Surfbox Sitting on a Liquid Platform:
A Note on Sensory Motility,
or the ‘Architecture of Landing’

by

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Abstract

This MFA project uses space defined by movement to develop an inscriptive practice, which I will refer to as an ‘architecture of landing’. The term ‘landing’ here refers to the potential of actual motion to augment sensory transformation within space, which in turn accommodates a move from one state of consciousness to another. Walter Benjamin’s fascination with ‘passages’ comprised of transitional potential at the height of early modernism serves as an ideal springboard for this discussion. Just as flâneurie gives its rhythm to new experience, Surfbox Sitting on a Liquid Platform comes into conscious being as perceptual cognition arrived at through motile experience. Surfbox is an exhibition shelter constructed as a public display, using water as a primary material. A lightweight physical structure surrounds an active floor, set into a fluid surface. It becomes active when a visitor steps inside. It is a structure allowing participants to recognize how their movement unfolds within a prepared space, through the attenuation of perceptual cognition. Designed as a corrective to contemporary spectacle, the experience of Surfbox begins with immediate kinesthetic activity, slowly settling into stillness. It is a somatic zone of acoustic and perceptual suggestion, directed toward presence in real time.

Keywords: ‘architecture of landing’; space in motion; sensory perception; spatial reality; experience; sensory motility
Dedication

This thesis project is dedicated to my son Samuel, who taught me that navigation of space is not limited to any particular sensory modality and that even the largest step can be accomplished if it is done one at a time. It also is dedicated to my parents Ilse and Ernst Artner for their ongoing support and encouragement. And last, it is dedicated to my friend Linda Stainton, who consistently helped me keep perspective on what is important in life.
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1. **Architecture of Landing**

In what I will refer to as an ‘architecture of landing,’ a site of transportation, three platforms are layered inside a lightweight, upright and irregular enclosed structure with sloping sides and roofline. Water is the primary element here, with a floating stage for the visitor to traverse from one point to another. The shelter surrounds this active floor, set into a fluid surface, defining a space not only through the movement of visitors within, but also by a set of relations in which image and actuality, fixity and mobility, private and public demonstrate that the entire body and its psychology are engaged.

*Figure 1. Site*

Note. Author, 2011, Personal photograph

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1 The landing is a term that was used in ancient Greece to describe theatre landings (Atajw^ara or Pracinciones) that divided upper and lower tiers of seats and served as passages from side to side. In respect to architecture, the term landing also refers to a platform, in particular the ‘halting-place between two flights of stairs’ (Encyclopedia Britannica).
This space can be described in relation to what surrounds it (see fig. 1), a site offering an *extensive* experience, as the percipient is invited into a haptic and kinetic relationship looking out to the surrounding environment; this in turn brings forth a mixture of memory, association, and emotional charge for the percipient. After all, sites of transportation are places not only from which one takes off, but also where being is reconstituted. A temporary contact zone for a new experience can be created through the interpretive skill of the viewer, presented with sensory information that opens up new levels of cognition, forms of sensory cognition that underlie aspects of experience and supply us with the knowledge of what we see as our reality.

Unrelenting exposure to psychic shock is a reality of urban life; this effect also veils our senses of the *real*. I want not only to articulate how self-conscious movement in space can transform our ability to understand reality, but also to register how spatial reality brings forth an animated dialogue between material, body and mind, concerning sensibility, identity and cognition. It seems fair to ask how it might be possible to propose a space that persuasively establishes our most intimate sensory contacts, while generating a new understanding of urban spatial experience.

Space in an extended sense of the word is not only a place for passing impressions, but also an active, changeable environment. One way of starting to get a grasp of the effects of spatial reality is to discuss mobilization in regard to space, through which meaningful connections are formed for the subject. Ideas of spatial realities emerge from contrasts between existence *within* space, affecting both subject and object, and space as *becoming*, through mobile relationships between subjects and
materials. Space is a product of social interaction, in Henri Lefebvre’s sense (PS 110); Walter Benjamin’s understanding of space within modernity also suggests the complex social relations that constitute collective living. For Benjamin, space in this sense exists in the interstices of experience and is at the threshold of what might emerge from one state of consciousness to another (AP 84).

I want to suggest that the work of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), and in particular Das Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project), continues to offer a complex methodology applicable to investigating issues of contemporary urban experience of space, particularly for my own work.

Informally associated with the Frankfurt school, Benjamin was not only a social and cultural theorist, literary critic, translator and essayist, but also a pioneering investigator of what came to be known as popular culture. The bustle of Parisian city life and its glassed-over spaces – the shopping arcades - seen through the eyes of a wandering solitary figure, are recurring themes in Benjamin’s writings. His descriptions of shopping streets, interiors, mirrors, railway stations and the like describe in depth the cultural structure of a city life, which many took to be the superficial spaces of the modernist metropolis, but which he understood as the actual\textsuperscript{2} coming into being of the history of a place, revealed through its material culture.

\textsuperscript{2} In Deleuzian terms, the ‘actual’ is a continuous emergence of potentiality into actuality. In this sense the actual is something that remains possible and fluid. On the other hand, something can be ‘virtual’ (and thus also real) without being actualized. Benjamin’s Marxist terminology is different, but it is interesting to note that ‘actuality,’ in a Benjaminian sense, is considered an Ereignis (SW 353), which translates into event or occurrence. Marxist thought distinguishes
The Arcades Project, Benjamin’s final work (1927-1940), represents a collection of notes, artifacts and reflections that may at first glance appear ordinary; but quickly these lively street impressions and architectural images elevate the ‘marginal’ in regard to modernity’s dominant trappings. Pointing to the chaos of modernity, Benjamin’s critical examination of metropolitan topography reveals a feel for life as it is lived out ‘on the surface’ of urban landscapes. A complex of social relations conjoined with material culture emerge as a kind of threshold: an interstice that floats up as a “transition revealing spatial consciousness from streets to underground” (Buse 54). Following Marx’s lead, Benjamin makes sense of the seemingly ‘magic’ traits of commodities and describes how advertisement generates invisible phantasmagoric passages and transitional spaces, which contribute to the structure of modernity. For Benjamin however, what the seeming magic of commodity culture is formed by habit. Habit, clouded by immediate hallucinatory attractions, numbs our senses into a monotonous state and leaves us out of touch with reality. For Benjamin, this is most noticeable in relation to urban space, which only can be “appropriated […] by us and by perception, or rather, by touch and sight (WA 240)”. Consequently, ‘threshold magic’ between sleep and awakening fractures modern space. “Each ringing of the doorbell” at this threshold penetrates the urban walker who experiences shock (AP 214). However, the arcades, as reality and illusion, where the latter is the alienated world of commodity fetishism, the former the actual world of economic and labor relations.

3 Phantasmagorias are the “century’s magic images” (AP 948) and are for the urban walker “verfremdet” or veiled with illusion.
a site between the “providential” and the “unpredictable”, uncover reality as a trace of what is repressed in urban experience (Patke 6,7). The revolving door—a rotating entrance—suggests the possibility of a critical relation between individuals and the spaces they pass through, bringing the percipient to potential consciousness of what may be regarded as her or his compromised situation within contemporary experience; this may emerge even in the slight dislocation provided by a moving door.

*Figure 2. Exterior of the Woodwards Arcade*

![Exterior of the Woodwards Arcade](image)

*Note. Author, 2011, Personal photograph*

Constructed early in the 19th century, arcades (see *fig. 2*) were glass-covered, marbled-floored passages cutting through entire blocks of houses, lined with shops, joining up with major streets. They were “without thresholds: a landscape in the round” (*AP 422*), where “doors and walls are made of mirror, there is no telling outside from in” (*AP 877*). “The path [one follows] in walking through the arcades is basically a kind of spectral walk, “on which doors give way and walls are insubstantial” (*AP 409*). The wings on the door are made of glass and the *players on the street* find themselves moving from
the ‘boulevard to the interior’. Their glass reflections present not only a dynamic mixture of objects and effects, but also the dialectical relationship between interior and exterior, light and darkness. The perpetual, unfolding urban site accumulates subjects and objects that constantly evolve and change through places that are appearing and disappearing. In this case, the movement of the urban wanderer encounters a city that is never complete: an emblem of the allegory of modernity. Lefebvre continues and suggests that “the most trivial object is the bearer of countless suggestions and relationships; it refers to all sorts of activities not immediately present in it” (*Dialectical Materialism* 128).

Walking in Benjamin’s arcades is like entering a panorama in which the visitor savors the illuminated streetlamps, the jostling crowd, and the steam engine’s sound. The glass-covered arcades predict a society captivated by perpetual sensation and

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4 Benjamin explains the dialectic relationship between interior and exterior in his essay ‘Louis-Phillipe or the Interior’ by pointing out the social dynamics of reality. Here, Benjamin’s ‘private citizens’ are capable of constructing an illusory atmosphere of permanence to ‘tweak the individual’s “account with reality”’ (Reflection 154). As a consequence, space considered as inside and outside, turns into a threshold between the private and public. Benjamin’s notion of the inside was an illusionary peaceful refuge for the domestic individual. Exterior space, on the other hand, reflects the bustling, modernized city streets and metropolis. The purpose of the bourgeois interior, Benjamin suggested, was to construct phantasmagorical spaces in where the modern man felt not only protected, but also shielded from the rupture and shock of modern experience. (AP 108).
experience where the organic motion of the interior becomes a driving force or motivation for participation and experience. A set of relations between objects and senses is put into action, becoming a paradigm of perpetual motion, merging movement, practice and meaning. As architect Frank Gehry suggests, “When I look outside the door what do I see? An airplane flying over, a car passing by. Everything is moving. That is our environment” (7). It is a setting in which the unfolding urban environment, like a revolving door, accumulates subjects and objects (see fig. 3).

**Figure 3. City Noise**

Note. Author, 2011, Personal photograph

Within Benjamin’s Parisian metropolis, “buildings are used as a popular stage […] divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theatres” (*OWS*). As Benjamin moves his readers gradually through the passages and transition places within the arcades, the urban walker moves “between the conscious world of city streets and the spatial unconscious of the Metro” (Buse 54). What persists in this passage through the confusion of the modern city is a series of shocking collisions (*SW* 328). For Benjamin, the modern period is filled with such incidents where “[a]t dangerous intersections,
nervous impulses flow through [the individual] in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery" (SW 328).

Benjamin’s arcades form a complex set of relationships within modern experience exemplified by spatial and temporal transitions: an increased isolation from reality (in the Marxist sense) in favour of an overload of information and sensation, which then provides the basic structure for experience. The normative tradition of spatial reality has the appearance of having been created on the basis of a pre-established template, through which we accept as true the things assembled. A critical kind of spatial experience, as a dynamic unfolding within the actual (where everything perpetually changes) may require the breaking of habit, in order to conclude with an immersive experience that can lead to an understanding of the actual social function of constructed space.

What I would like to ask in this paper is whether a space can be constructed that will unsettle these normative experiences, breaking routines of cultural “specularity” through which viewers have come to believe that they need only look to realize what a thing might mean. Whether the experience in this space acquires its meaning through visual stimulus or directly tactile ones is of lesser importance than consideration of the total kinesthetic experience and how it gives rise to reflective cognition. This leads to speculation on how one might ‘reconstruct’ actual space.

The relevance of Benjamin for my own work has to do with this idea of the overwhelming character of hegemonic consumer culture; this I believe separates us from coming in touch with our own sense of self and reality. The challenge one faces as an artist nowadays is therefore not only the typical one of how to reveal afresh the contours
of a contemporary reality that everybody already knows, but to create space in the age of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, where spectacle will no longer have the power to reify experience. What is produced, which connects the percipient to the world of material goods, is also what prevents critical distance on the same experience. This constant distraction interrupts the formation of a political conscience. To create a space of reflection, which has the potential to allow social clarity, becomes the goal of my work.

By extolling the art of ‘walking’ (*spazierengehen*) as an instrument of modern urban mapping, Benjamin maintains that the ‘true face of a city’ is revealed through a direct encounter with the urban environment itself (OWS 230). Already in 1847, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had stated, "I have walked myself into my best thoughts" (412). More specifically, space is ‘performed’ and ‘practiced’ through the ‘footsteps’ of those walking through a space (de Certeau 117). Walking, one can bring forth a brief opening onto the sum total of one’s own experience. Here Proust’s account of dipping a madeleine into linden tea or slipping on an uneven cobblestone comes to mind. Like those actions, walking acts as an antidote to the unified visual surface of the city and presents itself as a sudden experience, provoking personal memories. Proust’s involuntary memory presents itself as an explosive force, triggered by sensory input. The sensation translates into a physical reflex that interrupts the standard habitual consumption of the city streets and reworks the percipient’s senses. For Benjamin, “these images, developed in the darkroom of the lived moment are the most important we shall ever see.” [GS 2:1064].
2. Flâneurie

Brought back into existence with the rise of the modern city in the early 1920s, the solitary, observant, male flâneur quickly disappears into the urban streets and becomes a vehicle for not only observing, but also comprehending what surrounds them. While modern space surfaced as a site with little sense of direction, the immediate urban fabric comes into sight as a place where one is enticed by the *Lust am Schauen* (the pleasure in looking). The act of flâneurie, primarily regarded as an ‘optical experience of modernity’, is a venture in which the city becomes ‘strange’ to its inhabitants (Gunning 3). But the unruly streetscapes during the Weimar period emerge as a dynamic, fleeting sensory experience in which the urban walker, clocked with rhythm and sensation, is enticed to seek one stimulating experience after the next. In a typically Benjaminian fashion, the urban walker’s revolving vision gains a wider meaning: sensitive to marginal perceptions, it is an allegory for modernity, ‘capable of crossing boundaries, able to produce thresholds’ (*AP* 35). The metaphorical potential inherent in the mobile walker is

5 The figure of the flâneur emerges as an aimlessly wandering observer towards the end of the 18th century. Originally portraying a romantic, solitary character, he gets picked up by flâneur-poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) who transforms him into the "gentleman stroller of city streets" (Van Godsendthoven 2005). In the course of the ‘entre deux guerres’ (interwar period), the flâneur begins to share the streets with other *players of society* (such as noblemen, merchants, clerks, pickpockets, prostitutes, gamblers, thieves). In effect, he shifts away from being idle and adopts an utopian, apocalyptic vision. Since flâneur mainly refers to male members of society, I will refer to the *flâneur or flâneuse*, as urban walker, visitor or percipient. In French the act of flâneurie means ‘to stroll’ or to loiter.

6 The German word Schaulust (Scopophilia) was explained by Sigmund Freud’s as the active pleasure of looking (voyeurism) and the passive drive of being seen (exhibitionism).
her/his ability to move through and within space: to be “a mirror as vast as the crowd itself, or a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with each one of its movements represents the multiplicity of life and the dynamic grace of all life’s elements” (FST 33). Continuously in the transition between spaces and traveling, one discovers a new spatial awareness: a reality that exists in that motion between two spaces. In this sense, the moving body becomes its own cognizant vessel. It becomes possible to transform the relationship between viewer and environment, and ultimately venture into an uncharted ethical and political zone that acts upon and transforms the relationship the percipients have with themselves.

It is interesting to note that experience is often referred to in terms of movement; it is through movement that “experience” comes into being. For example, Benjamin’s arcades offer threshold experiences where one “feels like a child gliding through the house on its little chair” (Benjamin 13). Initially experienced by an over-stimulation of immediate visual perception, spatial reality comes into sight as a pre-established template. The critical potential in regard to motion here is that the traversing urban walker, as though touched by “[a] little heap of magnesium powder by the flame of the match” (OWS 342–43), has the ability to transform her/ his understanding of space. Enabled by motion, the urban walker is capable of filtering immediate sense impressions through the reflection of understanding. Benjamin proposes then a Vertovian experience where “within the chaos of movements, running past, away, running into and colliding, the eye, all by itself, enters life” (Vertov 5). Some theorists have gone so far as to compare the word Erfahrung to the German verbfahren (to travel) (Gilloch 143). When one considers the increasingly accelerated rhythms of modern, industrial life, the fascination with motion is not surprising. However to be accurate, the German word
Erfahrung actually translates into ‘having gained experience’. Then again, the ambiguity within modern experience is where one begins to move without knowing where one is going.\(^7\)

**Figure 4.** Charles Ray - *Ink Line* - Artwork Details at Artnet

Note. *Fine Art, Decorative Art, and Design - The Art World Online: Artnet.*

This is how one is drawn, for instance, to pay attention when viewing Charles Ray’s minimalistic installation *Ink Line* (1987) (see fig. 4). The apparent absence of

\(^7\) Central to this stance were the Situationists who replaced the ‘real’ and ‘original’ with "Where to? What next?" (Carl Sandburg).
movement in this artwork heightens our awareness of our immediate environment and we let ourselves be carried along. The reality between stasis and motion lines up as we are caught up in the *hypnotic effluvia* of the work, which releases a fluctuating tension rather than instantaneous shock. Ray offers space that becomes a perceptual and conceptual unpacking of the moment that fills the void. In search of the real, one forms a place of negotiation and chooses portions of reality to include in experience, and the renewed or accepted space becomes a central addition to the ‘actual.’
3. Experience

As the extreme experience of the Second World War and its catastrophic destruction brought about new forms of spatial awareness, the assessment of past static conceptions of reality was called into question. Driven by rapid shifts of technological development, the adoption of new materials, and the modernization of space (the need for housing, facilitation, etc), architectural and artistic practice broke away from tradition and evoked a new sense of space with an increased need for mobility. Postwar kinetic sculpture (such as the work of Jean Tinguely), Kaprow’s Happenings, the rise of artists’ performance work, and new architectural conjectures constitute a range of responses to this change. The modern world, which holds “places of passage and waiting” (Vidler 180), resulted in space defined not only by movement where activity happens, but also by social practice. The objective of Surfbox is to assess the crossover between technology, an area that is currently experiencing an astonishing and extended period of rapid development and change, and the urban experience, an area that is at once in flux, wildly varied, and extremely personal.

Lefebvre developed an innovative theory of space, inspired by the economic analyses of Marx, in which Lefebvre recognized the importance of social practice in
relation to production.\(^8\) Social relations, in Lefebvre’s view, are an assembly of actions within perpetually unfolding spaces that give a sense of lived experience (\textit{PS 104}).\(^9\)

Thus space “exists in a social sense only for activity - for (and by virtue of) walking... or traveling” (\textit{PS 191}). Similarly to Benjamin, Lefebvre conceptualizes social space as active and inseparable from experience: in this sense, social space emerges as a spatial practice that produces and reproduces that space. Lefebvre’s urban wanderer does not walk the streets alone; space evolves in constant interaction with its inhabitants. What is real here is the continual change of form, the motion and energy produced by physical reality and social relations. In the terms of Henri Bergson, reality is movement and “form is only a snapshot view of a transition” (\textit{Creative Evolution} 328). Experience in this framework is being and doing: it is “a means of living in that space, of understanding it, and of producing it” (\textit{PS} 47–48).\(^{10}\) Already we can make a connection to Benjamin’s flâneur who, when deciphering city life as a restless spectacle, takes part in “something experienced and lived through” (\textit{AP M1}, 5). Unlike Charles Baudelaire, writing in “The Painter of Modern Life” of late-nineteenth century modernity, who describes a modern subject relatively separated from social engagement, Lefebvre, writing in the mid-twentieth century, argues that space is a social form in which lived experience contains traces of human action. Chronologically between them, Benjamin argues for social subjects potentially alive to their own production of social relations. Benjamin’s account

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\(^8\) Lefebvre’s focus shifts from Marx’s economic sphere into a more active social one. Within a social space of cultural production, people de-alienate and act. (Vol. 2, 66).

\(^9\) Lefebvre considers space not only as a spatial structure or \textit{res cogitons} (outside of thought), but also as \textit{res extensa} (experienced, and in consequence, lived).

\(^{10}\) This leads back to Lefebvre’s interplay between the triad “perceived” (\textit{perçu}), “conceived” (\textit{conçu}) and the “directly experienced (or ‘lived’)” (\textit{vécu}) (246). Physically, mentally and socially produced by means of practices of day-to-day reality, it holds social meaning.
of ‘loss of experience’ in the modern world pays particular attention to the fact that experience is twofold: on the one hand fractured, reactive and transient (Erfahrung) (AP 838); on the other, an immediate or shock experience that splits from the actual experience in favour of sensation and information (Erlebnis) (SW 318). Benjamin’s reflection on Erfahrung offers a landscape where the percipient not only observes, but also feels and senses his/her transit through urban space. But in the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin points out, Erfahrung is no longer possible, as “the continuum of Erfahrung had already been broken by the unassimilable shocks of urban life” (Jay 49). Erlebnis, on the other hand, derives from the verb ‘leben’ which spells out ‘living.’ It suggests boundaries and thresholds mediated by relentless images that become a mode of dreaming, such that one must wake from the overwhelming experience of modernity (SW 343). Benjamin’s nineteenth-century interior foregoes ordinary experience in favour of a reality in which illusions are layered atop environmental stimuli. As the ‘box in the world’s theatre’ is filled up with phantasmagoria\(^{11}\) that ‘tweak the individual’s “account of reality” (Reflection 154), the real seems to depend on the imaginary and vice versa. One hesitates to be redundant in suggesting that these experiences apply a plurality of worlds. Employing the notion of phantasmagoria broadly to include the effects of technology and modernization, Benjamin considers an overexposed audience confronted with elements of shock\(^{12}\) to be a key element for bringing forth a ‘heightening sense of consciousness’ (WA 12). Modern subjects bracing themselves against the

\(^{11}\) Developing Marx’s notion on the ‘phantasmagorical powers of the commodity’, Benjamin connects this term with social perception. It portrays a world where “cracks appear in the commodity economy (PW 59).

\(^{12}\) For Benjamin, shock, which in its impact on the percipient, has a tactile effect and is “the very essence of modern experience” (Buck-Morss 130).
onslaught of perceptual stimuli, caught up in a series of collisions, only experience moments in passing without critical understanding. It is conceivable that as a dialectician, Benjamin views *Erlebnis*, “the phantasmagoria of the idler” (AP 801), not only as deadly, but also as providing the possibility of power and escape. To break through the modern, illusionary and transient world, Benjamin draws attention to the “optical unconscious”¹³ that gives rise to the possibility of new, non-alienated social forms and experiences. Thus Benjamin’s modern subject experiences things “in a state of flux, in motion, in ceaseless movement” (SS13), which - under the pressure of the optical unconscious - unfolds, resists and comes back into focus. A whole new mode of sense enters and the atmosphere becomes a doubling of a momentary state of doubt: awakening to what *is*, ‘what appears to be’ becomes the source material for a new understanding. It is living to the degree that, through striving expansion and self-transformation, one brings new experience and new possibilities to light in a critical way. As Benjamin’s ‘threshold walker’ moves through a labyrinth of commodities, he has the potential of insight through his actual action: the very dynamism of his movement alters his perception, but it becomes distorted (and loses its criticality) unless he is able to see through the city’s phantasmagorical character.

To contrast Benjamin and Lefebvre with Adorno is to proceed to Benjamin’s thought that one must establish distance when viewing modern life from more than one position. Benjamin’s correspondent Theodor Adorno (1903 – 1969) explains: in order to

¹³ In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin argues that “[t]he public is an examiner […] an absent-minded one” that filters social consciousness (63). In contrast, he observes, “mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye.”
recover experience, one should steer clear of identifying with the experience and should “step out” of one’s thought and attend to its likely conflicting meanings (Negative Dialectics 28). In a very dialectical sense, “A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them” (Adorno quoted in Heynen 148). A key element in Lefebvre’s production of space is also to remove oneself within spatial practice. A distant place, “[a] balcony, for example” (Rhythmanalysis 27, 28), becomes for Lefebvre a filter for magic and illusion. What I want to draw out here is a means of reviving a broader understanding of actual experience. Benjamin, agreeing with Adorno, underscores this by pointing out the temporal gap that underlies dialectical dream images (AP 943). As for him, “the caesura in the movement of thought” gives the potential for critical insight that arrives at “a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions” (AP 475).

Benjamin reports: “We have no idea at all about what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step” (SW 266). Thus Benjamin proposes that the optical flâneur/flâneuse or tactile collector is “like an augur [that] gets to look into the distance” (AP 858) and is capable of rediscovering experience by lösen (loosening) everything from its ursprüngliche Funktionen (original functions). The urban walker is confronted with a form of estrangement, but an estrangement that cannot be confused with alienation. A primary example from contemporary art is the ‘mind and body’ work of Canadian-based artist Mowry Baden, which presents itself as a brief opening or

14 Benjamin makes a distinction when referring to Entfremdung and Verfremdung. The first term is associated with his notion of alienation and the second merely refers to the false consciousness of the observer, who veiled by illusion cannot be objective.
invitation not only to challenge the viewer’s visual perception, but also to examine new possibilities in reference to a space whose very form is in motion. For example, Baden’s *Learning To Walk* (1976), a narrow, wooden pathway framed by upright dowels and an uneven floor, forces a shift in the percipient’s tempo, disrupting her/his kinesthetic expectation of horizontal and solid floors. In *I Can See the Whole Room* (1994) (see fig. 5), a fabric, aluminum and Plexiglas structure, Baden develops a strategy of unsettling the percipient’s expectation by undermining the distance at which viewers observe both themselves and what surrounds them within space. By using motion to disrupt the frame through which one experiences space and by using the body as a seismograph for expectations, ultimately Baden is continually reorienting the structure of space for the benefit of the percipient. Dislocated, the visitor becomes an active principle of the work, rather than separated from it.

**Figure 5.  *I Can See the Whole Room***

Note: Baden Mowry. Diaz Contemporary
4. Surfbox

Figure 6. Model of Surfbox

Note. Author, 2011, Personal photograph

Figure 7. Exterior of Surfbox

Note. Author, 2011, Personal photograph

Designed as a corrective to contemporary spectacle (see fig. 6,7) the experience of Surfbox begins with immediate kinesthetic activity, slowly settling into stillness. It is a somatic zone of acoustic and perceptual suggestion, directed toward presence in real time. Within these parameters, cognizance of the overall experience of a given space
not only becomes the central element within the formation of the ‘actual,’ but also allows
the recipient to actively unravel and reconstruct the ‘real.’

_Surfbox_ is constructed as an interactive installation. The visitor is invited to duck
down and step onto a ‘floating’ platform, which is surrounded by water and set inside the
aluminum-framed structure enclosed with sheet-metal panels. _Surfbox_ consists of three
layered platforms. Surrounded by a wooden tank-structure and filled 1/3 with water
(1326 l/kg), the first platform is the floor of the tank, which contains the water from a
hydraulic system and supports its weight. A waterproof membrane was applied to make
it watertight (see _fig. 8_). The second layer forms a base for the aluminum structure (see
_fig. 8_), which supports the sheet-metal lining. It is joined to the third stage, the actual
platform (see _fig. 9_), with various supporting mechanisms:

**Figure 8. Water Tank & Structure**

PVC circles, custom-made springs, and six one-foot-diameter gymnastic balls (see _fig.
9_). These are placed between the two floors, giving the platform the illusion of floating.
Hidden behind the structure inside the border of the tank, a small pump is connected to
a hydraulic system, pumping water to a sprinkler system on the roof.
The sheet metals act as a spatial buffer between the interior and exterior, as well as forming the major sound surface for the resonating droplets. My intention was to create subtle sounds and vibrations, a somatic zone of acoustic and perceptual suggestion, directed toward presence in real time. Light slots in the siding allow illumination inside the work and permit visual access to the surrounding architectural space. Physically, the structure has a single 90-degree angle (see fig. 10), with every other surface out of plumb and out of square. One corner declines to six feet; the highest point is seven foot eight inches, which includes the foot-high platform.
Stepping into Surfbox, the recipient gets the opportunity to actively unravel and to reconstruct the actual and the real, disentangling and re-enacting the one and the other. Within its parameters, the acceptance of the given space not only becomes a central element of the ‘actual,’ but also a passage, through which borders are not so much traversed as reconstituted and renegotiated (see fig. 11).

**Figure 11. Outside Surfbox 1**

![Image of Surfbox](image)

Note. Author, 2011. Personal photograph

“When I went in to the piece it was raining heavily outside, so I could hear the layers of water sounds separate and mix on the tin above me. Below me I felt liquid, unformed, malleable. And then the oddly angled vistas through which the sky is visible through grey tin. The entire stage yielded. There was a shift in motion.... I was very moved once I settled in... I think your piece is actually quite dramatic in a totally different way than we usually think of drama.” (qtd. in Anonymous Email. September 2011).
In this sense, motion is a form of understanding: when you move, your mind moves and becomes, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s sense, embodied cognition. For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual consciousness is embedded in the physical world, which for him starts with the body. No doubt, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of corporality links to his considerations of space, as for him relations between the inside/outside, the hollow/surface, and the visible/invisible are not static but continually in motion. Moreover, consciousness and reality merge and intersect with the visitor’s conceptual space: "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (273). Mobility also reminds us, in a Lefebvrian sense, of the social character of space. Lefebvre identifies the growing tension between viewer and spectacle as a means for filtering magic and illusion within spatial practice, and suggests that through the encounter of spatial practices, the visitor not only comes across resistance, but room to act is created, embedded in the ‘doing of life’ (PS 220). In Lefebvre’s sense, the fluidity of social space becomes parallel to moving through space. In a deeper Lefebvrean sense, space cannot be endowed with meaning until the mobile subject gets involved. By stepping into an environment, the visitor/ walker/ witness/ percipient frees herself, encounters, perceives, conceives,
mobilizes, and reconstructs the urban landscape. The productive power of spatial reality only surfaces in the metamorphic process once the percipient sets off, open to a potentially transformative experience that will assist, interpret, and construct the percipient’s *actual* world of the subject. Within is a give-and-take between possible and potential worlds, between the actual and the real. In this sense, moving has the possibility of redeeming alienated space. The visitor is invited to choose among sensations and to comprehend these ‘perceptions in the form of shocks’ (*AP* 132).

Within the modern world one finds oneself in perpetual motion; the movement of people and space still appears to be the common element to explain this fluidity. What interest me is that for Benjamin, it is this trace of the real that accounts for the ‘actual’ space. Conversely, Lefebvre foremost believes in the social use of space that includes active subject involvement. Yet both rely heavily on the bodily engagements in the material of the city, presented as an uninterrupted chain of production that ends with the city itself. The conscious shift from perceived to conceived space is made such that the inhabitant forms a place that announces the contraction between actual and spatial reality. In this sense, the sensible wanderer, when passing through a constructed reality, pieces together the emergence of an object-world. The reconfiguration of a new representational space becomes a condition of possibilities. Benjamin’s revolving door not only suggests a material threshold between interior and exterior, but also a place of transcendence and transformation, ensuring the continuous unfolding of space. In Lefebvre’s notion, the urban wanderer becomes a “mobile participant in dynamical flows” (Lynn 1988). Within the abundance of experienced moments of spatial reality, there is “the possibility […] of finding in each of life’s details the totality of its meaning” (Simmel 27). The threshold of the revolving door appears like a transition to what lies outside, or
what comes next. Once again, the imaginary is not so much a distorted reality as one that constructs the actual world. For me, as for Benjamin and Lefebvre, it appears that the productive power of spatial reality only surfaces in the metamorphic process where the urban traveler sets off and gives way to a potentially transformative experience. As the urban walker adjusts to the new reality, the previous reality becomes re-actualized through her and becomes, in consequence, sensible. Engaging the senses shifts the perceptual understanding of the percipient and offers insight into the practice of spatial reality.
5. Conclusion

However, as the earlier discussion shows, this sense of the social exists within a society governed by our contemporary modernity: global industrialism, commodity consumerism, mass media: Stimulation and sensation become intractable elements of urban, post-industrial modernity. A negative dialectic of shock emerges. The rhythm of modern life speeds up the process of sensation by penetrating the protective shield of consciousness. Mobility then becomes a form of critique of disconnection. Surfbox invites, and contains, both mobility and social consciousness. My hope for Surfbox Sitting on a Liquid Platform is that it create a space that is dynamic and capable of producing meaning for its percipients: a space whose form is simultaneously motile and static, creating effects for the viewer that cannot readily be assimilated into pre-established expectations. New relations of perception are staged for the viewer, such that memory and emotions may take hold and new fields of actions may be unlocked, suggesting a possibility for a critical relation between individuals and the spaces they pass through. The shelter becomes a space of reflection with the potential to (re)construct reality and permit a moment of social clarity.

The floating platform is where the visitor observes and senses. Considerably more than just a place of transport (or rest), it emerges as an objective puzzle. This translates into the visitor’s physical reflex (e.g. balancing, swaying), suggesting a shift in tempo and bodily sensation. The urgent need gives way to a more subtle openness to sensation. The visitor is invited to choose between sensations and to comprehend these
‘perceptions in the forms of shocks’ (WA 132). In this sense, movement itself invites the visitor to make an analysis based on individual impressions (Souriau 81).

**Figure 13. Rain from the Hydraulic System**

The inside of *Surfbox* is acoustically configured so that the sound of raindrops falling on the roof communicates something real and insistent (see fig. 13). Onlookers who choose to open themselves to the new environment immediately become engaged, and may lose the comfortably distance physical familiarity provides. In terms of generating a rhetoric of movement and bodily relationship, a tension is shaped against the normal order of bodily action, such as balance, resistance, and kinetic energy. Sudden changes of movement are brought into contradiction through abrupt repositioning and unexpected relocation within the space. Ultimately the platform destabilizes the structure of normative space to accommodate or induce the active participation of the visitor toward constructing meaning. This happens when the visitor is forced to abandon their passivity and to take an active role in shaping the outcome.
The experience of Surfbox begins as a visual perception that presents the non-linear structure of the work. Entering the space, the visitor has an anti-gravitational bodily sensation that proposes to upend and heighten our perception. Once inside, the experience switches from a mobile and transitory experience to an auditory and unstable one, eventually settling into a haptic understanding of the immediate environment. Thus we see the platform as a site that organizes ambiguity and contradiction to disrupt the visitor’s expectation using rhythm and motion. It produces a visual, kinesthetic, acoustic separation that offers a renewed and cohesive understanding of the site. The floating platform becomes a space where one sense is pulled into focus and the rest put out of focus.

In terms of its spatial elements, Surfbox plays with angles and manipulates the geometrical and temporal ordering of space. This is accomplished by defying normative assembly. As noted earlier, there is only one 90-degree angle in the entire piece. Elements like a stable ground or predictable angles have been deleted to redraw the user’s basic expectation of reality. Complementary to Benjamin’s notion of the ‘colportage phenomenon [within] space’, the visitor in Surfbox is required to slowly reorganize her sensory knowledge. This in turn allows a new understanding of spatial reality within constructive space.

Surfbox, from a perspective that neither negates nor embraces, but rather seeks the potential within given experience, suggests “a possibility at any moment of stepping

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15 A concept that Benjamin refers to the flaneur’s ‘basic experience,’ which heightens their perceptibility (gesteigerte Anschaulichkeit) and permits them to simultaneously experiences space (AP 418).
out of one’s limitation into freedom’ (Brücke und Tür 174). Freely entering as an osmotic agent, at play on the border, the percipient is available to any new understanding that a changed sensibility may create. The moving platform in Surfbox, initially experienced as shock, comes into conscious being through the collective involvement of human perception. Out of sync, the platform begins as a landing place, a station in process, which, once set free by the active motion and speed of the urban walker, assists the conscious and active remaking of the visitor’s immediate environment and consciousness. ‘Architecture of landing’ is then really a place of transformative passage, assisted by the platform; the landing is no longer a stable spatial divide, but shifts with the weight of the percipient to accommodate a move from one state of consciousness to another. In this sense the platform establishes itself as a functional tool consisting of a series of relations that solicit the sensory transformation within space for the visitor.
References


--- *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999. Print. This work is cited parenthetically as AP.


--- Simmel and Since: Essays on Georg Simmel’s Social Theory. London: Routledge, 1992. Print. This work is cited parenthetically as SS.


Appendix A. DVD: Surfbox Sitting on a Liquid Platform

Short descriptive video with images and footages from the making of Surfbox Sitting on a Liquid Platform

The DVD can be played on either a computer or a DVD player.