

Products, Atmospheres and Interactions

Relationship between the physical and phenomenological bodies and Light Art

light art
fenomenología
script
performance
atmósferas
light art
phenomenology
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atmospheres

Las obras de Light Art integran características del mundo virtual en el espacio físico. Según la fenomenología, todo lo que percibimos se siente real para nuestro cerebro, haciendo que estas instalaciones se experimenten como reales. Bruno Latour introdujo el concepto de "script" para describir las instrucciones de comportamiento que nos imponen las tecnologías, y las obras de Light Art nos inducen a comportarnos de formas específicas según su naturaleza. Esto genera diversas experiencias dependiendo de la obra. Este estudio analiza varias instalaciones de Light Art, considerando su interacción con los cuerpos físicos y fenomenológicos. A partir de ello, se propone una categorización tripartita según la relación entre el arte y el cuerpo: productos, atmósferas e interacciones. Esta conexión entre cuerpo y arte puede ser un elemento transformador en los espacios culturales y urbanos contemporáneos.

Light Art integrates characteristics of the virtual world into physical space. According to phenomenology, everything we perceive feels real to our brain, making these installations experienced as real. Bruno Latour introduced the concept of "script" to describe the behavioral instructions imposed on us by technologies. Light Art installations lead us to behave in specific ways depending on their nature. This generates diverse experiences based on the particular piece. This study analyses several Light Art installations, focusing on their interaction with physical and phenomenological bodies. Based on this, a tripartite categorization is proposed according to the relationship between art and the body: products, atmospheres, and interactions. This connection between body and art can serve as a transformative element in contemporary cultural and urban spaces.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the late twentieth century, we have witnessed the exponential growth of artificial light as a tool and a material to conceive installations aimed at reshaping the viewer's perception. Owing to its material properties, artificial light serves as a medium that bridges tangible and digital architectures, enabling the emergence of the immaterial within built space. This approach leads to the understanding of architectural space as a medium capable of being theatricalized through light, generating emotions and perceptions in the viewer (Ramírez Valenzuela 2014). Light Art creations are fundamental in generating these intangible realities, representing an extreme illustration of perceptual modification. The works of Light Art fall within the realm of phenomenological experience, being "environments that confuse the actual with the virtual or allow us to feel feelings that are hardly our own yet interpellate us nonetheless" (Foster 2013, xi-xii).

These installations seek to transform the observer into the artwork since it is through the viewers' subconscious that the work acquires meaning. Therefore, the work of art needs the bodies that interact with it to exist, because it exists through its interpretation. After the interpretation, the work of art becomes a reality for the observing subjects, who will act according to their new, perceived reality. These installations blur the boundaries between the physical and real worlds, and the virtual and phenomenological, placing the virtual within the real in opposition to the traditional dichotomy. According to authors such as Merleau Ponty, the world is what we perceive and live (Merleau Ponty 2002, p.xviii), so, in phenomenological terms, these virtual experiences are just as real as the experiences of the material. The success of these installations lies in their ability to understand separately the physical body and the phenomenological body. According to Murray, these installations seek "to destabilize the experiential boundaries of a person's body, thus

partially freeing the phenomenal body from the experiential constraints of a person's physical presence in the real world" (Murray 1999, 319). Although phenomenology, especially in Merleau-Ponty's thought, challenges the dualism between mind and body, in this research the distinction between the physical body and the phenomenological body is used as an analytical tool to describe different modes of embodied experience in Light Art installations. Rather than assuming an ontological separation, this distinction allows us to trace how artworks affect perception, agency, and presence in different ways.

Light Art installations served both as aesthetic experiences and experiments on the boundaries of our perception to explore the body's reactions under different stimuli. Moreover, these reactions produced through the phenomenological body contribute to altering the behavior of physical bodies in space. Bruno Latour grouped under the term "script" the 'built-in' prescriptions of technologies over humans (Latour 1992). The concept of the "script" explains that the non-human prescribes a behavior in the human as if it carries implicit instructions on how we should relate to them or in their presence. Under this precept, the non-human, in this case, the light, prescribes a behavior in the body that finds it. Contemplating, approaching, sitting, moving, relaxing or touching are acts that are part of this "script". The observing subject performs because it is what it has to do in the presence of the work of art, even if nobody tells the observers what they have to do. Therefore, there will be installations that invite the bodies to become more performative than others to the point that the observers themselves are not necessarily aware that they are performing (Duncan 1995, 1-2). The way a curator sets up an exhibition, and the way people move through it, situates the artworks. This placement determines how the public experiences the art. By looking at this "choreography", we develop a more robust theory of meaning-making that goes beyond

cultural sociology's exclusive focus on how the audience's cognitive presuppositions inform and constrain the interpretation of cultural objects. (Griswold et al, 2013). To benefit from these dynamics, Light Art installations usually deny a main or ideal point of view from which to observe the installation. This way, the moving position and the active functionality of the body are encouraged to the detriment of the static and passive spectator (Bishop 2005, 13)

Lighting designers and artists must foresee the behaviors and emotions that their works will generate. To do so, they require a shared visual vocabulary that resonates with the memory of previous experiences. There are lighting designs that invite contemplation, togetherness, or introspection, and with this invitation resulting from a mediated image they alter the behavior of visitors who confront the artworks. Not all sources and ways of using lighting get the same results, but they all get some result.

This research analyzes a series of Light Art installations in terms of their relationship with the observant bodies. The installations have been chosen to represent different dynamics between bodies and light. Those analyses are based on photographs of the works. In this way, the research seeks to understand how the material and immaterial conditioning factors that create the script of these installations affect the behaviors of the bodies. Subsequently, graphic analyses of the bodies' movement around the installation have been made to see how people interacted with them. The results are presented in a division of three categories that serve as a conceptual framework for the relationship between the body and the installation: products, atmospheres and interactions (Fig.1).

The first category is the products, defined as installations where the relationship between the body and the work of art is that of two separate entities. The body is passive in front of the

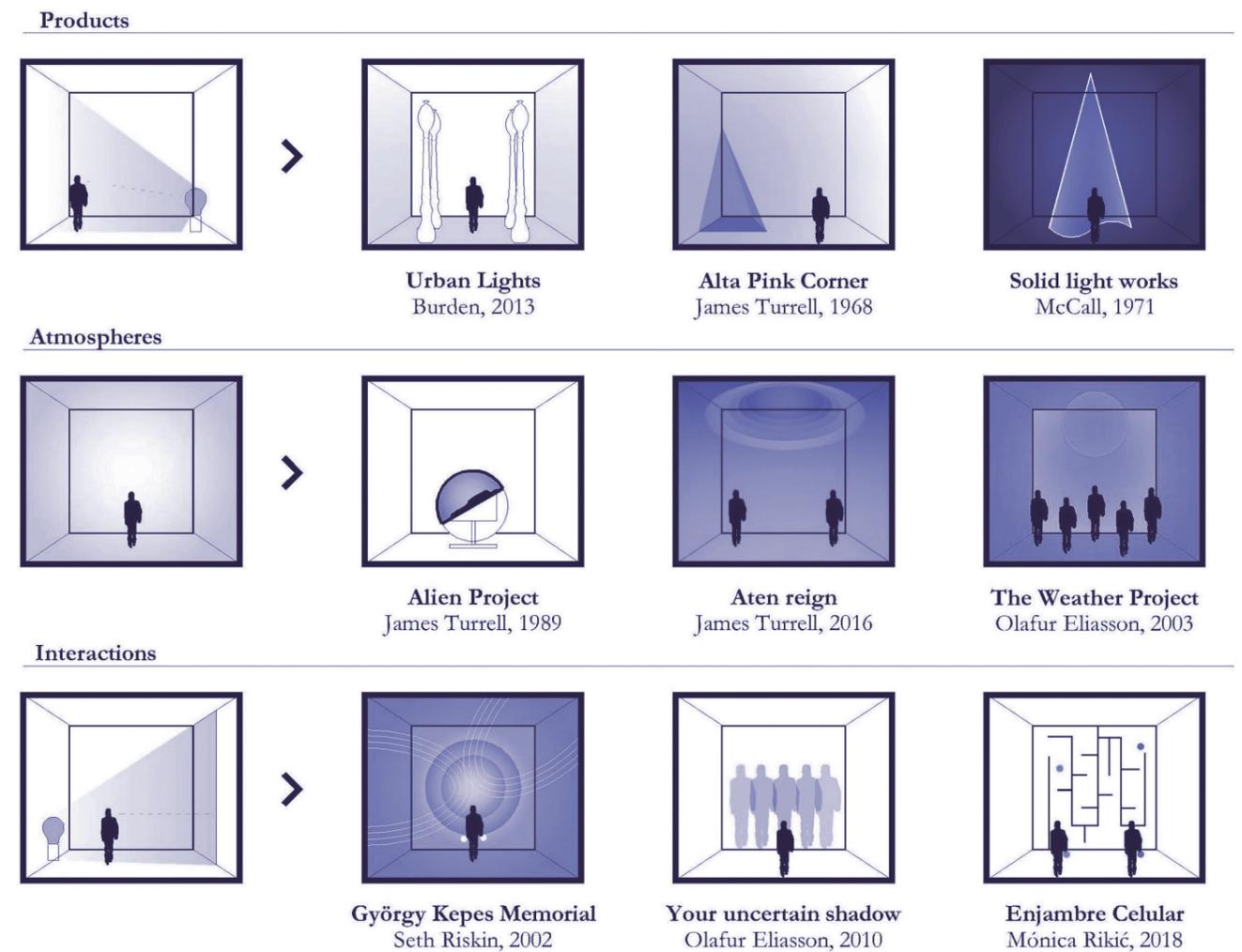


Fig.1 - Diagram of the three categories and the examples showed in the paper.

installation and is separated from it. It doesn't exist an alteration of the body or the installation. The second one is the atmospheres, defined as installations where the body is immersed in the work of art and becomes part of it. The atmospheres seek to envelop that body as part of the work itself creating a relationship of co-dependency: the art exists by itself and alters the phenomenological body while the body, by its presence, participation, or interpretation, completes the installation.

The third category is the interactions, defined as installations that require the performance of the physical body for their existence. In them, the installation is transformed and created through the physical body and its movement. Therefore, interactions are dependent on the bodies and transform the observer into a creator who performs under the script of the installation.

PRODUCTS

This first category is inspired by Dan Flavin's work. He considered that his sculptures made with fluorescent lights were "modern technological fetishes". The artist related his work to the iconography of Russian religious art, and by relating his pieces to fetishes, he highlighted the separate condition between the observing body and the observed object. As fetishes, the spectator looks at them from a distance, not approaching or engaging in any kind of physical interaction with them. The relationship sought is that of a body subordinated to an object that has the power and rules the scene.

This total separation between the object and the subject is what formulates the product category. Furthermore, inside this category, we can determine two types of products: material and immaterial. While the material

ones use visible luminaires that create the installation, increasing the difference and opposition between body and object, the art in the immaterial ones is the visible results of the projected light, which the body can walk through to test its solidity. Flavin's installations exist in the material realm, but there are other installations, like James Turrell's Light Projections – Afrum (1967), or Alta Pink Corner (1968)–, that are objects that only exist in the virtual reality – a flat image perceived as 3-dimensional due to viewers psychological and perceptual need to pull the known form up into three-dimensional solidity (Butterfield 1993, 71). The differentiation between material or immaterial products may or may not have any direct implication on the relationship between the physical body and the artwork, but it has an impact on the phenomenological body. It is through the phenomenological

body that the light achieves its solid appearance, on which the installation relies, so it is through the perception of the observer that the installation becomes real.

Urban Lights (2013)

One example of the material products is *Urban Lights* (Burden, 2013) installation located outside LACMA museum in Los Angeles (Fig.2). The installation consists of 202 authentic cast-iron lamps with 16 different designs from Los Angeles that date from 1920s and '30s, all of them collected by the author of the installation, and among which passers-by can wander (Vankin 2018). The work invites the viewer to enter inside, transforming the public square where it is installed into a super-illuminated hypostyle space that can provide a sense of security, privacy and enchantment. According to Burden, the sculpture transforms itself into "a building with a roof of light." Burden says that street lamps like these were symbols of a civilized and sophisticated city – safe after dark and beautiful to behold (Burden, 2013). In Western cultures, the presence of light in public space is directly associated with safety while dark areas at night are associated with crime and illicit activities – even if this association is not as direct or true nowadays. In this installation, the viewer becomes an active being but does not have to alter the nature of the installation. Visitors walk around the safe space that becomes the hypostyle plaza. They move around and not just in the side that faces the main street – even if that is the most populated spot.

This installation is a variation of Dan Flavin's attitude of worship from the outside, as the viewer can interact with the work becoming closer to it. In opposition to the fetishist and sacred idea that separates the object – or saint – from the person, Burden's installation creates a sacred space to gather in and also expresses the welcoming idea through familiar lamps – ones that can be found in other cities – creating a relaxing atmosphere.

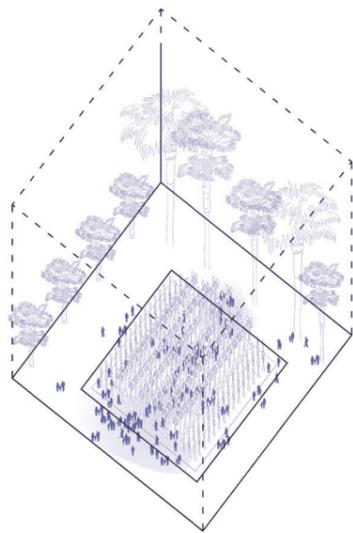


Fig.2 - Axonometric diagram of *Urban Lights* (Burden, 2013) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

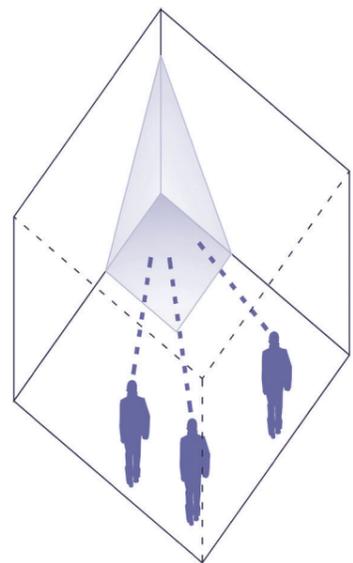


Fig.3 - Axonometric diagram of *Alta Pink Corner* (James Turrell, 1968) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

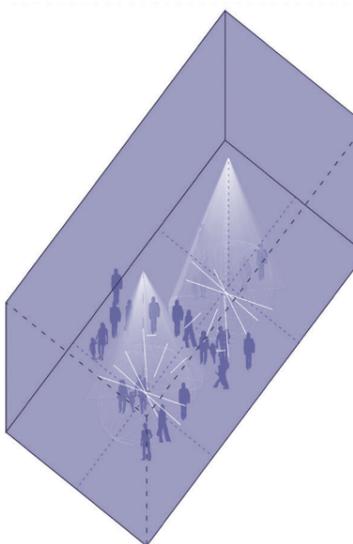
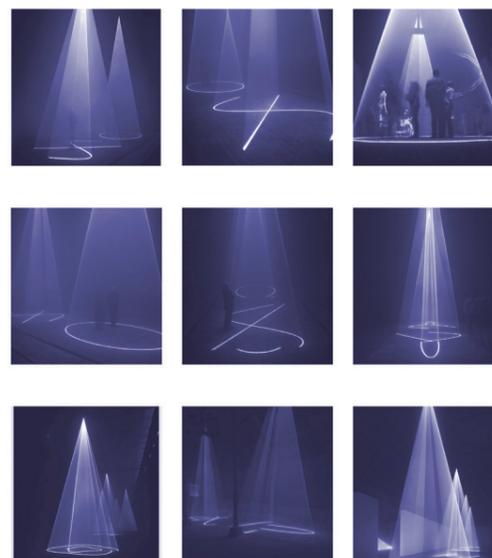
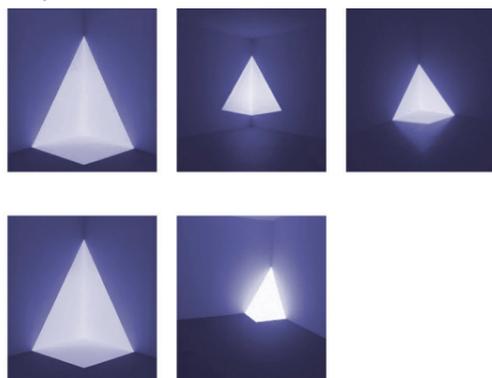


Fig.4 - Axonometric diagram of *Solid Light films* (McCall, 1971) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.



Alta Pink Corner (1968)

On the other hand, similar to Dan Flavin's fetishism, we can find James Turrell's *Light Projections* (Fig.3). In his early works, Turrell created optical effects of light figures that appeared solid when, through the viewers' perception, planes of light were transformed into three-dimensional figures. These immaterial objects are intended to be observed from a distance, placing the subject again as a passive being in front of the work of art. This separation recreates the first idea of the body being separated and dominated by the fetishized object. There is no active physical reaction in the body, but in this case, it [exists ...unclear] a phenomenological reaction. While Burden's or Flavin's installations were based on palpable physical objects, Turrell's cases highlight the ability of light "to significantly alter our perception allowing us to visualize seemingly solid objects when in reality, the only object that exists is the mental object created by the medium" (Katzberg 2009, 29).

Solid Light films (1971)

Likewise, in his *Solid Light Films* (1971), McCall also played with the paradox of generating seemingly solid objects through the use of light. The difference Turrell's works were that these light projections

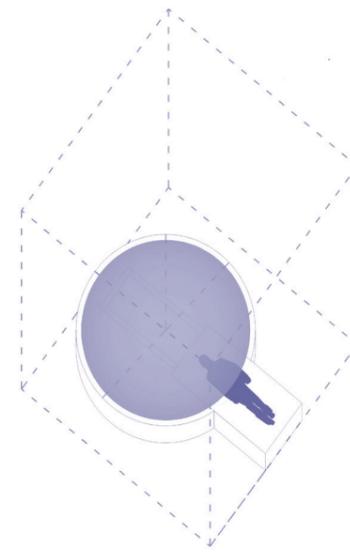


Fig.5 - Axonometric diagram of different perceptual cells by James Turrell based on photos of the installations. Own elaboration.

were planned to be easily pierced by the physical body. Under the paradoxical concept of "Solid-light films" (Fig.4), McCall invites the visitors to play with the paradox of trying to touch the projections – even if the hands and the body are going to pass easily through the light. The same as Turrell's he invites the viewer to see the volumes as solids even if they are just light. The active viewer can decide whether to walk among the volumes created with light, but can also choose to walk through them, breaking the sensation conveyed by the object about the solidity of the product. It is the temptation to touch the light expecting to feel something by touch, a sensation that will not happen. This installation becomes a mix between the previous two ones. First, you can find the idea of walking through, similar to Burden's – in this case, in a dark room you can only see what happens inside of the changing lights – this action engages with the physical body that moves itself driven by the light. Secondly, is the virtual appearance of solidity, the phenomenological body perceives the light as something solid that we cannot cross. To prove it, the bodies situated themselves in the areas where the light moves through, allowing the light to cross the physical body.

ATMOSPHERES



The second category of this research's conceptual framework is atmospheres – installations in which the spectator's body is absorbed as part of the artwork. This category is generated from the questions raised by both Turrell's and McCall's product installations: "Where is the work? Is the work on the wall [or the floor]? Is the work in space? Am I the work?" (Coburn 2009, 81). In the case of atmospheres, as the body becomes part of the installation, the location of the art is both outside and inside the body. It approaches both the physical and the phenomenological body, creating a reaction in both of them, and at the same time, all these installations need the presence of the bodies that enter into them to be read as a whole.

Perceptual cells collection (1989-1996)

After James Turrell's early works – generated sculptures with light playing with the perception of the spectator – the artist kept exploring the perception of viewers through his famous atmospheres. These installations were specially aligned with Turrell's work and research as he holds a Bachelor's degree in perceptual psychology and a Master of Arts degree. He was particularly interested in the Ganzfeld effect – also called perceptual deprivation – which is the effect that results from the brain amplifying the neural noise when exposed to an unstructured and uniform stimulation field.

In *Alien Project* (1989), *Perceptual Cell* (1991), or *Ganzfeld Sphere* (1996) (Fig.5), Turrell created a series of Ganzfeld experience spaces – for one person at a time – that made it possible to experience changes in one's perception by way of altered lighting conditions. Turrell uses light of different hues and rhythms, to challenge our sense of being located and the boundaries of the physical body. As far as possible in these installations, the spectator lacks reference points on which to focus. This way, one's own nose (a prominent but normally unnoticed protuberance in our field of vision) becomes visible, and the lack of focus or visual signals gives

rise to hallucinations. According to the visitors' book of Ganzfeld Sphere (Benson 2001, 125), the testimonies relate that they were unable to know if their eyes were open or closed, or if what they were watching was the membrane of their eyes or the dome, or if the colours were inside or outside of their heads.

In the case of Alien Project, he created a simulator where the body can lie under a hue-changing light that makes it look as if it has been abducted. The spectator who arrives sees the abduction room, enters it and lies down on the stretcher that lifts him into the light. The viewer becomes part of the performance of the work, a work that in turn allows the viewer to be part of the script. The perceptual cells were several mobile works that allowed the visitor to have a similar experience, and in the Ganzfeld Sphere the installation simulated a body scan. In the 3 installations, the visitors were expected to have the experience alone, since the purpose was to create the hallucinations generated by the Ganzfeld effect. We can see how the devices are evolving to allow less and less intervention of external elements – in Alien Project there is a person more or less close to us and we are placed on a mobile platform; in the Perceptual Cell we are standing and the space where the light is produced only surrounds our head; and finally in the Ganzfeld Sphere we are already lying down and the space on which the light is reflected occupies our entire field of vision and the full-body.

Aten Reign (2013)

Following his signature strategy on the use of color to alter the perception of visitors, but with slight differences, Turrell created *Aten Reign* (Fig.6). This installation in the hall of the Guggenheim of New York used the helicoidal whole and created a conical cupola, changing the natural light provided by the skylight, for the artificial light of its installation which seeks to create an atmosphere in the space. In this case, Turrell created a huge agora in the atrium for people to gather

together under the installation. Instead of the solitude of their first installations – more focused on the internal changes in the perception system due to the lack of reference – in this one, the interest relies on the togetherness of the act, the current moment, and the reminder that there are multiple ways to see and perceive the world.

The users are placed on the perimeter of the room and some of them lie down in the center. The installations look for people to stay there, creating a contrast to how we usually see museums – moving from one artwork to the next one paying attention just for a couple of seconds. In addition, it contrasts with the activity and tours in the museum by eliminating the view

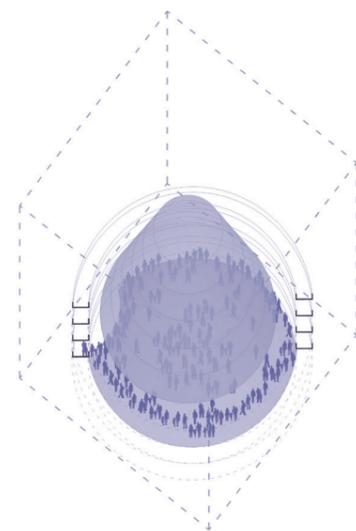


Fig.6 - Axonometric diagram of *Aten Reign* (James Turrell, 2013) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

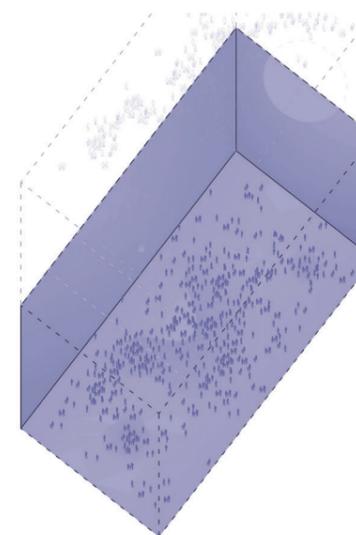


Fig.7 - Axonometric diagram of *The weather Project* (Olafur Eliasson, 2003) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

of the helical ramp that is the main attraction, making us focus on the courtyard space. The movement in this room is more conditioned by the zenithal light and the location of a seating area on the perimeter. All the movement and the view are concentrated in a central point on the ceiling, contemplating the changing colours of the work.

This installation followed a similar prompt to his sky observatories, especially in *Roden Crater* (1972), where visitors stay overnight and contemplate the light of the work for introspection and also the stars in the desert sky. In all his pieces the participants can feel that light is inhabiting the space too.

The Weather Project (2003)



In 2003, Olafur Eliasson installed the *Weather Project* in the Turbine Hall of London's Tate Modern (Fig.7). The installation consisted of an apocalyptic sun that lit the entire hall and invited visitors to stand beneath it. In the words of Rem Koolhaas, it allows the turbine hall to become the huge agora that it was supposed to be due to the activities of the users (Koolhaas 2014). We can see how the users conquer the whole space, and they move around freely, they walk, lay on the floor, and if you look at the pictures, you can see people doing acrobatics or yoga.

The installation is not meant to be observed from a fixed point, but neither is it meant to be surrounded, or seen from multiple angles. In this case, the installation is meant to look and be seen and be aware of how we look, so the work must be traversed and it is through this traversing, playing and being, and watching others doing the same through the installation, that the work acquires meaning (García Piriz 2018, 109). The work relies on the multiple perspectives of the decentralized subjects who walk through the artwork, turning visitors into observing and observed subjects at the same time (Hornby 2017, 63). According to Olafur Eliasson, the work seeks the experiential response of the subjects (Eliasson 2018).

Olafur Eliasson's installation was characterized by working with the

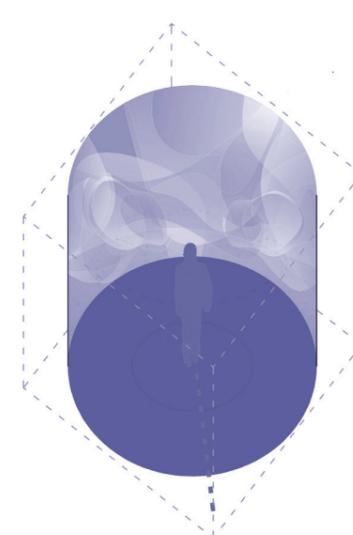
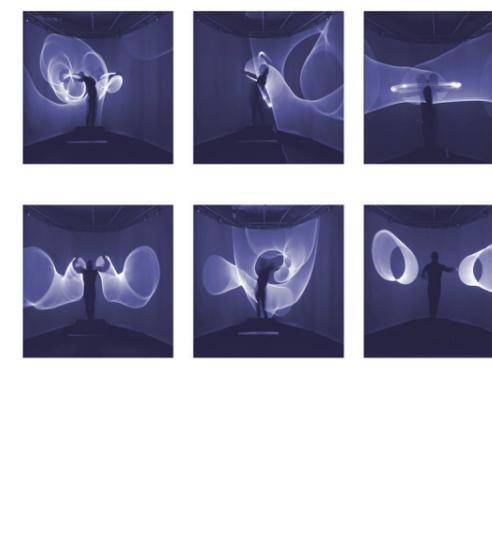


Fig.8 - Axonometric diagram of *Light Dances* (Seth Riskin, 1989) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

atmosphere as the main element, avoiding the presence of a concrete physical object that could serve as the focus of attention. In this context, the entire nave became the object of the installation, and the actions of the visitors became an integral part of it. This tabula rasa condition facilitated free movements and spontaneous associations, which led visitors to engage in various activities and performances. These behaviors are a significant departure from the behaviors traditionally considered appropriate in cultural spaces. However, it is the installation itself that enables and encourages such actions through the "script" in which the design and configuration of the space – the transformation of the turbine hall – facilitates and structures the interactions of the visitors. Even more relevant is that the participation of the attendees generates synergies that involve new actors, who influence each other through their actions. Ultimately, it is the people and their movement that endow the work with meaning, underscoring the importance of collective interaction as a central component in the interpretation and experience of the installation. The position orients the location and at the same time, the location orients the construction of meaning. Bodies and objects move through space and influence each other. Ultimately the work becomes an experiment in atmospheric and visitor control



through phenomenology (Hornby 2017, 73). The sun is the bait for the visitors, the light and fog that reinforces it are the mediums, and the performances and effects of the bodies are the result of the installation. If Turrell's intention in *Ganzfeld Sphere* and *Athen Reign* was to foreground the act of seeing, the *Weather Project* focused on seeing ourselves seeing. These installations are focused on the interpretation and subsequent reaction of the body – by perceptive alteration or movement – so the artwork achieves its significance in the interpretation or through the body reaction. In the case of the *Perceptual Cells* it is through the hallucinations or the separation between the phenomenological and physical bodies blurring the limits between what was the body and what was light; in *Aten Reign* it is about changing the path and movement of bodies around the museum interfering in the orientation of the body on time; in the *Weather Project* the installation focus in the activities of the bodies under the installation, is not that much about the big sun displayed in the agora, but about the reactions that we can see in others.

INTERACTIONS

The third type would be the interactions. In these works, the body is necessary for the installation as the artwork gets fueled and is dependent on the body's movement. This category is about the total symbiosis of the body and art as dependent entities of the artistic process. I would divide them into two main types: the first one would start from the artist's performance, so the testimony that would be left to the spectators is photographic or video material resulting from their performance; the second type would be the one that starts from the visitor's action, so the spectators are in charge of deciding how the installation will be materialized through their action. As the spectator is also the creator of the result, the role of the artist is the one who gives the tools and creates the conditions for the collective art to happen.

Light dances (1989)

According to Seth Riskin's Light Dances (Fig.8) "is a conscious transfiguration of the body, its movement and the encompassing space; a transposition of matter to light exalted in the dance. This corresponds to the conceptualized spirit of the performer whose body is "consumed" by light" (Riskin 1989). This work was part of his Master's thesis at MIT directed by Otto Piene. For the performance, the artist stands in the center of a dark room with a black backdrop and a light in each hand.

In this way, by capturing images of his movement we can see the result of the complete installation in which the body gets lost inside the light – in some pictures, we can perceive a human silhouette, in other the silhouette of the body is created by the mind that knows that there is a body there. Although the whole body is in movement, it does not leave its position creating a fixed installation around it that is dependent on the speed and movement of the upper-body.

Your Uncertain Shadow (2010)

One example of the second type of this installation is Olafur Eliasson's Your Uncertain Shadow (2010) (Fig.9). In a white room, visitors enter by passing in front of 5 spotlights that project light onto the façade in front of them. As visitors enter, their projected shadow appears on the wall as an array of five differently colored silhouettes. Each silhouette is crafted by obstructing light of different colors from slightly varied angles.

As visitors move around the space, passing closer to and farther away from the lights, the silhouettes shift in color intensity and scale. In this installation, art is produced through play, experimentation, and the curiosity of the visitors, who decide what the work on display looks like, and what can be done with it. Similar to what happened on the Weather Project where the visitors saw themselves seeing, Your Uncertain Shadow is about seeing ourselves doing.

Enjambre Celular (2019)

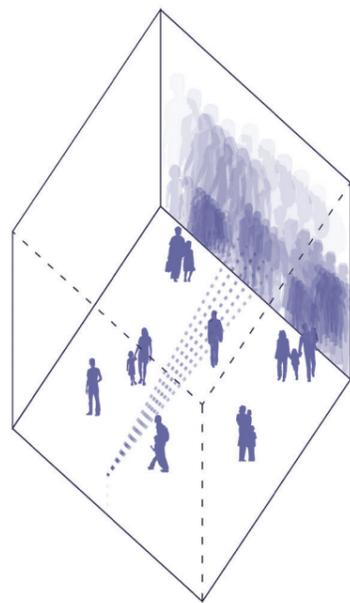


Fig.9 - Axonometric diagram of Your Uncertain Shadow (Olafur Eliasson, 2010) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

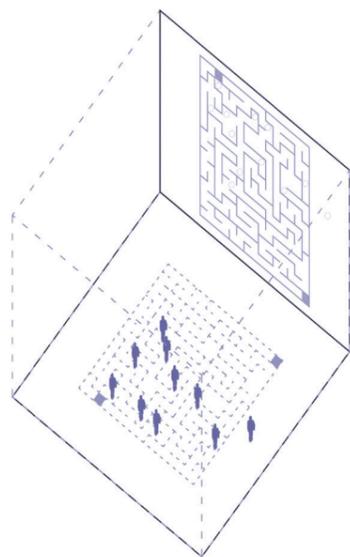


Fig.10 - Axonometric diagram of Enjambre Celular (Medialab, 2019) based on photos of the installation. Own elaboration.

The last installation is in the Media Facade of Medialab Prado (Fig.10). One of the side facades of the cultural centre is covered by a giant screen. This digital façade aims to be used as a device for artistic experimentation by the research groups related to the Medialab. The façade is made with a matrix of pixels. Each pixel is made of 7 LED lights – 2 red, 3 green and 2 blue – and is individually controlled by a DMX. Through the individual manipulation of the pixels, the façade is transformed into a big screen made with lights. To make easier the experimentation and interaction with the public space a



DISCUSSION

In this research, a series of installations of Light Art are analyzed in their relationship to the bodies of the observers and artists who interact with it. It is proposed a separation between the physical and phenomenological bodies, and the research on the installations takes note of the influence of the phenomenological reality on the physical for the analysis. Before the graphic analysis of the installation and the movement of the physical bodies, the installations are divided into 3 categories according to the relationships between the bodies and the installations: products, atmospheres and interactions.

There is an ever increasing interaction between the bodies and the art according to the role of the viewer with the creation or participation. With the products, the viewers only physical response is when the installation confronts them into provoking them into touching (Solid Light films) or when the viewers find some familiarity that calls them in (Urban Lights). This interaction never changes the reality of the installation but emphasizes it.

But as it was said in the introduction, sometimes the script can be less explicit, for example the act of staying away from the light, watching it from the distance (Alta Pink Corner), is also part of the script, and is a provocation to stay away, the same that we stay away from the religious icons or fetishes that we can watch, but we cannot touch. In the atmospheres the phenomenological reality activates the physical body in different ways, like the passive bodies in the perceptual cells or Aten Reign, that stay still in one spot, to the wandering, and playful activities under the big sun of the Weather Project.

There is a huge parallelism between the physical realities of Aten Reign and the Weather Project installations: huge agora, light from the top, and atmosphere that invades the whole room. But the reaction of the viewers differs

because of one element, what they are looking at. In Aten Reign the theme is about introspection, they look straight to the light and inside themselves oblivious of what happens around them, in the Weather Project they look at themselves from the outside – through the mirror – and they also look at others and interact with them. So, the physical body becomes active through the provocation of the reflection. The third category is the one that requires a constant interaction between the body and the light to exist.

The three installations require the movement of the body for the light to move and create the installation. In the case of the Light Dances, the result is photographed and is what is left to the spectators, while in Your Uncertain Shadow and Enjambre Celular, the artistic result is born from the play of the visitors.

The Light Artworks installed in museums can be seen as small-scale experiments in a controlled environment, which can later be used in other scales or places – similar to what happened with Enjambre Celular that is made on a public space. It is important to analyze people's relationship with these installations to understand the phenomenological relations between people and art pieces and so on with the physical space.

Understanding the relationship of the body in phenomenological spaces can help to develop and understand new techniques and tools for the construction of contemporary spaces for the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. "The 'diagonal' in its overt formal simplicity was only the installation of a dimensional or distended luminous line of a standard industrial device. Little artistic craft could be possible... The 'diagonal', in the possible extent of its dissemination as common strip of light or a shimmering slice across anybody's wall, had the potential for becoming a modern technological fetish" (Flavin 1965), former records daily news, while the latter focuses on past events and builds theoretical interpretations of those events.

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