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## LIVED ABSTRACTION

### Architecture and the production of presence

Art is the name of the object of an encounter, but also the name of the encounter itself, and indeed of that which is produced by the encounter.<sup>1</sup>

Simon O'Sullivan (2006)

In principle, anything that can be perceived sensuously can also be perceived aesthetically. Among possible aesthetic objects there are not only perceivable things and their constellations but also events and their sequences – in short, all states or occurrences of which we can say that we saw, heard, felt, or otherwise sensed them.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Seel (2005)

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<sup>1</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (2006), Palgrave MacMillan, New York, p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearance* (2005), translated by John Farrell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, p.21

The question about what is art, or what is the aesthetic quality of a work of art, it be painting, sculpture, dance, music, building, or literature, is as old as the idea of art itself and continues to be one of the most fundamental and engaging challenges there is. Philosophers, art theorists, artists, and critics – in fact, anyone with interest in art and artistic practices – have all presented arguments concerning value, meaning, craft, culture, and aesthetics.

Abstraction in art is about how to transmit this information in a particular way, to concentrate, densify and bring forth a mood, that be by painting, writing, by photographing, performance, installations or musical notations. Abstraction, as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is diverged and is identified in multiple different art categories as impressionism, cubism, expressionism and minimalism just to mention a few - all currents in the art that run parallel to the development of modern architecture. Abstraction in art was not a break with the figurative tradition but a prolongation, as the act of abstracting includes the entire span from photographic precision to non-representational form. The premise of abstract art was the fundamental difference between disparate information perceived by sensory organs and the cognition of an object. Abstraction as a method in painting detached painting from its dependence on vision and instead reached an imagery of objects that was recognized beyond the mere visual input.

*Lived Abstractions\_Architecture and the production of presence* is an inquiry into the aesthetic affect of abstraction in architecture and concern the capacity of architecture to provoke aesthetic experiences through abstraction. The term “lived abstraction” is borrowed from Brian Massumi’s discussion on aesthetic experience whereas the formula “production of presence” is borrowed from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who is interested in the potential of presence in literature, opposed to the hermeneutic traditions.<sup>3</sup> Like Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, my ambition has been to avoid interpretation and instead to acknowledge and capture presence. Presence can be associated with appearance as that what appears is made available and thus present. Presence refers to a spatial relationship where things are within reach, are tangible and thus have an immediate impact on human senses. The word “production” literally means to bring forth an object in space. An aesthetic experience of architecture is thus the capacity of the assembly of fundamental architectural categories of substructure, structure, material and space to bring out abstractions that produce affect.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence, What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004) Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, US

The research explores how abstraction, withdrawn from the dynamic relationship between the architectural categories has a capacity to produce presence and thus a lived abstraction. The research is based on photography, painting, drawing, spatial structures and a theoretical reflection on abstraction, as an aesthetic quality, with references to contemporary and historical theories and artworks. Abstraction as a method in making architecture and a way of understand aesthetic experiences of buildings are about allowing oneself to be expose to the undefined gaps that occur in the relation between structure material and space. Timothy Morton names the gaps between things and how they appear the subsistence, “the half-sister of transcendence” that “can’t be pointed out in ontic space-time”<sup>4</sup> according to Morton but can following Brian Massumi and his theory of lived abstraction, be sensuously felt.

The research is a process-oriented exploration; it does not seek solutions or arrive at any final answers. My motivation is to be able to rethink aesthetic quality architecture in an alternative manner. The aim is to explore the impact of abstraction in architecture and to shed light on how abstraction can be a driving force in the making of buildings and to expand the understanding of what architecture produces. Lived abstraction is a way to understand and appreciate a dimension of architecture that is often difficult to identify and discuss. I believe that the awareness of that what architecture produces – that what can be bodily sensuously experienced - is a fundamental knowledge of architecture. When appreciated and taken into account, it offers a new dimension to that what we already know.

The thesis is organised into three main parts, *Context*, *Lived Abstractions* and *Studies*. The practical work is an attempt to develop thinking by making, while the text relates the practical thinking in making to a larger discourse. *Context* includes historical and contemporary theoretical discussions on sensual experience of art and architecture related to abstraction in addition to works and thoughts on art by artists that I feel an affinity to. Together this forms the environment in which I like to place my own work. The concept of semblance and the recognition of presence as formulated by Brian Massumi has been one of the main sources of inspiration. By discussing works of art, including music, dance, painting, and media installations, Brian Massumi articulates an aesthetic philosophy through the unfolding of the concept of semblance. The concept of semblance is based in large part on Walter Benjamin's notions of mimesis and "nonsensuous similaris" as well as on Susanne Langer's adaption of Friedrich Schiller's eighteenth-century theories on pure

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *Humankind, Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, Verso\_ London New York 2017, p.124

beauty formulated as the concept of Schein. Susanne Langer alters the concept of semblance by changing the focus from the feelings of the perceiver to the object or structure itself. Brian Massumi develop the concept further and describes semblance as the moment where the object and the subject becomes one, defining it as a lived abstraction.<sup>5</sup> *Lived Abstractions*, is subdivided in two parts; a) Photographic documentation of lived abstractions in three selected buildings and b) Abstractions withdrawn from photography by painting and spatial structures. *Studies*, contains of a series of exercises and studies in abstraction\_discussing how abstraction and presence as aesthetic qualities in architecture can be brought back into the making, pointing towards the teaching of architecture. The studies investigate conditions of ambiguity, transformation, hierarchy, the general and the particular and the relation between the whole and its parts. The studies are an attempt to develop tools of revelation, to be able to understand qualities of abstraction in the making of architecture. The studies can as such be paralleled to the architectural sketch. The studies is not based on technical tools or computer drawing - it is a hands-on works where properties of the included material - tactility, size and measure, weight, colour and presence are critical in the materials capacity to communicate the immanent argument.

Every creative process is a search for something new. One fundamental aspect to engage in the process is one's ability to consider the processual work; that is drawing, sketches, spatial structures, photo and film, not as representations but as autonomous entities. To be presence is critical in the creative process. To intuitively follow the energy found in the on-going work indicates a sensual merging with one's work that affects and evoke action. To be present in a creative process does not necessarily mean to be present in the world - on the contrary, it is about shutting the world off. As these moments of total presence varies in time there will always be pauses; room for intellectual reflections which helps drive the process forward.

In part three, *Studies* I seek to visualize shifting hierarchies and appearances produced by alternations from a starting point or a fixed set of parameters. The studies challenge dominating properties of a material by emphasising hidden properties, either by the way the material is treated or confronted with another material or context. I have strived to achieve abstraction in the work by discussing the level of presence of colours in a composition, by questioning the level of presence of a recognisable architectural element in an otherwise geometric drawing composition or in a three dimensional structure and by reassembling defined elements in a way so they are reactivated; the assembly of two or more independent physical structures together create a new identity consisting of its parts.

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, 2013, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, US

**Loca+Loci+Locus**      *Region, place, to place*

A set of taxis (arrangements)

I place, put, set in order, I assign  
I put together, assemble  
I settle,  
I convey, relocate

The study titled *Loca+Loci+Locus* consists of four series, one of which is displayed at the WORKS+WORDS Biennale 2019 at KADK. Through the series I intend to discuss the becoming of an architectural construction based on the process of abstraction. It is an attempt to concretize a generative process based on action and reaction, moving a material towards an architecture. The study discuss the becoming of an architectural constructions based on the process of abstraction. By reflecting on the relationship of the whole to the parts the study investigates how underlying structures inform the making of architecture. The focus is on the relation between individual autonomous forms, when brought together forms a set of taxis (arrangements). By arranging distinct particular regular/irregular physical forms, new meeting occurs, relations are established, and a place is defined. The place generates a construction.

The exhibited material includes six physical arrangements building on the same substructure. Like the other series in this study, this process of abstraction results in a final construction. In addition, these arrangements have been given a title thus stressing the connection between works and words.

Through the research project, *Lived Abstraction Architecture and the production of presence*, I search for a way to include the sensual aesthetic experience of abstractions to the physical world, both in the process of making architecture and in the experience of architecture. Also, this particular study engages in the discussion of Genius Loci, providing an alternative understanding of the spirit of a place. Relocating the discussion from the spirit of a place to the concept of Lived Abstractions permit additional understanding of architectural identity.

Series 4 - of a total of four series of taxis (arrangements)

4.1

Collages: Series of 6

Media: Gouache and acrylic paint on paper

Dimension: 21 cm x 29 cm

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4.2

Physical structures: Series of 6 arrangements

Material: MDF, steel, wooden studs, acrylic paint and words: Division, Hording,

Paradisical, Periphery, Platform and Solitude

Dimensions: approximately 20 m x 30 cm

### Bibliography

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