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More Is The Same

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MORE IS THE SAME

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Thesis

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Table of Contents

Image List.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Terms.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Background.....	3
<i>More is the Same Exhibition</i>	5
Showcard.....	5
Beams.....	8
Building Blocks.....	10
Grids.....	12
Windows.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
Bibliography.....	18

Image List

1. *In Search of James Turrell (35°25'01.4"N 111°17'21.3"W)*, 2015
2. *Beams (view 1)*, 2015
3. *Beams (view 2)*, 2015
4. *Building Blocks (view 1)*, 2015
5. *Building Blocks (view 2)*, 2015
6. *Grids (view 1)*, 2015
7. *Grids (view 2)*, 2015
8. *Windows (view 1)*, 2015
9. *Windows (view 2)*, 2015

Nansen, Tyler, M.F.A. Spring 2015

More Is The Same

Chairperson: Associate Professor Trey Hill

More is the Same is the result of my examination of the perception of space in relation to architecture and landscape. By embracing modern concepts of the grid, formalism and design, this compilation of personal experiences and memories, manifests as post-minimal sculptures. However, when considering the hierarchy of importance in my work this involves pure visual perception over any specific narrative. The final product is an exhibition which elicits a perceptual experience for its viewer.

My work is about space and the creation of visual interactions, I am particularly interested in the place where space and object meet. I see this as a sort of puzzle for the brain in which the viewer's perception is challenged visually. My research has been an exploration of this through travel, self-reflection and observation of my surroundings. By researching how other artists and artistic movements have found ways to express physical space I am able to create spatial and temporal visual interactions for my viewers.

Terms:

The following terms are paramount in the analysis of *More is the Same*. To ensure my audience has full understanding of my intentions I am defining these in relation to my work.

Architecture

Within the built environment I am most interested in human made structures, which I define as architecture. As a mode of building, construction, or organization; architecture considers the arrangement of parts, elements, and constituents. Architecture considers aesthetics but holds a specific function; function and aesthetic then influence its visual interpretation.

Built Environment

My day to day landscape consists of the built environment; the human-made space in which I live, recreate and work. These are the spaces that have been created by people and dictate my daily visual experience.

Gallery

A gallery can be defined as a built structure for the exhibition of artwork. This space also offers opportunities to enhance or dictate the art if the existing built structure is considered when creating the work.

Installation

In regards to *More is the Same* installation is a form of art in which the work is designed to transform the perception of a space. An installation's goal is to create a broader sensory experience that isolates objects; here space and time may be the only constraints.

Scale

My work considers scale in reference to the body and to the landscape or built environment in which it exists.

Space

When I consider space in my work I consider the area between the viewer and the object more than the footprint the object occupies. The area between the viewer and my art stimulates a visual and visceral experience. When processing ideas I will rotate the related imagery three-dimensionally in my mind, examining the space it exists in. In this regard space can be considered a concept and a sensation.

Introduction:

There is no way to really mock-up or simulate what I am doing until I am there. An exhibition for me is not a statement but an experiment. (Robert Erwin, 2007)¹

My work is about space and the creation of visual interactions. *More is the Same* is the intuitive response to my physical surroundings. When I began developing *More is the Same* I studied the area in which it would exist, the Gallery of Visual Arts at the University of Montana. The work was crafted specifically for this space with the goal of encouraging a visceral response before a cognitive one. The physical experience a person has with the space that my work occupies is particularly interesting to me. The alignment and mis-alignment of planes and objects in human made structures, like a doorframe and the objects in it's adjacent room, are visually intriguing so I intentionally create similar interactions in my sculptures. These interactions between a surface's plane and its shape bring to attention the nuances of alignment and mis-alignment. The end result is a perceptual experience. Space has been a major concern in art throughout history.

But, after all, the aim of art is to create space - space that is not compromised by decoration or illustration, space within which the subjects of painting can live. (Frank Stella, 1986)²

Painters often produce an illusionary space, the benefit of sculpture is that it can engage viewers and influence their perceptual shifts as they move through the space.

My aesthetic and concepts may be familiar to an academic audience; however, the themes I address are timeless and thus relevant in contemporary understanding of

¹ Jori Finkel, "Artists of Light, Space and, Now, Trees," *New York Times*, (Oct. 2007):3.

² *Working Space* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

art and culture. In the following paper I will outline my background, influences and establish myself within these fields as well as explain the core image-based ideas that inform my practice: specifically spatial awareness in reference to landscape, architectural design, and the built environment. I will accomplish this through the examination of the work from my thesis exhibition, *More is the Same*.

How can ideas support a diversity of forms? *More is the Same* is a reference to my belief that the work displayed in this show offers differences within the similar, change within stagnation, and forward motion within the familiar. We all take comfort in the familiar while exploring new territory.

Background:

As a youth growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area my family of four would routinely pile into our 1983 Volvo station wagon, embarking on car trips through the American West. The destinations were often National Parks and geological wonders, taking us through remote highways and interstates on hot summer days. Sitting in the back seat gazing at the landscape, I looked out at the stark horizon lined by agriculture and dotted with few human-made structures it appeared to be an ordered grid. The serene sparseness was compelling; everything had its place.

For me art is about space and place. When processing ideas I will rotate the related imagery three-dimensionally in my mind, examining the space it exists in. My spatial ability is heightened, which I contribute to my dyslexia, something that has formatively shaped who I am. Research conducted by Harvard Medical School's Dyslexic Research Laboratory has concluded that individuals who are affected by dyslexia, "seem to lack efficiency in the left brain hemisphere which relates to language

ability. But there is increased efficiency in the side of the brain which dictates spatial ability”³ Visual thinking is the dominant way I understand, process and conduct myself in life and in grasping what I make and why. What I make are visual interactions, something I never qualified until this past year.

Shortly after my arrival in Montana I drove to visit Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels*. These four concrete tubes, each eighteen feet long with a diameter of nine feet, are located in Utah’s Great Basin Desert, configured as an open X. The diameter, length and distance between the tunnels is based on the proportions of what can be seen of the sky and land, as well as how long the sun can be seen rising and setting on the solstices. Holes drilled through the tubes’ surfaces align with the constellations – Draco, Perseus, Columba, and Capricorn – challenging the viewers’ expectations of an artwork as stable, while giving them the tools to orient and locate themselves in space.⁴ Holt explains that in making the *Sun Tunnels* she, “wanted to bring the vast space of the desert back to human-scale.”⁵ and “Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape is framed and comes into focus.”⁶ Holt gives her viewers the experience of time as an abstract notion, abstracted because of this heightened awareness of space.

While in the presence of the *Sun Tunnels* I had an awareness of space and time that I had never experienced before. Here time took on a physical presence through the desert rocks and the mountains in the distance, on land that quite possibly no person

³ Diana Appleyard, “Education: The art of being dyslexic,” *The Independent*. (Feb 1997):

⁴ Antonia Rigaud. “Disorienting Geographies: Land Art and the American Myth of Discovery,” *Miranda*. vol. 6 (2012): 5.

⁵ Nancy Holt, “Sun Tunnels,” *Art Forum*, vol. 15 (1977): 34.

⁶ Ibid

had ever walked before. My physical relationship with this work in that setting was critical in developing an awareness of the goals for my artistic practice. I had been making three-dimensional work but now I had a complete awareness of why; the space between the viewer and the object and the visceral response the viewer receives from the work is what I need to pursue.

The *Sun Tunnels* inspired me to research the physical experience a person can have with space. These concrete tubes can be entered and interacted with. Peering through the holes drilled in their sides gives the opportunity to look through the work into the landscape beyond, the concrete is cold to touch, even in the hot sun, and the echo they stage against the vast silence of the desert is engaging. The response is physical but also tactile and visceral, which I partially attribute to the scale of the work and also to the scale of the landscape in which it exists. Through this research an awareness about my art came to fruition. My work is about space and the creation of visual interactions.

More is the Same Exhibition:

More is the Same will be exhibited in the Gallery of Visual Arts at the University of Montana, from April 9 - April 23, 2015. This exhibition is a direct response to the space it is intended for. By synthesizing craft and form with concept the result is an experience in which awareness of space is heightened.

Showcard:

While on a road trip researching Land Art this past winter I traveled to remote sites in Utah, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and Nevada. This journey provided a well of inspiration for *More is the Same*. The showcard image, *In Search of James Turrell*, (Fig.



Fig. 1 *In Search of James Turrell* (35°25'01.4"N 111°17'21.3"W)

1) is documentation of the sensation that trip afforded me. This image of a frost-covered field taken at a high altitude location outside the gates of James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, is able to convey a feeling of place more effectively than words. It is not possible to access this work of Land Art since it is still under construction but while searching for *Roden Crater* it occurred to me that this process was the art itself. Most of the Land Art pieces force its viewers to go through space to reach the work thus challenging their physical perception of space. Site-specificity is one of the themes of *Roden Crater*, you must travel a great distance to see this work and it does not translate into other media, "the work is not in the place; it *is* the place"⁷ *In Search of James Turrell* documents a

⁷ *Land Art* (London: Tate, 2006), 48.

moment in time in a place of starkness – the experience of place is at the root of this work.

The American Land Art movement began partially in response to the 1960's culture in the United States and as a progression of post-modernism. It developed alongside the rise of environmentalism and awareness of the land's potential susceptibility to catastrophes heightened by the presence of nuclear armament. This post-modern approach took art out of the gallery and into the landscape where it could be experienced at a monumental scale. "Robert Smithson and other so called land artists simply disengaged from architecture, placing their work in America's open landscape, leaving behind the museum and galleries Smithson referred to as "tombs".⁸ It also responded to the modern tradition that associates artwork with one sense - sight.⁹

In Search of James Turrell contains one human-made object, a rigid blue foam sculpture I describe as a "beacon". By positioning this sculpture in the landscape I am attempting to understand a desire to visually frame landscape and architecture. This beacon is visual documentation of a self in the act of going through space, thus challenging physical perception of space. Although, this foam sculpture is roughly human scale (5 feet tall, 4 inches wide, 4 inches deep) in this setting its scale cant be distinguished, it is dwarfed by the environment and the disorienting fog reduces depth perception. The viewers' focus is oriented to highlight the beacon in the uncluttered

⁸ *Phenomenal, California Light, Space, Surface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 81.

⁹ Antonia Rigaud, "Disorienting Geographies: Land Art and the American Myth of Discovery," *Miranda*, vol. 6 (2012): 3.



Fig. 2 *Beams* (view 1)

Fig. 3 *Beams* (view 2)

view's minimal aesthetic. Here the reductive qualities of the landscape function in a similar way the reductive qualities of a white cube gallery function for the sculptural pieces of *More is the Same*.

Beams:

The hallway installation, *Beams* (Fig. 2, 3), began as an investigation of horizon line and its resulting atmospheric perspective. The initial idea was conceived while observing Donald Judd's *100 untitled works in mill aluminum*, at the Chinati foundation in Marfa, Texas; where I noted shadows cast by the building's industrial windows on smooth concrete floors. The cast shadows were shapes that hi-lighted structure but without object. A shadow is reductive because it's the result of light being denied to certain areas of an object. However, its presence makes it additive as well. This duality interests me because of the resulting visual aesthetic of clean, flat shapes. The form is sculptural but it can't be touched, there is nothing to experience physically, only visually.

Beams' form is similar to that of support structures found in many modern buildings – I particularly appreciate how these also cast shadows and wanted to synthesize this. The hallway of the Gallery of Visual Arts is the ideal location because of

the close proximity of its walls, this is an opportunity to exploit the space's architecture. By using these walls as support the beams are installed overhead and the gallery's lighting is able to create dramatic cast shadows from the forms. The shadows are similar to the cast shadows of a building's industrial windows, or support structures and are both expansive and contractive; challenging perception of space.

The result of this exploration of atmospheric perspective is a visceral experience for the viewer. There is a feeling of massive weight sensed by viewers when approaching the gallery entrance and an impression of strength to the objects installed in the hallway. Light emanates from either side of the forms creating the illusion of *Beams* hovering. The height of *Beams* decreases at an ascent; forcing anyone who walks through the hall in which they are installed to gradually lower their body in order to maneuver the space. The physical sensation of space contracting adds to the investigation of perspective, the viewer is now forced to perceive space physically.

Bruce Nauman presented several influential works with relationships to light, architecture and the human body in the early part of his career. One of these works, *The Green Light Corridor*, created on-site as part of the 1971 *Body Movements* exhibition at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art relates light and architecture to the human body and exemplifies my goals with *Beams*. Museum curator, Marcia Tucker, stated, "Nauman's work does not deal with the concept of space but the sensation of it...it is similar in feeling to the impact of seeing but not immediately recognizing yourself in the reflective surface of a store window as you pass by."¹⁰ I interpret this statement to be that Nauman's work offers the opportunity to challenge preconceived notions of how we

¹⁰ *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 52.

perceive the world. The sensation of space is achieved viscerally and physically in the piece *Beams*.

Building Blocks:

In the northeast corner of the North Gallery space *Building Blocks* (Fig. 4, 5) is installed. This sculpture mimics architecture but references my childhood obsession with Legos. Much of the work I make is calculated and mapped out ahead of time, but with this piece I gave myself the opportunity to work intuitively, much like how I built with Legos as a child. My goal is to create a visually balanced but engaging experience for the viewer. These blocks are arranged in parallel and perpendicular relationships mirroring the grid and layering of architecture for sound building. Some beams are set off, by 2-4 inches, to create interest and allow space for the work to cast shadows. The resulting shifts in value on the forms' surfaces add depth and apparent voids to the sculpture as well as highlights that enhance specific shapes, making some appear closer while others further away.

Building Blocks was installed in the gallery's corner to limit the audience's view. Architecture is viewed from a distance and at limited angles. When the view is restricted, the way the work can be perceived changes. By eliminating the option to walk around *Building Blocks* viewers are forced to use their spatial imagination to consider viewpoints they can not access. Unlike *Beams*, that appears to defy gravity, *Building Blocks* possesses a very apparent weight and because of many cantilevered blocks, an awareness of gravity and enhanced tension.

Minimal art has been defined as, "Primarily sculpture, tending to consist of single or repeated geometric forms industrially built by skilled workers following the artist's



Fig. 4 *Building Blocks* (view 1)



Fig. 5 *Building Blocks* (view 2)

instructions, removing any trace of emotion or intuitive decision-making.”¹¹ It is described as not eluding to, “anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world.”¹² Aspects of *Building Blocks* would be considered minimal – the repeating forms, stark coloring, and uniform build - however this work was artist-made, and intuitive decision-making is responsible for its formation. It also references beyond its literal presence. Thus, this piece and the larger body of work of *More is the Same* aligns more directly with Post-Minimalism.

¹¹ *Miminalism* (London: Phaidon, 2012), 15.

¹² *Ibid.* 15.

Post-Minimalism developed in America in the late 1960's as a general reaction to Minimalism. Here, rather than adhering to pure formalism, the artists skewed the objects for more open forms, and psychological and physical processes were involved in the actualization of the art; often resulting in work that reflected personal and social concerns. Although most Post-Minimalists continued with the muted Minimal palette, a wider range of materials was accepted, and the hand was often visible in the work.

Robert Morris held a seminal exhibition in 1964 at New York's Green Gallery. Morris's work appeared to reference pure Minimalism. Critics hailed the Green Gallery exhibition to be Minimal, citing him as the founder of Minimalism. However, I do not believe Morris was ever a minimal artist. Reducing visual material does not necessitate that a work's content be reduced. Morris's exhibition, although minimal in material, was not void of content. Morris himself worked in multiple media – painting, performance, land, soft sculpture – too many channels to be reduced to the label "Minimalist."

By creating this work I do not wish to eliminate content but rather refine it to its most simple form. Here in *Building Blocks* the ideas of architectural design and intuitive construction are presented in a Post-Minimal aesthetic.

Grids:

The piece *Grids* demonstrates order and creates an optically engaging experience for its viewers. These wall-mounted cubes resemble Donald Judd's wall boxes, specifically the piece *Untitled, stainless steel and Plexiglass in six parts*, on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum. This piece exemplifies Judd's aesthetic – boldly reductive and geometric. "As a Minimalist theorist, Judd's sculptures relied on



Fig. 6 *Grids* (view 1)

Fig. 7 *Grids* (view 2)



modern machined materials and challenged traditional notions of form and of the “handmade” nature of art.”¹³ In Judd’s *Untitled*, perception is addressed as the viewer is challenged to look through the piece as well as at it. With this piece and with Judd’s work in general I am inspired by its aesthetic and concept but not necessarily its presence.

In my piece *Grids* I attempt to push Judd’s aesthetic a step further by utilizing the optic effects of the material. The inlaid glass of *Grids* is ordered within each box but in alternating horizontal and vertical arrangements. The visual overlap from box to box creates the illusion of gridded space. The result of the translucent glass and its cast shadows in *Grids* is an optical sense of infinitely additive space.

¹³“Collection,” *Milwaukee Art Museum*. April. 2016, collection.mam.org.

In Rosalind Krauss's 1979 article, *Grids*, she states, "There are two ways in which the grid functions, to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal."¹⁴ The grid's appeal is that it extends in all directions, implying spatial infinity and a world beyond the frame. In the context of *Grids* the sense of infinitely additive space is also temporal since it is created by earthly materials and is set clearly in a box to remind us boundaries exist.

It was pure chance that I obtained glass as material. However, while examining these flat panes of glass I immediately visualized a lattice - the basis for structure and a critical form of architecture. This material also afforded me the challenge of working within its constraints, *Grids* was designed around the glass.

Windows:

Set in the center of the North Gallery space is the piece, *Windows*. The space around *Windows* encourages viewers to inspect it from multiple angles and to expand the audience's view, ensuring they experience the effects of the ordered glass. When organizing the panes of glass for *Windows* I chose to set them 2 inches apart on the first, 4 inches apart on the second and 6 inches apart on the third; a decision that was both formal and rational, based on my natural desire for order and predictability. Placement of the panes at these distances increases the optical effect of the piece, emphasizing the importance of distance and space. *Windows* introduces an additional material, rigid blue foam, which adds color to complement the reflection of the glass. It also creates a grounded break between the glass and the formal structure of the base.

¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, vol. 9 (1979): 50.



Fig. 8 Windows (view 1)

Fig. 9 Windows (view 2)



As a person who has spent much of his life indoors, many of my views of landscape have been framed by windows, either of car or of architectural structures. *Windows* simulates an abstracted feeling of the motion and distance of landscape viewed through a window. In Krauss's essay, *Grids*, she comments on Piet Mondrian's use of the grid, particularly his paintings of vertical and horizontal asymmetrical grids within diamond shaped canvases. Krauss describes their effect as,

*the contrast between frame and grid enforcing the sense of fragmentation, as though we were looking at a landscape through a window, the frame of the window truncating our view but never shaking our certainty that the landscape continues beyond of what we can, at that moment, see.*¹⁵

I am excited about the physical and visual strength *Windows* evokes and because of the bases' absent centers there is a duality in feeling – truncation but also vastness.

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, vol. 9 (1979): 63.

Windows has a reduced visual aesthetic, but by introducing the artist-made and additional materials, content is added. My memories of looking through glass framed by a Swedish car's aesthetic served as the inspiration for *Windows*. This ties directly to my showcard in which the image is framed by a white boarder on the top and bottom, referencing observation of the world through windows and framing the sensation of space.¹⁶

Conclusion:

*This work does not deal with the concept of space but with the sensation of it...it is similar in feeling to the impact of seeing. In other words, Naumans's work often presents the participant with a sense of alienation from that which is familiar, thus offering opportunities to reconsider preconceived notions of the way one sees the world.*¹⁷

I return to this thought about Nauman, as I believe it to be encompassing of what I hope to achieve in my art. My work is about space and the creation of visual interactions. An visceral understanding of the physical aspects of my work may qualify a viewer's comprehension of *More is the Same*. Although I do not believe my work gives a sense of alienation like Nauman's it does stage interactions with objects that prompt the viewer to reconsider ideas about the sensation of space.

Overarching themes of this exhibition and my artist practice include architecture, landscape and perception of space. My graduate career has been fruitful in uncovering the goals and intentions behind my artistic practice as well as aligning myself with the movements I wish to be associated with. Moving forward I intend to continue

¹⁶ *Phenomenal California Light, Space, Surface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 52.

researching and creating art that expands upon the reality of what we know to be true in relation to space and visual interactions.

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