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INTERIOR, CONCEPT & CLAY: A STUDY OF SELF AND SPACE

by
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**SUMBITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Thank you to my professors and readers who always asked the right questions. To my friends and family who supported me in my creative and intellectual endeavors. And to ceramic clay, my unrequited love.

What is the modern conception of pure art? It is to create a suggestive magic which contains both subject and object, the external world and the artist himself.

— Charles Baudelaire, *L'Art Philosophique*

The topics of space and the self are temptations for ontologists and epistemologists alike. The vague and seemingly ineffable natures of these concepts are irresistible to these progressive scholars who examine the nature of being and theories of knowledge, respectively.

Consequentially, there is an extraordinary amount of texts and theories concerning these enticing subjects. Rather than chronologically, I have organized these theories by specificity or by a denotation of scale, if you will. After each discussed theory I will examine the way in which they directly influenced my artistic investigation of space and the self within my senior thesis project: *Interior, Concept & Clay*.

This ceramic installation was originally prompted by the word “interiority” and its ability to describe both an interior space and the interior self. The piece encourages viewers to place their heads within the sculpture and look out through carved peepholes. This act of looking out captures the overlap between the physical and the metaphysical. It creates a moment where interior space and the interior self interact in multiple, complex dimensions: enjoyment, anxiety, compromise, and reflection. By looking out through an enclosed space with peripheral vision obstructed, viewers are reminded of their own specificity as well as the spaces within their minds and sense of self.

We begin our journey within the human brain and the study of visual, perceptual experience. Nivedita Gangopadhyay, Michael Madary, and Finn Spicer’s book *Perception, Action, and Consciousness: Sensorimotor Dynamics and Two Visual Systems* explores the cognitive connection between perception and action as well as the body and consciousness. The authors state their motivation as the “new paradigm [of perceptual experience that] encourages a radical

rethinking of the nature of perceptual states and the subject of experience” (Gangopadhyay et al. 1). One of the particularly poignant issues worth rethinking is the dual-visual system, also known as the two-streams hypothesis.

One of the earliest discussions of the dual-visual system was proposed by brain development specialist Colwyn Trevarthen in 1968 (Gangopadhyay et al. 2). Trevarthen presented the notion that the two subsets of vision within monkeys: ‘vision of space’ and ‘vision of object identity’ are “subserved by anatomically distinct brain mechanisms” (Gangopadhyay et al. 2). One year later, neuroscientist Gerald E. Schneider described the theory in its application within the human brain (Gangopadhyay et al. 2). In more recent times, M.A. Goodale and A.D. Milner claimed that the previously theorized dual-visual system occurs at the point where visual information leaves the occipital lobe and splits off into two-streams. First, the dorsal stream, whose purpose is to process an object’s spatial location in regard to the perceiver, travels to the parietal lobe. Second, the ventral system, which is involved in object identification, travels to the temporal lobe (Gangopadhyay et al. 2). What Trevarthen called “vision of space” in the dorsal stream and “vision of object identity” in the ventral stream, Goodale and Milner describe as “vision for action” and “vision for perception,” respectively (Gangopadhyay et al. 2).

While there are criticisms of the proposed differentiated and separate functions of the two streams, this work is important as it established an emphasis on visual output and behavior, as opposed to a focus on visual input distinctions. This distinction connects to the idea of space as it defines the concept as a potential for visual perception and action. It relates to the self as it tangentially plays with the idea of visual specificity within the mind’s interior. Further, if we align the definition of the self with notions of individualistic perception, the two-streams hypothesis explores the self directly as it characterizes vision as a distinctive attribute. Questions

of visual perception in relation to action, like the theories mentioned, push the boundaries of what vision means and makes a crucial point in the analysis of how the human self interacts within space.

This investigation of a dual-visual system is critical to *Interior, Concept & Clay* as it aims to give each viewer an altered sense of vision. Once inside the sculpture, the ceramic piece obstructs the viewer's peripheral vision and changes his or her "vision of space" within the surrounding area as well as within the sculpture. Additionally, the artwork alters one's "vision of object identity." A person outside of the sculpture becomes merely a face or arm while a chair becomes a wooden leg or a swatch of fabric. While this obstruction would typically be interpreted as a hindrance *Interior, Concept & Clay* challenges others to view it as an alternative. Gaining a more atomistic, specific view of an environment allows one to notice details and possess a new perspective on seemingly ordinary things.

Thinking of vision as a combination of elements and variables rather than one entity allows one to understand its complexity as well as experiment with it. Behind the formal structures of art and design—specifically shape, form, and value—lies a scientific background that, when explored, addresses concerns, opens up new and important questions, and can even inspire new ideas.

Another influential thinker that considers these important questions within scientific and mathematical fields is architectural historian and theorist, Peg Rawes. In her 2008 book *Space, Geometry and Aesthetics: Through Kant and Towards Deluze (Renewing Philosophy)*, Rawes examines aesthetic geometry and space through the lens of ontological philosophy. Demonstrated across her citations, Rawes conveys the idea that spatial figures and geometric methods are imbued with an aesthetic sensibility unlocked when placed within the context of

physical corporeality. For example, she writes, “geometry is not merely a mathematical method of constructing space but is also an aesthetic and embodied procedure, thereby challenging the view that geometry is exclusively concerned with scientific forms of knowledge” (Rawes 4). Here Rawes describes geometry in the borrowed words of Goodale and Milner, as possessing a potential for action and perception. The word “geometry” is derived from the Latin word *geometria*—meaning the science of measuring and the Hellenistic Greek word *γεωμετρία*—meaning land survey (OED Online). That is to say that geometry has deep roots in spatial understanding. To bring in a discussion of the human sense of perception, Rawes turns to legendary thinker and German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

The work of Kant is particularly fitting for Rawes’ conversation as his work “explores how spatial three-dimensionality is derived from our sensible understanding of other bodies in relation to *our own corporeality*” (Rawes 17-8). Indeed, Kant writes of this matter thoroughly in his theoretical philosophy within the years 1755-1770. He claims that humans only have a cognitive comprehension of the things that exist outside oneself insofar as they stand within relation to one’s own anatomy (Kant 366). Aligned with this thinking, it makes sense that the intersecting planes that make up the three dimensions of Cartesian space derive from the relation they have to our bodies (Kant 366). This concept is crucial as it clearly connects space to human perception, and even goes on to suggest that space is a result of one’s own individualistic perception.

Kant chooses to exemplify this relation through the example of drawing out spatial figures. He “discusses how the imagination is the active aesthetics generator of geometry and space because it is analogous to the ‘technical’ tools that construct geometric figures (e.g., the compass and ruler)” (Rawes 3). In this regard, the mind is a device for projection, assessment,

and calculation. Does this mean that the spatial field is akin to the sphere of consciousness, or even the self? The answer is indefinite but, then again, so is the question.

Both the question and its answer significantly influenced *Interior, Concept & Clay* as it brings forward a pivotal link between space and the self. It is this link that my ceramic installation works to investigate and emulate. Rawes' and Kant's idea that geometric figures are imbued with spatial and aesthetic value also plays an influential role in the installation as the pieces, themselves, are geometric forms that, as artworks, take on aesthetic and spatial dimensions. Further, Kant's suggestion that one's definition of space is a product of one's own perception captures one of the most important topics of my artwork: each sighted person has an individualistic sense of perception that can be linked to one's self. It is this sense of self that helps inform the recognition and comprehension of space. Or, in other words, the way we perceive ourselves influences the way we perceive that which surrounds us.

Gaston Bachelard, French philosopher, grapples with some of the same ideas as Kant in his 1958 text: *The Poetics of Space* as he lays the spatial world of the house alongside the metaphysical world of the mind. Bachelard introduces this significant connection early on. He writes: "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard 4). As Bachelard equates the house to the cosmos he greatly emphasizes the importance of the home to its inhabitant, the weight it carries in our lives, and the all-encompassing nature it seems to possess. It is important to closely read the phrase "in every sense of the word." While we have taken the cosmos to mean the magnificent and vast universe, we must acknowledge "cosmos" in all of its senses. One of its other crucial senses can be traced through its etymological basis in a Greek word meaning order

(OED Online). So, of course, the cosmos is as notable for its order and harmony as it is for its sheer splendorous size.

So how does this sense of order relate to the house? According to Bachelard, the house is the ordered system that holds and protects our dreams—in both day and night (Bachelard 6). The house retains “the treasures of former days” and its protection shelters our memories of “Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all immemorial things are” (Bachelard 5). These memories are static, yet one can remember them as time passes. Thus, they are not frozen in time but rather in space. Bachelard elucidates this point as he writes: “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are... For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates” (Bachelard 9). If we take Bachelard’s word—that intimate moments are safer in space than in time—then one begins to wonder what else can be uncovered within the spaces of our memories.

Bachelard, too, pondered this same thought; his self-conceived response was topoanalysis, which he defines as: “the systematic psychological study of the sites in our intimate lives” (Bachelard 8). The sites from one’s past that house and protect intimate moments color the way one views space in real time. The corners, windows, and hallways of one’s childhood memories are ever present in each corner, window, and hallway one sees. These spaces remain within us as ghosts only to reveal themselves as faint memories. Sometimes their presence is so distant insofar as they are not conscious memories, only a vague yet comforting familiarity. Bachelard particularly notes one’s interactions within spaces of previous solitude that he details as: “the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude [that] remain indelible within us” (Bachelard 10). He equates the value of these spaces of solitude to that of a shell: a retreat for privacy and shelter (Bachelard 10). The motif of the

shell is also a signal of emptiness and withdrawal. In this regard, the shell embodies all aspects of solitude; its enjoyment and its suffering. Empty spaces are not always inviting and they can make viewers or inhabitants feel self-conscious, scared, or nervous. Still, there are moments where one can find peace, clarity, and positive reflection in solitude.

So what are the aspects that differentiate peaceful spaces of solitude from unnerving ones? It is both, as Bachelard suggested, one's previous memories of similar spaces along with the physical attributes of the space. For example, a room with many corners and sharp edges would discourage creative and positive moments of solitude more than a rounded, smooth one. This, according to Bachelard is because "everything round invites a caress" (236). The visual and tactile sensation of roundness, while somewhat disorienting, gives an impression of a cradled enclosure that further supports the enjoyment of solitude.

This idea along with many other ideas expressed by Bachelard played a role in the conception of *Interior, Concept & Clay*. The topic of solitude is directly addressed by the physical enclosure or rounded "shell" that creates a space of isolation. Additionally, the piece creates a sense of emotional and mental solitude. Looking out on an open environment through an enclosed space fosters a sense of solitude in a less concrete way; this solitude can be experienced, as Bachelard suggested, as something complex, enjoyable, compromised, anxious, and desirable. The artwork aims to allow viewers to explore this solitude in their own terms without guiding them toward an anticipated response. One could determine that the ceramic sculptures also encompass Bachelard's idea that intimate moments are safer in space than in time. Viewers will be able to recall the "intimate" moment of solitude they experienced within my piece. Rather than a connection between the experience with a date or time, the moment is bound to a specific space and a specific experience of the self. This moment of solitude is largely

based in a notion of self-awareness and the self, topics that have been redefined, debated, and criticized for centuries.

The word “self” has numerous meanings. It is defined as a pronoun, adjective, noun and prefix. Needless to say, it has a long and complex history. Looking specifically through the lens of self-awareness within philosophy, we begin with the two ends of the spectrum: the birth of the self and the enlightenment of no-self. In his book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Pulitzer Prize winning cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter expresses his belief that the self is not inborn but, rather, “comes into being at the moment it has the power to reflect itself” (Canfield 171). In other words, the dawning of self-awareness is the birth of the self (Canfield 171). Opposing, Satori is a Zen Buddhist term used to describe the experience of enlightenment in which one realizes that there is no self (Canfield 171). Ranging between these contrasting and extreme views are slightly more moderate takes on the self and its meaning.

For example, 18th century philosopher David Hume is cited as stating that the self is an illusion (Canfield 1). However, he did acknowledge the existence of the “I” as a synthesis of one’s perception (Canfield 1). This perspective clearly separates the “I” from the self and, in turn, places the notion of the self, of which Hume denied, on a level beyond mere perception to something metaphysical and transcendent. Somewhat similarly, 18th century scientist Georg Lichtenberg and 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche both referred to the self as a sort of “grammatical illusion” (Canfield 2). That is to imply that “I” is a “substantive word lacking a substance to denote” (Canfield 2). This idea shrouds the self in further mystery; is it a mistake or a puzzle to be solved?

One theory that attempts to resolve the mystery is solipsism. The philosophical ideology of solipsism is “a denial of a common or public world. It holds that the sphere of consciousness

of each person is (for that person) the total world” (Canfield 15). Therefore, in order to define solipsism under its own guidelines, one must say it in the first person: “I and the things that I immediately experience and only those things, constitute the entire universe; there is nothing beyond them” (Canfield 15). This theory immediately sounds unreasonable and naïve. How can someone seriously consider “the world revolves around me” as a philosophical ideology worth exploring? However, with further analysis, the basis for its foundation finds legitimacy.

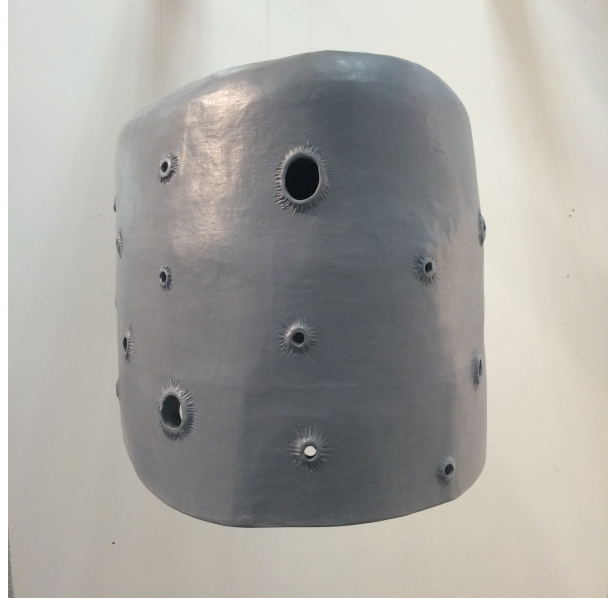
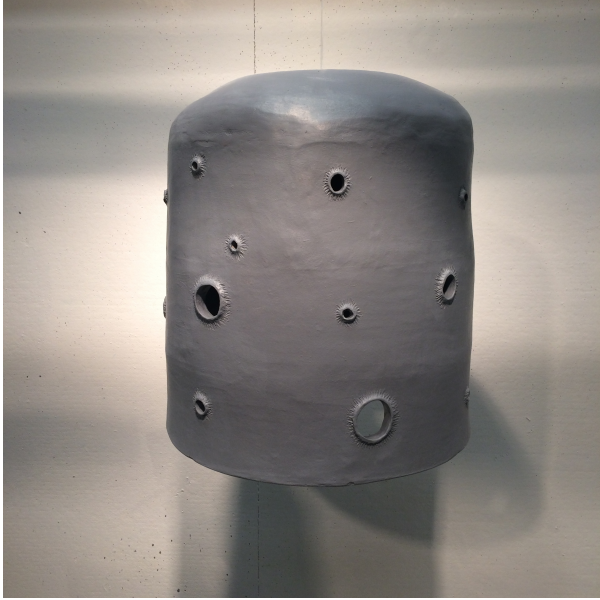
It is known that the “science of perception establishes a time gap between initial stimulation and direct experience” (Canfield 15). As a result, we do not directly interact with the physical world. Instead, we interact with our own subjective perception of reality (Canfield 15). Consequentially, the world one sees and experiences is an extension of oneself. The next natural step is to wonder whether there is a reality “behind those immediate experiences” (Canfield 15). Suddenly the notion of solipsism does not seem so nonsensical. So, what is the self in accordance with solipsism? One could gather that it is everything and nothing all at once. It is everything as one’s sphere of consciousness is akin to the entire universe. But, if we take the self to mean a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others, then the solipsistic self is non-existent as there is no other self to distinguish from. Now we can begin to see the paradoxical inner nature of the self. Stripped of all its glory and splendor we discover a term that is constantly battling its own connotations.

The next question to ask is: how can a topic so connected and intertwined with the human experience vary so immensely? Throughout human existence, the self has been defined as an illusion, a transcendence of reality, an enigma, everything, and nothing. If its existence is fictitious, the self must be mistaken for something else because the concept, whether it is refuted or accepted, is so widespread (Canfield 173). Perhaps the resolution to the problem can be found

within its examples. The two-streams hypothesis highlights individualistic perceptions within the brain and the self, Kant and Rawes examine the connection between specific spatial fields and its corresponding sphere of consciousness. Bachelard delves deeper into the sphere of consciousness as he studies memories and their manifestations within interiors and Canfield questions the power of these connections through the specific yet multidimensional self. Meanwhile, my own piece *Interior, Concept & Clay* aims to give viewers a chance to interact with the relationship between their perception of space and the self. The common thread that binds all of these examples together is the predominance of difference, specificity, and individualistic perceptions.

We, as humans, are all different. We experience different things in different ways and processes. Whether it is related to space or the self, these differences result in varying beliefs on what these topics mean to ourselves and to those around us. In this regard, the answer is the question. It is, quite ironically, self-referential. There are multiple definitions of the self and its interaction in space *because* there are multiple definitions. Each definition, each person, generates a specific experience that cycles back and reaffirms or redefines the definition. Does this matter? Probably. But what matters most in human terms is that regardless of what one's outer-self reality may be, it, in the words of Baudelaire, "helps me to feel that I am what I am" (Canfield 172). It is important to remember that supporting the words that string together each philosophy is a person who believes, through their perspective and experience, that his or her theory holds true. Rather than agree or refute it, we should merely admire its existence as a relic of the human experience. With this statement comes a revelation: we cannot find the self within these differences as it is made up of the spaces in between. My thesis piece champions this idea as it creates a space in between the differences for exploration and safekeeping.

Photos of *Interior, Concept & Clay*



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