

# IS IT – a diorama

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of *place* may be approached and theorized through the idea of placing oneself at a location, in order not only to *be* there, but to *mediate* the spatial circumstances and the self-place interaction as such. This paper reviews findings on the thematic of place-construction and self-placing as results of a mediating act performed in art context. As a generative part of a practice-based research project, an installation was realized at an art gallery, which influenced the writing of a dissertation on the thematic of place and self-placing.

## Keywords

Art, research, place, self.

## PRECONDITIONS AND CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

As part of a phd-project about place and self-placing, an installation work called "IS IT," was developed and presented in an art gallery location. The spatial presentation was followed by a version of "IS IT" as a word-image combinative and published as an article in a special issue of a cultural magazine. The exhibited work influenced the phd-project in several ways:

- It produced ideas that helped forming the thematic structuring of the dissertation. Ideas were developed in the process of realizing the exhibition, invoking concepts that would not otherwise have been investigated in the dissertation work.
- It generated a diagrammatic approach as a methodology used in the dissertation.
- The presentation of the work in art context had the residual effect of questioning certain expectations on artistic as well as scientific documentation. The artistic presentation became more explicitly referential. The dissertation work became more liberated in its relation to established

methodology and argumentation

- The process of realization of the exhibition became an activating, cross-cultural, and contemplative phase in an otherwise rather monotonous daily practice of writing.

The overall phd-project may here briefly be described as an analysis, and a critique, of concepts of place as they appear in architecture theory, anthropology and art discourse. More specifically, the thesis analyses different place-concepts in their mutual tendency to exclude certain places as being "placeless." It is thus an investigation of non-places, in the sense locations that do not have the qualities required to be "a good place," "an authentic place," "a socially sufficient place," etc.<sup>1</sup>

## "IS IT" – A SITE DESCRIPTION

"IS IT" was constructed spatially as a diorama, i.e. as a scenic representation in which sculptural and lifelike details are displayed so as to blend with a realistic pictorial background. The circumstances needed for this was provided in a gallery consisting of four rooms: three in a row that established the scenic construction, and one on the side displaying additional information.

On one of the walls in the "side-room" there is a small color photograph from 1967 of myself as a boy stretching out on a sand beach, grasping for a bottle of Cola. On a circular white

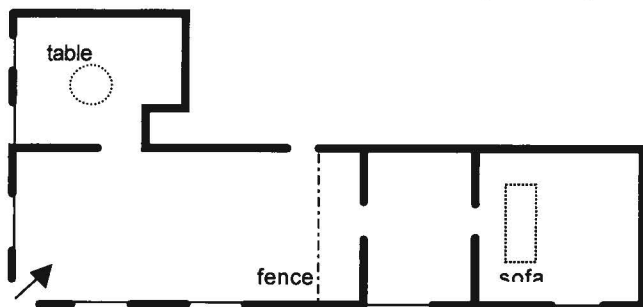
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<sup>1</sup> As an undertaking parallel to an ongoing research program at the School of Architecture, Lund University; I participated in a one year pilot program at Valand School of Art at the University of Gothenburg. It was during this year, in this experimental research milieu based on art practice, that "IS IT" was conceived of, successively discussed, and eventually published. "IS IT" was first presented at Galleri 21 in Malmö, Sweden, in February 2000, and shortly after that as an image-text combinative in a special issue, called 'Art and Research,' of *Glänta*, 4, 2000. The dissertation in question is forthcoming (to be defended and published at Lund University in 2003).

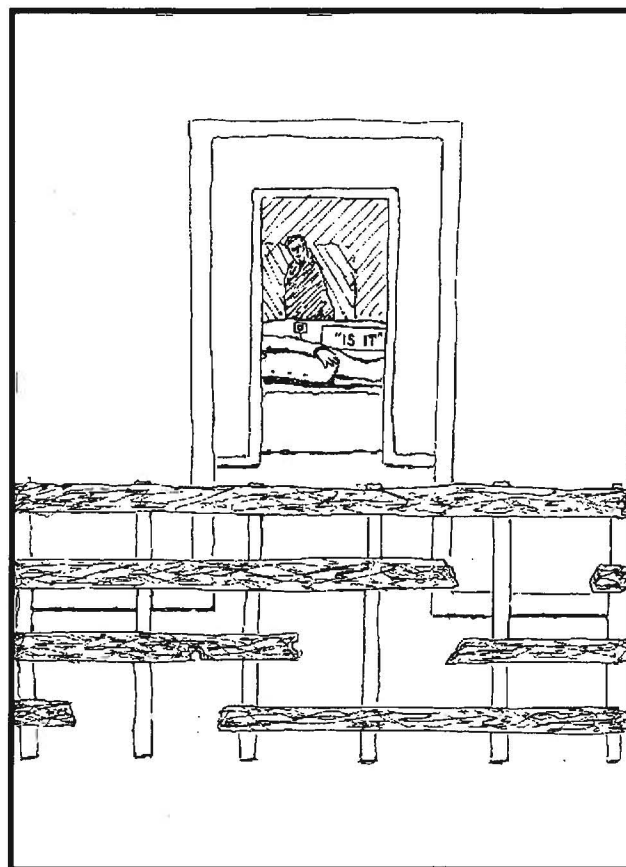
In *PDC 02 Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*, T.Binder, J.Gregory, I.Wagner (Eds.) Malmö, Sweden, 23-25 June 2002. CPSR, P.O. Box 717, Palo Alto, CA 94302 cpsr@cpsr.org ISBN 0-9667818-2-1.

table a text is provided, telling about the occasion when the photograph was taken. It is possible to sit by the table on white, smoothly shaped chairs with seats covered by blue nylon, designed by an unknown carpenter in the 1960s.

In the big room (which you first enter) there is a hose running along one of the walls up to a funnel attached to the wall. Water is pouring constantly from the hose, then caught in the funnel and led through another hose out of the room through a side door opening. The murmuring sound of the water is taken up by a microphone attached to the funnel, then amplified and transported to speakers in the side-room. In front of the door leading to the two inner rooms there is a fence; old wooden boards are placed horizontally and nailed to fresh ones standing vertically.



Over the fence one sees across an empty room lit by bluish daylight into a last inner room characterized by a yellowish, slightly weaker, light-condition.



In this inner room a person, in the initial case myself, is lying on a sofa-like piece of furniture, essentially a bed with a leaning back support and a front slanting down to the floor. The lying person's body and the piece of furniture are both uniformed in the same beige cloth. The larger part of the body is visible, but the head and feet are out of sight, since the range of vision is limited by the sides of the doorway. Right by the back of the sofa a small video camera is positioned, directed back through the rooms towards the visitors facing the fence in the large room. The video image is projected onto the wall at the far end of the inner room, and the visitor therefore sees herself mirrored on this wall behind the lying person. Beside the camera at the furniture stands a sign-post with two words in quotation marks: "IS IT."

#### **Preliminary Sources**

The work came about as a reflection on mainly four sources: the personal memory of the photograph taken at the beach in 1967; a reflection on *Etant Donnés*, the work that Marcel Duchamp constructed during the last 20 years of his life; the modalities of artists' partaking in their artworks; a reading of the philosophical history of the concept of place.

#### **Bagging the Beach**

The first source is the principle of place-appropriation. I recall a family holiday when I was about 11 years old. Lying

at a beach I suddenly felt a strong drive to create a desert landscape with myself in it posing for a photograph. This was not easy because the beach was full of bathers, kiosks, trees, toys and occasional leftovers, and the social networks and grammars reigning there were felt as prohibiting my project. I finally had to arrange a “free” spot by moving some things away and ask two persons to step aside for a while, and so the photographic act could be completed. This event, this creation of a temporary place, in order to fit it into a conception of an image, exemplifies the principle of reciprocity in the relationship between a fictional space and a real place.

### Places and Placebos

The second source is derived from an analysis of Marcel Duchamp’s last work, *Etant Donnés* from 1968. The work can be seen, in a first interpretation, as a return to an artistic paradigm dominated by constructions of perspective and the effects of visual perception. This seemed odd to me though, since Duchamp is generally regarded as the one who “liberated” the art object from its dependence on a material and perceptual image-plane, altering it to be a matter of the conception of the spectator and the conventions of the art institution.<sup>2</sup> In *Etant Donnés* it is as if Duchamp has returned to *place*, as a physical locus established by tradition, after having operated in *placebo*, i.e. in a mentally conditioned space where an image works conceptually but nevertheless reaches an actual sensed effect. However, since the set-up of this work involves a peeping viewer’s position, it becomes clear that Duchamp again operates with a notion of the spectator as involved in the creation. His turning back is thus illusory. The concept of placebo serves here then, in partial accordance with the beach photography act, to illustrate the change of a traditional circumstance by way of a temporary illusion.

### Self-participation: a reflection

When the artist takes place in her own work – which is quite common in art generally today, not only in the traditional performing arts – then new types of identity is produced. I am not here referring to the genre of traditional self-portrait

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<sup>2</sup> In *Etant Donnés* an apparent violent act has taken place: a naked female torso (although with androgynous traits and partial bodily deformation) is placed, or rather left in a twiggy landscape with an artificial waterfall in the far end. One arm is holding a gas lamp pointing upwards. This scene is viewed through a large hole in a brick wall from a peeping hole in a thick wooden door a short distance away from the bricks. The work was not presented until after Duchamp’s death in 1968. The paraphernalia of *Etant Donnés* seems to return in other art works, for instance in Robert Gober’s installation with a literally transfixed madonna and a waterfall at MOCA Los Angeles in 1997.

but more generally to the aesthetic conveying of a circumstance outside of, but nevertheless by a pictorial or actional use of one-self. A couple of examples here, just to cover a large time span, could be Velázquez’ *Las Meninas*, 1656, and Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills*, from late 1970s. Here, an operating artistic subject directs other instances, or roles, of the artist’s self. This implies a complex unfolding of different types of selves, such as for instance an organizing self, a demonstrating self, a partially hiding self, and an emotive participatory self, all of which are present in one and the same artistic act. This production of selves could go on as a multi-generative self-reflection, especially if the artist’s expectation of the audience, and the audience’s expectations of the artist, is considered. A self-participatory artistic act is therefore by necessity a poly-semiotic matter.

### A matter of place.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology of place, much focus has been laid on the complex of appropriation, i.e. what it means to take place, to appreciate place, to belong in a place, etc. Quite often, and especially in architectural theory based on phenomenology, the concept of place is regarded as linked to genuine and traditional values, while a site, as the locus of a possible place is associated with exploitation, calculation or mapping. Sometimes it leads to a view that *place* and *site* are incommensurable instead of inter-relational.<sup>3</sup>

### END REMARKS

Four thematic sources have here briefly been presented, distinguishable as having influenced not only a gallery installation and a publication made in art context, but also an ongoing research project on place and self-placing, that run parallel to these events. As an outcome of the work realized in art context, arguments were made in a dissertation work the theme of which is conceptual fabrication of place. *Place*, in the sense lived and produced space, is here viewed as a concurrence, and a merging of fictional and actual places, not as separated categories. The main thematic areas, concerning the concept of place, that emerged through this process were: the interaction between place taken and place at hand; modalities of place-self-production; “placebo” as an aesthetic function in the ongoing change of places. Provisional places are thus viewed, in opposition to how they are often regarded in traditional aesthetic evaluation of for instance architecture, as productive intermissions. As such they are places to be in.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those who participated in the discussions in the art research milieu that surrounded the realization and evaluation of “IS IT.” They are above all

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Edward Casey’s *Fate of Place*, 1997.

Lars-Henrik Ståhl, Mike Bode, Lars Blomqvist, Anna Brag, Andreas Roth, Cecilia Gelin, Göran Dahlberg, Bengt Olof Johansson, Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Roger Cook, Mark Kremer, Mika Hannula, and Bente Stokke.

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3. *Robert Gober* / ed. Paul Schimmel, Scalo Verlag, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997
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