. Geometrical space is a pure abstraction.” According to him, all features of the visual perception can be abstracted, which was first done by the Greek geometers. Since that first understanding of geometric space, we have started to think of space as something we produce. Architect Jan McCredie said: “Space is a deeply imbedded science with over 5000 years of history – it is not inert, neutral or a pre-existing given, rather it is an on-going production of spatial relations.”

Hans Loidl and Stefan Bernard write about the fundamentals of environmental design in their book “Opening Spaces”. According to them, for humans, creating spaces is “a natural, pre-conscious act of self-positioning within our surroundings”. They say that the perception of space is an evolutionary ability that helps us survive and make use of our surroundings. The act of creating spaces is “an essential act of self-location”.

1  Gibson, 1979. The ecological approach to visual perception, p.3
3  Loidl & Bernard, Opening spaces, p. 46
4  Loidl & Bernard, Opening spaces, p. 48
So space is, rather than a physical form, an idea that we have created together to make sense of the world. It is not relative to individuals, but social in the sense that all of us understand it and can read it in a same way. French Marxist-philosopher Henri Lefebvre writes that: “Space is neither a ‘subject’ nor an ‘object’ but rather a social reality – that is to say, a set of relations and forms.” In his book “Production of Space” he continues to explain his theory on how space actually consists of three different forms: representational space, representations of space and spatial practice of a society. Representational space means the space of the user: the individuals lived space with their ideals and imagination. Representations of space are the conceptualizations of a space by planners and architects. They are physical in the sense of maps and plans. Spatial practice refers to space and practices of everyday life, reality.

Architects get to work mostly with representations of space, as Lefebvre suggests. Design of a space usually starts from the needs of the user. Public space consists for the most part of streets, squares, parks and playgrounds. The public space is full of visual boundaries: fences, building facades, trees and shrubs or landforms and different groundcover. Boundaries can have many different characteristics. A window can act as a boundary but at the same time connect two spaces together. A change in level can be a functional boundary but not a visual one. The boundary can therefore be visual, functional or even mental. All of this is a visual language that has a socially shared meaning: we know automatically what to do and what not to do in these spaces: a street is for driving and a park is for playing frisbee. The boundary of the space determines and guides the function of a space: a fence is not to be crossed, a shopping window is something to look at, a building façade usually gives clues about the space behind it.

So what happens in an urban environment when this language of space is broken? It seems that a space with no apparent function or form is considered worthless and disheveled. Empty abandoned buildings, brownfield areas and overgrown parks are seen by most as useless and even dangerous waste of space. We have a need for giving spaces a function to help us utilize them.

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5 Lefebvre, 1991. The Production of Space, p.116
6 Lefebvre, 1991. The Production of Space, p. 38-39
We are surrounded by continuous, never-ending visual stimuli. Colors and images are used in our every-day environment to draw our attention and produce a pre-ordered reaction. How is the world meant to be interacted with? Is our connection to the world, our perception process, simply just data processing? The urban environment offers us mostly pre-purposed spaces that we don’t need to work hard to utilize. We live among concrete and continuous regulations and rather than providing us with a conversation, our environment is imposing a monologue. Perhaps these questions of our relationship with the world can be answered by starting from the fundamentals: how do we see and understand our surroundings?

Figure 1. Henri Lefebvre divides space in three forms in his theory of production of space. According to him, space is a set of relations and forms, a social reality.
thoughts on SEEING DIRECTLY

Seeing is something that we quite often think of as the preliminary way we understand and get around the world we live in. It helps us move around, recognize objects and other beings and choose between one shade of blue or another. As a seeing being, it would be hard to imagine how to get by, how to communicate, or move around without a set of eyes. Our movement in the world however is not entirely dependent on our vision. It could be said that our movement helps us see and perceive our environment as it is. Perception of the world or our surroundings is much more than seeing.
Perception is formed through all the sensory information that exists around us and vision is just one of the tools to retrieve it. The understanding of the process of perception, how we actually combine all this information, is continuously dividing psychologists and naturally there are varied theories on the subject. Perhaps most of us were still taught in school that our eyes work like a camera and capture a series of two-dimensional images which are assembled in the brain. This would create two worlds: the physical world and the world in our mind. The alternative way to understand perception is as a sensory experience, a process of the whole body. As I see it, this is how we should relate to our surroundings as well: as an environment to interact with, not only to look at.

James J. Gibson was one of the early supporters of the direct theory of perception in psychology, and his work can be seen as the basis for further embodied theories of perception. According to Gibson's ecological approach, perception starts from the stimulus and is a direct process. This means that there is no processing of the information in the brain, but we get all the information we need directly by moving and interacting in the environment.

According to Gibson, “natural vision depends on the eyes in the head on a body supported by the ground, the brain being only the central organ of a complete visual system.” Thus he refuses the claim that vision is dependant only on the eye that is connected to the brain but rather depends on our body and its movement. He says that “seeing of space depends on exploring and manipulating the environment.” This creates a strong link between what we see, what we do in and to our environment and maybe even how the environment makes us feel. The thought process could be extended even further by suggesting that vision and perception are personal experiences, and that they are influenced by who we are and how we think. These theories open up possibilities for studying how different movements and interactive environment affects the body and mind.

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7 Heft, 2013. Lecture on the ecological approach to perception and action.
11 Gibson, 1950. The perception of the visual world, p. 223.
Figure 2. An illustration of the traditional view of the perception process, where information is collected in the brain as a representation of the environment.
The direct approach to perception relies strongly on our ability to move around and our actions in the environment. Does it mean that without movement we wouldn’t perceive?

According to Alva Noë, perception is “a skillful activity on the part of the animal as a whole”\(^\text{12}\). He continues: “The ability to perceive not only constitutes of, but is constituted by our possession of sensorimotor knowledge.\(^\text{13}\)” Noë is thus implying that perception is something that we actively do with our whole body and our constant movements. This means that our simple ability to see things does not mean that we can perceive them. We need movement and exploration of our environment to be able to understand shape, distance and location - space.

Noë’s enactive theory argues that perception is an active process rather than passive. Alva Noë notes: “To perceive is not merely to have sensation; it is having sensations that one understands.\(^\text{14}\)” What he means is that perception is something that we learn to do as our information of our environment increases. Noë notes: “You aren’t given the visual world all at once, you are in the world, and through skilful visual probing, you bring yourself into contact with it.\(^\text{15}\)” This means that in contrary to Gibson’s thinking, Noë thinks that we don’t only instantly perceive our environment but our past actions and learning influences it. He therefore connects the direct perception process tightly to cognition, to who we are as individuals and what we have perceived in the past. This enactive approach suggests that perception is a process of action and thought. Michael Pace explains in his review of Noë’s theory this process with

\(^{12}\) Noë, 2004. Action in perception, p. 2
\(^{13}\) Noë, 2004. Action in perception, p. 2
\(^{14}\) Noë, 2004. Action in perception, p. 33
\(^{15}\) Noë, 2004. Action in perception, p.73
the example of a ripe tomato: “Seeing a ripe tomato consists in part in your having a bit of practical knowledge: you must know how the visual stimulation you have would vary if you or the tomato were to move in certain predictable ways. When you successfully see the tomato, you understand implicitly what would happen experientially if you were to move your eyes, or body, or shift your attention, and you also understand what would happen experientially if the tomato were to be moved.”16 This full perception of the tomato would not be possible without our personal previous encounter of it, movement and other sensational information. Enactive approach to perception suggests to us that we consciously perceive and constantly learn from our environment. Not only do we influence the environment, but the environment influences us. Therefore I believe that an environment which challenges our movement and perception also has an affect on our mind and self. The effect would then go both ways: our self also effects our perception.

Once we accept that our perception of the world is embodied in the sense that our whole body and its movement receives information that we directly process and react to, the question rises, how does our body then influence our perception of our environment?

Philosopher Shaun Gallagher has researched the embodied cognition theory, which strongly connects perception to cognition. According to him, our body shapes our perception and action, starting from as simple as “the egocentric framework that’s required for the very possibility of action”, meaning that we perceive perspectivaly and act from an egocentric point of view. This suggests that our body and through it, our “self”, is constantly apparent in our perception and action. Whatever we perceive is influenced by our individual physical body, our previous actions and memories, attitudes and experiences.

What does this body then consist of? Gallagher makes a distinction between what he calls the body image and body schema.

“A body image consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one’s own body. In contrast, a body schema is a system of sensorimotor capacities that function without awareness of the necessity of perceptual monitoring.” This suggests that our body has a side that we are aware of, and another that acts unconsciously. We all know this, because we have vital body functions that work without us having to consciously monitor them such as breathing. Gallagher extends this idea to movement and perception.

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17 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p.137
18 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p.24
He notes, that “even if I become conscious of certain aspects of my posture and movement, the body schema continues to function in a non-conscious way, maintaining balance and enabling movement.”

This distinction between two separate sides of our body means that we have a personal side of our body that we are aware of and that we can have effect on and another part that we have no control over. It acts independently, reacting to the surrounding environment. The body image can be seen as consciously separate from our surroundings, but the body schema is integrated to the environment. Gallagher explains how “by focusing on the performances of body schemas we can deepen our understanding of how the body contributes to the determination of perceptual consciousness, and in particular, the perceptual experience of the body which helps to form the body image.”

This means that the body schema helps us perceive the world in a way that makes it accessible to us to consciously act in. In a way it acts as a system that allows us to take advantage of certain things in the environment and also see ourselves perspectivally in it. This is what Gallagher means when he says that the body shapes the mind. His theory states that the body “sets the stage for action” and that the body is already acting “before you know it”. What he indicates here is that our body schema is able to act anticipating our intention, not only reacting to the environment but also taking our intention into account. This anticipation comes from previous encounters and experiences.

Gallagher’s intention with his theory is to stress the fact that “we are not just what happens in our brains”. He sees us as a system that continues beyond the brain, beyond the physical body, into the surrounding environment physically and socially. According to him, “we fail to recognize the true size of the system that we are”.

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19 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 38
20 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 139
21 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 244
22 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 237
23 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 242
24 Gallagher, 2005. How the body shapes the mind, p. 242
The theories of embodied cognition and enactive approach to perception raise up many interesting questions about our relationship with our environment. Has the modern day individual distanced themself from the natural instinct-driven affair with their surroundings? In the past, it seems that the relationship with the nature was much more direct. We could see the effects that our actions had on it and also what it could give us in return. We learned from the environment through action and experiment, which we conducted with our whole body instead of learning from instructions. Does the established urban setting keep us from really connecting with the environment and use these embodied skills to learn and develop as individuals?

Figure 3. An illustration of the theory of embodied cognition, where perception and action create a continuous loop with the body and the environment.
02

SPACE

as

ART
“Is it my role as an artist to say something, to express, to be expressive? I think it’s my role as an artist to bring to expression; it’s not my role to be expressive. I’ve got nothing particular to say, I don’t have any message to give anyone. But it is my role to bring to expression, let’s say, to define means that allow phenomenological and other perceptions which one might use, one might work with, and then move towards a poetic existence.” - Anish Kapoor

Anish Kapoor’s quote describes his work well. His work embraces the power of empty space, which is often the dominant element in his work. Many of Kapoor’s work have to be experienced first hand – you can’t experience an empty space through a written description, photographs or spoken descriptions. Homi K. Bhabha writes about Kapoor’s Double Mirror (1996): “The purpose of Kapoor’s work is not to represent the mediation of light and darkness, or negative and positive space...Kapoor stays with the state of transitionality, allowing the time and space to develop it’s own affects – anxiety, unease, restlessness – so that viewing becomes part of the process of making the work itself.”

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Figure 4. Anish Kapoor: Double Mirrors (1996).
Kapoor and other installation artists create work that the viewer physically enters, and the viewer or the viewing becomes part of the artwork. Claire Bishop describes installation art as follows: “Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision.” This means that instead of a self-contained object, the artwork is a space and a situation where the subject enters. Their movement and body become part of the work, thus blending the border between the subject and the object.

Bishop notes that “many artists turned into installation art precisely through the desire to expand visual experience beyond the two-dimensional, and to provide a more vivid alternative to it.” I see definite similarities between installation art, embodied perception and cognitive theories of psychology; they both consider the human as an embodied being who perceives through movement. Installation art uses this movement and changing perspective as one of the primary materials.

The embodied viewer, and in particular his or her body, is distinctively present in Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto’s works. Neto’s immersive installations transform art galleries and temporary installation spaces into organic, soft environments where the viewers might lose themselves and have more than a visual experience. Carlos Basualdo describes Neto’s Nave óvulo (1998) as “an ordered disarray of all senses…the alteration of common sense through into a sharp stimulation of the viewers sensory perception.” Neto’s fabric spaces don’t have a specific form or function, but they still encourage viewers to remove their shoes and enter. They, in Basualdo’s words, “urge a change, a vague laxity with no defined aim.” The flexible, ever-changing form makes the artwork a process with an unlimited series of formal possibilities.

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27 Bishop, 2005. Installation art: a critical history, p. 6
To return to Anish Kapoor’s quote, inspired by it, I see that my role as an artist is to create a setting, a space, that allows the viewer or viewers a phenomenological or otherwise perspective experience that might have an impact on their body and mind. The installation itself is a tool for the viewer to be more aware of their body, its movement and the edges of its existence. Where do our bodies end and our environment begin? Is my body the limit of my existence?

“In order to assert itself as an artistic form, movement within the space must have a dimension. To put it another way: movement per se does not yet have meaning in an artistic sense. The piece must prescribe a structure for the movement so that it has a direction, a sequence, a rhythm. Only then does it become possible for what we call form to appear, which is a prerequisite for art.” – Franz Erhard Walther

This is how in a catalogue for his exhibition “The Body Decides”, Franz Erhard Walther describes how the body and movement form his artworks. I had the chance to see his collection of works First Work Set (1963-69), which consists of 58 separate items that activate the body and connect it in different ways to the object, the environment or another person. Each item is a unique piece with instructions on how to use it. Using the objects is an experience of your own body and its relationship to the environment. The artist sees that the body defines the work: “In these pieces, the body itself cannot be the work, but it can become part of the work. This is not an abstract concept, but one that is directly addressed in pieces where the body has a tangible form...’The body is part of the work’ also means that the work is completed by the body.”

I find Franz Erhard Walters works to be just that: works to which my presence contributes something, works that the body completes. In these works the relationship of the body and the work creates a form. The form is influenced by the movement, which comes from the individual. The art experience becomes a responsive action and creates a momentary form. Without the participants these works are equipment, a commodity that waits for the user.

In Franz Erhard Walters exhibition many of the pieces of work were out of bounds. I believe this somewhat makes the artist’s work incomplete: he himself did not see the artwork as art without the form of the user. In these works, does the art have a start and an end? Can the art exist without the participant whose body creates a form for it? Is the whole essence of the artwork in the experience of viewer?

The concept of a soft space is an attempt to create a space that would absorb the body as part of it and dissolve the boundaries between the environment and the body. It is also an intervention to a traditional functional space that is restricted by solid walls or ground. It reminds me of a child who wants to build a hut from sofa cushions or wants to have a tent in the backyard. As a child, those unconventional spaces were exciting, safe and private.

I’m drawn to fabric because it has features that complement my ideas of a soft space: it can be flexible, expand and contract and it can separate space in a unique way. Fabrics can of course have very different features as a boundary material according to its style; a thick velvet curtain in a theater can almost be compared to a separating wall, but a tent in a camping ground can feel like almost sleeping under the open sky.

Fabrics can also have many connotations that are formed from their pattern or color. They have a lot of strong cultural meanings, which should be taken into account when working with fabric. In my earlier works I’ve used plain white
fabric to keep the material neutral and keep the focus of the work in the form and features of the material, rather than the connotations it may suggest. It should be kept in mind though is that in some contexts, white fabric can also have strong meanings and associations and is not purely a neutral material.

Loose/Tense was a soft space installation I created for Installation Art course in Aalto University’s Arabia Campus. I see this work as a spatial experiment later contributing to my thesis artwork. The space was a semi-public space in the university building, which can be seen as an exhibition space or simply as a walk-through space. I didn’t find the space to be that inspiring, so my focus was to the windows and the way the space continued outdoors through the glass. I was also noticing the exposure of the space, which is why I played with the idea of creating a more private, sheltered space inside this walk-through space. The finalized installation was a white fabric tube that stretched from the frames of one of the rectangular windows into the indoor space and had a circular loose end. The artwork came to life when the viewer interacted with it: moved, stretched or went inside it. This way the installation became a moving sculpture for the other viewers to see.

Fabric was the perfect material to symbolize the semi-restricting boundary that I was looking for in the space. With the fabric I managed to create a pause, a moment of solitude, in this shapeless corridor-like space. The small space created was strongly connected through the windows to the outdoor space rather than the surrounding indoor space. The form of the artwork started and was greatly influenced by the fabric and its qualities. I chose the most flexible fabric I could find and studied the way it created forms when it was stretched out or let loose. The mounting at the site determined the final (and fluid) form of the work and the way it was possible to approach and interact with it.

This artwork was highly dependent of the viewer’s body, which became part of it. For a moment, the viewer was part of the environment, becoming an unrecognizable shape. By entering the artwork, the viewer also became a performer, perhaps consciously or not. The main focus of the artwork was to dissolve the borders of visual art, the spectator and the environment, which I feel it succeeded to do.
Figure 7. Suvi Saastamoinen: Loose/Tense (2014).
03

THOUGHTS in PRACTICE
You’re walking in the city. Suddenly, there is a big black steel box on the square. It looks exclusive, solid and a little bit oppressive. However, one side of it is glass and you can see faint movement inside. Let’s take a closer look.

From the glass window you can see a white form inside. It’s moving and you can recognize the shapes of hands, feet, even faces on its surfaces. The bodies inside shape the white form stretching and moving it. It is hard to say how many people are inside and what they are doing. It doesn’t matter; their movement becomes inseparable with the form and creates a captivating momentary event.

The door on the side of the container opens. You are invited inside. You take your shoes off in the middle of the city and the carpet on the ground feels warm under your feet. You look up through the door to the container. What you see in front of you is not what you expected. A white form appears before you that seems to cover the entire space: the walls, the ground and the ceiling. There are a few small points like corners that expand further, almost like funnels that lead to another space. You raise your foot and lower it to the white surface. It’s soft and gives in to your movement. You feel a soft ground-like surface that allows you to keep your balance. As you make your first step you can see the entire white void in front of you change. When you lift your other foot forward it changes again. The boundary that you think of as a wall moves closer at the same time as the boundary you think of as a ceiling vibrates.
The door closes behind you. You realize that the sounds of the city have disappeared and all you hear now is a low hum of something that you can't really specify. The sound is soothing and you lay down for a while. You forget where you are for a moment.

Something in the sound wakes you up and you wonder where the sound comes from. You get up and try to estimate how big the white void is. Where is the wall of the container? You try to reach it and as you do, the ceiling stretches lower. You try the other side and as you stretch the material, you start to make out shapes of people through the wall. It's as if you were in a thick fog and could barely see the square and people moving through it. You have the urge to touch the space, feel it with your hands and feet, your whole body sensing the tension and reaction of your movement to the space. You lean against the wall letting your whole body weight stretch and shape it. You feel the material cling to you. It gives you counter-pressure and wraps around you. You feel embraced. You wonder if the void fills the whole container or if there is something else. Is the back wall right there or meters away? Does it matter? Your balance fluctuates. The abstract shape of the space makes you disoriented. You turn back to where you came from and reach the door. You step out from the container and sunlight and familiar sounds fill your sensors. You don't know how long you were gone. You just know you were somewhere different and you experienced something. You see and remember the white form you saw from outside. You were one with it for a while. You put on your shoes and get on with your day. The ground feels different under your feet.
T.I.L.A
on auki
pe-su
klo 12-18

T.I.A is a reactive and experimental installation exploring embodied perception.
www.visualempowerment.com
T.I.L.A aims to create a space, which challenges the viewer’s movement and creates a perceptual space as the result of it. I call this an embodied space. As the viewer enters, they become more aware of their movement, its limits and effects on the surrounding space. They become part of the artwork.

T.I.L.A is an acronym from the words tactile immersive limber aberration. ‘Tila’ also means ‘space’ in Finnish. The title of the artwork demonstrates the abstract idea of creating a space with no apparent function but at the same time, contains an elaborate explanation of what the space is.

The setting of T.I.L.A creates a momentary art event to a public space, which appears when a person enters it. On entering, the viewer creates a dialogue between themselves and the form and between the artwork and spectators outside. Knowingly or unknowingly they express themselves through the artwork to others.

Figure 8. Transformation of space from disembodied to embodied environment.
The term urban intervention is an umbrella term used to describe various acts performed in the public space. Urban intervention can deal with political issues, but is more often connected to its location, redefining it and creating new situations. Alain Bieber notes, “interventions and urban space sculptures make a stand against functionalism and speak for including those that are excluded. This makes the city a work of art that can be freely shaped – the street becomes a canvas.”\(^{33}\) Originally, urban intervention started as a movement that aimed to bring art out of the private gallery setting to the public. Nicholas Whybrow writes that “the radical move out of the museum meant literally to some degree but also figuratively as a ‘reaching out’ of art in general towards incorporating both participation and the everyday.”\(^{34}\)

My decision to work in the public setting started from my thoughts on urban environment “imposing a monologue”, as described in “Architectural Space” chapter on page 11. I’m hoping to encourage creating art outside gallery spaces and bringing it closer to the public. We need an alternative to the commercial visual and physical stimulus that is offered in the urban space. Art can provide us with connection to our body and our mind and create a direct transaction between body and space.

T.I.L.A reached an audience of almost 200 people during three days. It didn’t reach media publicity, but the amount of visitors was sufficient. On a later thought, a longer exhibition period could have created more interest for the artwork. The location for the exhibition was Lasipalatsi Square in the center of Helsinki. The place hosts cultural events but acts mainly as an every-day passage for many citizens.

\(^{33}\) Kla nten, 2010. Urban interventions: personal projects in public spaces, p. 4
\(^{34}\) Whybrow, N., 2011. Art and the city, p. 15
My intention was mainly to reach people who were passing by and not necessarily intentionally come to an art exhibition. Lasipalatsi Square was busy enough venue for this kind of idea of a public intervention to be possible.

Figure 9. Delivery of shipping container on the first morning of construction.
Sewing and Construction

The arrangement to have a 20’ shipping container on Lasipalatsi Square was a result of close collaboration with Lasipalatsi Media Centre. After discussing with them about wanting to construct an art installation in a shipping container, we worked together to gather up more actors to utilize the container after my exhibition.

The planning of the artwork started with experimentation with material on a scale model. After the measurements of the shipping container were confirmed, the draping of the fabric on a 1:10 cardboard model started. I ordered samples of several types of fabric and was looking for a thick, durable, 4-way stretch fabric, which would fit my budget. I ended up choosing micro lycra, which is 92% polyester and 8% lycra. The final fabric was ordered from the UK.

The fabric construction was sewn from 160 cm wide strips of fabric. The total amount of fabric used was 35 meters. The intent was to have as little attachments on the fabric as possible: this way the amount of possible rupture points would be minimal. This also influenced the shape of the work as I decided to attach the fabric only at each end of the container; to the frame of the door and to the corners of the back wall. Some loops were sewn on the long seams of the fabric “tube”, to make it possible to adjust the structure on site by creating several attachment points. During planning and sewing I kept in mind that the structure would have to be fitted on site. This is why all the attachments were adjustable rubber bands and I made several options for attachments. All the seams of the fabric were made with stretch stitches to ensure that the seams wouldn’t rapture.
The container of the artwork is approximately 6 meters long and 2.5 meters wide and high. On one end of the container is a door. The longer wall is glass, which creates a naturally lit condition inside. The window wall also opens up, which made the construction and maintenance of the work easier. While the fabric could be sewn beforehand, the rest of the structure had to be built on site.

The container itself had few points for attachment, so I needed to build a supporting wooden frame inside of it. This was made from basic 2”x4” wooden planks that were wedged into the container structure. While the structure was to be hidden from the inner space of the installation, I decided not to paint or cover it and leave it visible from the window. The wooden structure also worked as a frame to attach all the technical equipment such as the lamps, speakers and extension cords.

The soft floor was created with pieces of foam and covered with stretchy grey fabric to fit the color of the containers inner surfaces. The wooden structure worked well as a frame for the foam and the lining of the fabric on the floor.

The fabric structure was the last piece of the puzzle to complete the construction. The back end of the structure was attached to the wooden frame with adjustable rubber thread and metal hooks. The tightness and shape could be adjusted with adjusting the length of rubber threads. The other end of the fabric “tube”, needed to be cut and attached on site. It was stapled on an external wooden frame that fit the doorway. This way there was an immediate connection from outside to inside without any structure showing to the doorway.

I had reserved four days for the construction of the work. Most of the structural details had to be solved on site as well as sound and lighting systems. Only a few modifications had to be made to the fabric structure on site, mostly just trying out different adjustment combinations. Because it was first time constructing the installation, it took rather long. If it was put up second time, I’m sure the construction time could be shorter.
**20' SHIPPING CONTAINER**
Rented black container with unfolding glass wall. Entry door on the side. Inner surface painted grey.

**FABRIC LINING**
Pre-sewn. Attached with rubber thread to metal hooks on frame.

**MATTRESS**
Foam covered with grey jersey for a finished look.

**SUPPORT FRAME**
2”x4” wooden planks supported by container structure. Technical equipment attached to frame.

*Figure 10. Assembly of the installation. Most of the construction was done on site, custom-built inside the shipping container.*
Figure 11. Original sewing pattern of the fabric lining. The length and the shape of the “tube” was adjusted on-site.
The artwork isn’t site specific to Lasipalatsi Square. The big black shipping container could be moved to any central public space in any city. The container could be said to function as a small individual gallery. However, I wanted the container to have a more specific role and not act merely as a vessel. I wanted it to become part of the artwork. In a way it also made the abstract idea of a flowing form concrete, because it gave me limits inside of which to act.

The industrial steel container works as the frame and a structural contrast to the soft sculptural space inside. The wooden frame inside the container allows the fabric structure to be a direct extension of the shipping container. All the technical equipment such as the lamps, flexible attachments, wooden frames and speakers are left visible from the glass window, because they are seen as part of the structural frame (the container).

The color of the inner space is white, allowing as much light in as possible. During the exhibition, for most visitors the white color created an abstract space, but to others it created a representational environment, like for example, notions of snow. Connotations like these were impossible to predict beforehand but I was aware that what to me is a neutral abstraction, might be something else to others.

The intention is to “fade out” the surrounding urban environment. The walls, floor and ceiling of the space are soft, in order to allow room for stretching and collapsing, adaptive use of the space and manipulate the viewer’s sense of balance. When a person moves in the soft space, the walls react to the movement, expanding and stretching throughout the space.
While the container is visually hidden in the inner space, I still wanted to maintain the connection between it and the soft space. The shape of the fabric space connects to the rectangular shapes of the container and is attached to the containers edges in certain spots. The fabric is also loose enough that by stretching it you can reach the window wall of the container. This way the dialogue of the two intertwining spaces remain in the experience.

During the exhibition, to allow complete immersion to the space, the door of the container was closed behind visitors. The space also had a looping abstract sound, which had a low, repetitive tone with a little variation. The sound was played from two speakers at the end of the space, so on each step the sound volume increased. Artist Petri Ruikka designed the sound after discussions and tests together before and during building the installation space.

Including the sound in the space allowed complete isolation from the city noise, which worked well. Keeping the sound as abstract allowed people to have very varied interpretations of it: for many it was industrial (ventilation channel), others natural (snowstorm) and to some an abstraction (danger). Again, these connotations were impossible to predict beforehand. I personally was looking for a sound that would be neutral and unidentified. Still many people heard things that I didn’t.
While my starting point was the experience of the inner space through movement and perception and immersion from outside world, one of the artworks intended characteristics was also how it looked to other viewers. Set in a public space with a glass wall, the installation became a moving sculpture that changed depending on how many or how active the people inside the work were. The variation between movements and their changes to the form was substantial, and the speed and style of various actions gave the form totally different characters.

Some visitors saw the opportunity to perform in the space and were very conscious of their movements and actions. For others it became as a surprise only after visiting the space or they completely forgot it after going inside. In further works it would be interesting to expand this idea of performance and private experience; would people move differently knowing they are watched versus thinking they are sharing the experience only with themselves? In this work some people said that they forgot the outside world and were completely immersed in the work. This phenomenon could be experimented further.

On the last exhibition day we also created a series of improvised performances in the space with artist Saana Kytömäki, which were documented in photographs and video. The intention of the performances was to see how Saana would utilize the space and what kind of movement it would generate from her as a performer who is used to working with her whole body. The performances created a random audience of a few bystanders.
The idea to create a performance in the space was under consideration during the development of the artwork. The decision to have nothing pre-planned was made, because I didn’t want the artwork to become a stage for performing right from the beginning. I wanted the viewer to make his or her own conclusions of being on show and being in private. Arranging a planned series of performances would have created a pre-purpose for the installation. Working with Saana could be a way of developing the work further in the future by concentrating on the performative aspects. This time it came secondary to the embodied experience of the viewer.
Figure 12. Photo series of a viewer creating several forms through movement.
The exhibition time for the installation was three days. It was open daily from 12 to 6pm. The container was accompanied by a black pop-up pavilion, which served as a rain-cover and a place to leave your shoes and bags, which were supervised.

In three days the installation had a total of 188 visitors, most of which were just walking by. I managed to be present the whole exhibition period, so I got to see the general reaction and got all the feedback first hand.

People were surprisingly open to the experience and many were willing to try out the space. Giving people an embodied experience doesn’t need a too specific explanation or reason, the experience speaks for itself. The artwork was presented quite abstractly without a specific narrative. The idea behind this was to see the visitors reaction to the space itself, rather that my intended idea of the space. This worked well: it felt easy for the visitors to react physically with their movement and body. There was no need to explain their experience or my intent with the space.

People entered the space individually or in pairs. The individual experience seemed to be more of a meditative experience, whereas entering with somebody made it a playful environment. When entering the space individually, you concentrate on your relationship with the space and you are very aware of all of your gestures and movements and the way the space reacts to them and lives with your movement. Arguably this increases your connection to the space, and the border between your body and the environment becomes more obscure. When another person is present, it immediately creates a game between the two visitors and the experience becomes shared: it becomes a dialogue between the two visitors and the space becomes more like a vessel for a dialogue.
When it comes to specifics of the exhibition, the installation feels still like an experiment. Since this was first time exhibiting it, it was good to test out all possible reactions to the space. How rough would people be with it? Would it break? If I made no rules, would people behave themselves or test the limits of the construction? These things couldn't be predicted beforehand. There were times that I didn't know if the structure and the materials would endure, but I was prepared to repair the work if it came to it. One possibility was that I could have made specific instructions of how to behave in the space and perhaps this could be tried out in the future. If the viewer had a pre-thought model for how to use the space would their experiences be as varied and individual as this time?

When people described the work, they rarely tried to draw concrete analogues to objects or recognizable forms. The only thing that directed them to representations was the color (snow, ice, egg) and the sound (wind, heartbeat, industrial). In their descriptions, they concentrated mostly on their feelings and movements. Many felt uneasiness in their sense of balance and sense of scale. The space was described as ‘dreamlike’ or a womb. Most felt it as a positive intervention to their day, only a few felt that the space made them anxious or nauseous.

The artwork didn’t need to be explained to most visitors. Many were open to the experience and were contented with it: they didn’t need a narrative for it or have the need to categorize the artwork. Artworks can have a subtle effect on the way we see the world without us even realizing it. Alternative way to approach a public space would be to make the artwork louder and more radical to attract attention and create contrast to the surrounding space. But does an artwork need to be considerably arrogant or radical in order to have an influence on us? The intent of this artwork wasn't instant radical response. The intent was to create an embodied space and see how the visitor completes it with his or her movement.
There’s a need for spaces that challenge and question us as complete, moving individuals capable of expression with our whole body. Rather than seeing space as a dimension to explore, we should see space as an extension of our bodies.
“I wanted to put things together and I wanted them to become a sculptural moment, the idea of a moment has always fascinated me. This is happening here and now and from the moment that you disassemble the work of art it stops happening... So this notion of art occurring and “unoccurring” was what attracted me – an unexpected space that contains a drama within itself.” – Ernesto Neto  

I see T.I.L.A as an unexpected space and a sculptural moment, as Neto successfully describes in the quote above. T.I.L.A is an act of creating a momentary space and providing people with an experience that can only happen there and then. It is a happening in the ever-changing city space and a structure that adapts to the public setting.

This thesis has made me explore and question my ways of understanding and creating spaces. In the future, the thoughts it has provoked and the concepts it has generated will most definitely influence my art practice. I see the thesis as an experimental application of perceptual theory to art, in a scope that I have not tried before. I feel that this brief, but already fruitful study in the field of psychology has potential to contribute even more to my art practice. I hope to continue with these themes of space and body and find new ways to experiment and give them a physical form.

I’m glad I had the chance to make T.I.L.A occur for three days and let 188 people experience an unexpected space in an unexpected moment. In a way I feel that even though the artwork was mine, the viewers created 188 individual artworks through interacting with it.
This thesis has been a year-long process and many people have influenced it directly and some without even realising it.

I’d like to thank Petri Ruikka for encouraging me through my studies as well as all the help during the thesis from building and documenting the installation to discussing theory and ideas. Thank you for listening through all my silly ideas and moments of total break-downs.

Thank you also to my tutor Tanja Koponen for an enormous help with creating the installation, “getting me” and cheering me on! You helped me not to doubt myself.

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Thanks to my teacher Scott Elliott and professor Pia Lindman, for all the great talks and comments on text, as well as general support in the last few years of studies. It might have taken an extra year, but you helped me through it!

Last but not least, I’d like to thank everybody who came to see my installation. As I’ve said, the artwork would be nothing without the viewer and it’s true. Thank you.

Special thanks to my friends who posed for photos: Pekka Antti-Poika, Mari Heikkinen, Paavo Kuukasjärvi, Isla Ristiluoma and Camilla Sundin. And especially to Saana Kytömäki, who created a beautiful connection with my artwork and let me document it.

Lastly, I thank my family, all my dear friends and my amazing colleagues at the office for supporting me and letting me do what I love.
Abstract

T.I.L.A is a study and a built installation exploring embodied space. The thesis deals with the past and current psychological research circling the subject. It also presents the documentation and outcomes of a built public art installation, which derives from the contemplations generated by the research.

The first part of the thesis deals with the concept of architectural space and how its disembodiment led me to study the perceptual process. Through a short research in psychology, in the fields of the direct theory of perception, enactive perception and embodied cognition, I explain my understanding on embodied space. I question our relationship with our surroundings, arguing whether our connection to the environment has weakened with the established urban setting. Understanding theories of embodied space and applying these to art enable an embodied experience that might bring answers to these questions.

The second part of the thesis explores the idea of embodied space in applications of art by others and myself. The methods and texts by artists Anish Kapoor, Ernesto Neto and Franz Erhard Walther have inspired me and influenced my thinking. I focus on these contemplations and try to find their influence in my earlier work as well as my current practice.

The last part focuses on my thesis artwork, a temporary public art installation titled T.I.L.A. The installation presumes an embodied viewer, who steps into the artwork and becomes part of it. The artwork becomes a momentary public event, which the viewer participates in and creates. The exhibition was held in May 2015 for three days and it gathered almost 200 visitors. The artwork is presented through photographs from the exhibition and construction drawings.

My thesis as an experimental application of perceptual theory to art. I feel that this brief, but already fruitful study in the field of psychology has potential to contribute even more to my art practice. I hope to continue with these themes of space and body and find new ways to experiment and give them a physical form.

Keywords  installation art, public art, urban intervention, space, embodied perception


Opinnäytetyö on kokeellinen tutkimus havainnollisen teorian soveltamisesta taiteeseen. Tällä lyhyellä, mutta ajatuksia herättävällä tutkimuksella on selkeästi tulevaisuudessa vaikutusta tekijän taiteen harjoittamiseen. Tilan ja kehon tutkiminen ja tämän teoksen konseptin kehittäminen jatkuvat taitelijan seuraavissa projekteissa julkisen ja väliaikaisen taiteen parissa.

Avainsanat: installaatio, julkinen taide, tilataide, kaupunki-interventio, kehollinen havainnointi
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