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Suspended Blue

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PROCESS AND THOUGHTS ON:

[ SUSPENDED BLUE ]

ROSE HEYDT

Advisor: Dave Olsen

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"The most often celebrated feature of Western space is spatial noncontainment, its expansiveness, its vastness, its sheer, weighty limitlessness."

– Krista Comer, in *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing*

Driving in the deep plains, surrounded by a boundless plane of land and a sky that demands awe, I am aware of a profound feeling of endlessness. At the transitional moments between day and night, when the sky is filled with such a deep, bright blue that all of the air appears saturated with it, and the uninterrupted horizon turns to black silhouette, you could claim to see the curvature of the Earth. This particular moment has been among my most unforgettable, sublime experiences. It is an experience that words, images, and even film does not have the capacity to translate. It is a felt experience.

To me, this defiance of translation seemed to offer an artistic challenge – incorporating video shot in the Nebraska Sandhills, I set out to create an immersive environment that had the power to invoke this same felt experience, suspending an ephemeral moment in time so it can be experienced in the here and now.
Suspended Blue

(2012)

Sheetrock, plaster, paint, 12-gauge frosted vinyl, led fixtures, rear projection screen, projectors, fabric.
INTRODUCTION

I find the experience of my nine-month thesis endeavor to be a hard one to delineate. Coming into the project with only a vague sense of what I wanted to accomplish, the path was anything but straightforward. I can’t say that I ended up where I expected to, and I am happy for this fact. My biggest take-away from this experience is that your thesis year is intended to be a process, not a project.

At first, I thought I could use this thesis as an opportunity to learn some technical skills that would beef up a resume for a career in arts and technology. My aim was to use technology to create a dynamic or interactive immersive environment, inevitably causing me to learn more programming along the way. Although this is a legitimate aim, I later realized that building my thesis project around some piece of technical handiwork was not going to allow me to maintain the passion and zeal required for an independent and open-ended project of this length. Instead, the content and concept of the work eventually took hold (as it should) and became the driving source for my art.

One thing I did not approach this project with the intent to do was to build upon themes developing in my collection of past work. If anything, I thought that this was an opportunity to branch out, and prove I could do something different. While in the past I worked primarily in Photoshop to create two-dimensional digital images, my last few works have branched into the areas of new media, installation and light art. Yet, although my mediums and methods have been evolving, the
content and imagery of my work seems to inevitably circle back to the same theme – the plains landscape of my home, Nebraska.

Although I know this obsession must be rooted in my origins there, I do not feel that I am drawn to this subject because of home state pride or a sense of belonging or tradition. Rather, it is an inexplicable, magnetic fascination – an aesthetic preference that feels innate. I am transfixed by the stark geometry of the flat landscape and machine-perfect rows of crops, by the awe-inspiring, or rather awe-demanding immensity of the sky – and the work I’ve created seems without my intention to exude a comfortable eeriness, an accepted loneliness- that is the atmosphere of the plains. Yet again, although I began this project with the intention of something entirely unrelated, in retrospect I can see how I was drawn like a moth to again butt my head up against the irresistible, enigmatic essence of the plains.

“Still, that landscape is the place my mind summons when I’m asked (usually in some yogic or meditative context, now that I live in Los Angeles) to close my eyes and “imagine a scene of total peace and serenity.” In those moments, I picture the Rothko-like blocks of earth and sky, the psychedelic sunsets, the sublime loneliness of a single cottonwood punctuating acres of flat prairie.”

- Megan Daum, in “Lincoln, Nebraska: Home on the Prairie.”
Images of some of my past work that reflect my fascination and feelings of loneliness, eeriness, and sereneness associated with the plains landscape.

Top: Untitled, 2011. Installation

I also find my interest in psychology and cognition making itself known in my work. This is a more recent development, something I only began exploring a couple of years into college. I am consistently intrigued by the thought processes behind aesthetic pleasure, by illusion and mood induction, by mind states and our innate creative drives. I want to understand why we like the things we do, and what we are getting from them. I believe that art has immense potential to convey complex emotional and philosophical concepts. It is with this in mind that I set out my original thesis proposal – the creation of an immersive environment that has the ability to convey a powerfully felt experience.
PHASE ONE: conceptual research

My first research efforts for my thesis were conceptual – I wanted to figure out what I’d gotten myself into – what is an immersive environment, exactly? I found that from ancient frescos to early explorations in immersive virtual reality such as CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) projects, people have been attempting to create simulated environments that had the power to transport them, mentally and emotionally if not physically, to another place, time, or state of mind. I wanted to know why we feel the drive to make these simulated realities, and why we have the inclination to try to trick our senses using illusion. I didn’t find a clear-cut answer, and I wasn’t expecting one... a comparable question would have been, why do people do drugs? It seems that as humans, we have a natural draw towards experiencing other states of mind. We are curious about other realities, simulated as they may be, and perhaps we even get pleasure or a certain sense of self-efficacy from our ability to mold our own perceptions and experiences.

With their high level of sensory engagement, immersive environments have the ability to translate the essence of an experience that I didn’t think I could properly and wholly describe in any traditional artistic medium. Such an inexplicable experience is usually one that is felt as being compelling and awe-inspiring, rich with deep, complex emotional content that is rooted in universal experience, not subjective personhood or ego. I wanted to create an experience that was a moment, a feeling, and not a scene.
PHASE TWO: technical research

With my basic goal solidified, I began to search for a medium to express this experience in. This became a primary focus for the next few months. Through experimentation, I discovered that in order to feel immersed, the viewer had to be allowed a full or nearly full field of vision, otherwise the contrast between the simulated situation and the outside reality would break the illusion.

I realized that I was no longer concerned with using the technical aspects of my thesis project for anything but facilitating my goal, but I still felt that some technical complexity was necessary for the experience I wanted to create. Early in my research, I had looked into the cognitive underpinnings of what makes an environment feel immersive and believable, and knew that the more interactive, dynamic, and sensory-engaging the simulated experience was, the more believable it would be.
As I realized later, this was a misguided attempt at understanding. I was taking a technological, scientific, literal approach to an affective problem, hoping I’d deduce some magical formula for making rich simulation. After quickly dismissing using virtual reality to create my environment, I spent months doing research on making curved and domed projection screens, movement and sound responsive fiber optics and led lighting, and surround-sound setups. I looked into projecting onto glass, fog, and water; I found code for dynamic Flash animation based on real-time inputs like time of day; I looked into motion tracking in AfterEffects, and
became interested in projecting video editing in real-time in Quartz Composer. I considered user (viewer) interaction using biofeedback like breathing and heart rate, implementing rain on glass using water pumps, and building do-it-yourself high-definition projectors and rear projection screens.

I must note that at this point, my research into the technical aspects of the piece was not for the purpose of hoping to wow viewers with tricks of technology (as it may have been in the beginning)– rather, I was now hoping to do quite the opposite, to incorporate the technology so seamlessly and intuitively that it was perceived as a part of the experience, or perhaps not perceived at all. Each technical inquiry sprouted from some particular scene in my head that I was attempting to recreate: backyard full of fireflies, a night drive on the interstate during a rainstorm, the experience of airports and airplanes, driving in the countryside and looking between the corn rows as you zoom past. I was trying to define the practical bounds within which I could be creative – a flaw in my processes that would continue to affect me and drive my efforts for many months.

I was seeking emotionally evocative experiences, both to challenge the technology’s (and my own) ability to translate and facilitate certain states of being. My research into cognitive proponents for the feeling of immersion stated that higher levels of emotional engagement (as well as things like motion, and user interaction, and engaging the maximum number of senses) provide more believable simulated experiences. And although I was trying to intellectualize my way into something more solid, my main drive behind creating these particular emotionally evocative experiences was to see whether they were universally felt, or if these
moments, which affect me so powerfully and consistently, are part of my objective experience. I wanted to know if anyone else felt what I felt.

My frustratingly fragmented, dull, and confusing research had provided me with limited results. I had narrowed my focus to one specific experience (based on its potency but also on it’s technical feasibility) and came up with a proposal for the formal aspects of the piece. I was going to create a small enclosure, abstractly representing the interior of a car, which the viewer would sit inside of. They would face a large window (the windshield) and another smaller (passenger) window on their right. Through these windows, the viewer could sit and experience the meditative state of long drives through the Nebraska plains, where the straight roads grid the aerial countryside and the landscape is devoid of obstacle or stimulation, eventually creating a trance-like state. However, I was unhappy with this formalization, and during a critique it was noted that this too closely resembles a driving simulator. No wonder, I was basing my concept of an immersive environment on CAVE, a system now used in flight simulators. I decided I needed to make some big changes, and I scrapped that idea.
PHASE THREE: filming

I decided that I needed to go to Nebraska, for filming purposes and to re-experience this feeling that I was trying to convey. I wanted to film the expansiveness of the pure Nebraska plains, so I devised and built a specialized camera mount that could shoot film panoramically at 3 horizontal angles, or at 2 angles with more vertical space captured.
I have to admit, when we first set out on filming day, I was disappointed at first. Traveling through the spaced-out sprawl of outlet stores and Walmarts, run-down small towns who've given up on maintaining a sense of charm, factories and feed lots... it was November, and everything was dusty, dead, and uninspiring. I was worried that my trip to Nebraska was in vain, and even more worried that this sublime feeling I had placed at the crux of my thesis was a remembered figment that I had morphed into being idyllic.

If there is an abundance of anything in Nebraska, it is space (and corn). Although there were thousands of short stretches with not a car, tree, or house in sight, every minute of driving or so another farmhouse would appear on the horizon. In order to find a perfect, lengthy stretch of horizon, my father and I drove nearly 6 hours to the Sandhills.
During the trip, I kept track of my thoughts on certain themes:

THOUGHTS ON TRAVEL:

Inherent in travel is a going-to and a coming-from. The travel, the transformation, happens in the between period. I am intrigued by the idea of having already left, but having not yet arrived. What is in between? What changes are taking place? Is one in a suspended state, a place of possible meditation? Is one in the void?

THOUGHTS ON THE MECHANICS OF TRAVEL:

Transportation is, in essence, the experience of being in between places. This time of forced passiveness, especially on the long featureless drives common in the Midwest, can induce a sense for calm and presence. Though so accepted as a part of daily experience, the mind-body relationship during transportation is strange – there is a sense, and an actuality of stillness, and yet dually a sense and actuality of movement. You are disconnected from the ground, yet moving along it.

During this trip, the necessity of paying attention to a focal point ahead, of staring at and staying within the repetitive pattern of white lines, brought me to a calm, vaguely trance-like state of mind. Considering the possibility that this induced state of being may serve a role in the overall heightened experience, I decided that the video that I produced from the Sandhills footage would aim to have this trance-inducing quality.
REALIZATION OF THE HUGENESS OF THE SKY:

This seems silly to say, but until this trip to Nebraska for filming, I had never actually thought about the size of the sky in comparison to the sky. When thinking about the framing of the footage I wanted for my installation, I was picturing a 50/50 land – sky ratio. And although I used a special panoramic camera setup, I understood that my cameras could never capture the true sense of sky. *That* is what Nebraska has that makes it seem so consistently open and free, and why my art has never been able to capture the feeling – my focus is always down, on the motion of the road, the movement through the cornfields. But the sky is the essence of the experience.

On the ride home, once it was dark, my dad stopped the car and we got out to look at the stars. The stars never look bigger, more reachable and understandable, than they do in the deep country. I was in Astronomy class that fall semester finishing up my science requirement, and I recall my professor explaining that we are made from the same carbon, the same “star-stuff” as everything else. Looking up, I remember feeling an “oomph” as I had the thought of how immensely far away those stars were, and how there is nothing at all between here and there but particles or air and dust and light. A tangent, perhaps, but just another demonstration of the profound thoughts that the plains landscape can evoke.

In terms of my thesis, this was a big turning point. I wanted to focus on the sky above all else, more than the horizon and the experience of being in the car, and the “cornfield effect”, as I came to call the visual illusion that occurs when you look
down each row while driving by. I wanted to recreate the sense I had in Nebraska that the light from the sky, particularly at the deep blue twilight moment, could be felt.

PHASE FOUR: formalizing

Returning to Nebraska, I uploaded my footage and made a two-panel video that I felt portrayed the feeling I was going for. Although I had all of the panoramic footage available, I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of being surrounded by screens anymore, and so I put aside trying to use the footage in the way I had originally intended.

Home in Nebraska again for Wintersession, I spent nearly every day sketching, sketching, sketching. I was getting very anxious that halfway through the year, I had a large bunch of ideas, some “scenes” that I liked, and a few important realizations, but I didn’t know how to put them together into an immersive installation. My first couple of days back home had been spent finishing up my final paper for my course in Buddhism, so I had all of my books from class with me. Recreationally I had been reading parts of books we did not get to in class, and I slowly began to realize how entwined the concepts spoken about in Buddhism were with the concepts I was trying to describe and understand. I began to see aspects of my thesis that I was trying to explain in terms of Buddhist thought, and this helped me to put a name to my concepts and gave me the ability to describe, research, and
visualize them. Mandalas, which are often used to help induce meditation, reminded me of staring at the focal point of the road on the horizon. Particular colors of blue, which I had noticed affected me so greatly in the sky, also carry certain significance in Buddhism.

Modern Mandala –
A Soul Brought to Heaven
/ Wall Corner 3

Bart Ross
2001

Another big turning point came during break when I found a material, frosted vinyl, that I thought would allow me to create light effects vaguely reminiscent of my new artist obsession, James Turrell. His works, particularly his
Ganzfeld pieces, were exactly what I wished I could create if I had unlimited resources and space.

After I had finally set aside my material/actualization anxieties and was able to focus on the formal components of the work, I spent much of the beginning of the spring semester researching more inspirational artists (this was a reenergized continuation, as I had also spent the bulk of the fall semester doing this) and found inspiration in nearly every one of the Light and Space artists of the 1960s, particularly Robert Irwin. All of these artists seemed to have such a geometric concept of space, and yet no concept at all. They were focused on experience, not content. There was the lack of an image- something that would change from all angles, and something that could only be felt.
INSPIRATIONS

Robert Irwin
Slant/Light/Volume
2009

Gabriel Dawe
Plexus No. 9
2011

Olafur Eliasson
Your Atmospheric Colour Atlas
2009
Here is finally where I find myself unable to describe my process. After what must have been hundreds of sketches, scribbled ideas on envelopes and napkins, ideas that I just couldn’t find a way to draw, my thoughts and explorations finally manifested themselves into the installation you see today. I have tried numerous times to verbally and pictorially map my flow of thought, but it is far too difficult. My focus would shift, from caring most about the “cornfield” effect and the imagery of parallel lines, to caring most about the feeling of a large space in a small space, to wanting to create a walk-in mandala, a sort of circular sanctuary room, to caring most about the horizon line and the feeling of dimension...It was a long and arduous process, at multiple points feeling impossible, “unsolvable”. I feared that I had come up with an idea that with my resources, was impossible to realistically convey. I was hitting inspiration blocks. I knew so completely how I wanted it to feel, and now that I felt that the imagery was no longer the important part, it was that much more difficult to conceive.

But somehow, it came. I had to give up a lot. Let it go. Perhaps my take-away number two – you can’t have it all. In fact, you don’t need to. To express the feeling, I didn’t need to express the whole experience – I didn't need to show cornfields and sweeping green and the lines on the road going towards the far away horizon... all of that showed up in the piece, in the end. But it wasn’t until I let go of everything else, everything but that one, most powerfully felt moment at the twilight, the deep richness of a simple blue sky, that this piece formalized itself.
REFERENCES


