**Captured Atmospheres**
Rooms and interiors that tell a story in the absence of people

When people die, nurses sometimes believe that the soul of the dead person is still in the room. It’s not uncommon procedure that staff would open a window when a patient has died, to ‘let the spirit out.’

The artist Gregor Schneider, who conceives rooms as three-dimensional sculptures with psychological twists, spent some time experimenting with creating psychological experiences in already existing rooms:

*I had the feeling that I needn’t have built them at all. At the time the experiments I was doing seemed more logical: these involved going into a room, leaving it again, hoping that the experience would linger there and then inviting other people into that room.*

Can a room hold feelings and experiences after its subject has left? Could for example a scream be captured in a space? If you went into a room and gave off a loud scream and then left, could the scream somehow reside in the room? Would the next person to enter be able to hear or ‘sense’ the scream? And would it make a difference if the person knew of the ‘captured scream’ before they went in?

Where would these experiences, moods and atmospheres actually be captured then: Within the physical room or within the human psyche? Or perhaps within the *interaction* between the two?

Whether it is spatial, emotional or intellectual the human experience of different room environments is an intriguing matter. How do we actually experience spatiality and atmosphere, and could a room possibly have the ability to develop and hold atmospheres?

*In architecture atmosphere refers to the sensorial qualities that a space emits. Atmosphere is an immediate form of physical perception, and is recognised through emotional sensibility.*

What is it that essentially conveys atmosphere or mood of a physical room? Is it the meaning embedded in certain rooms and buildings, or the awareness of a place formed by memories, history, stories, experiences, feelings or images? Is it the sensations embedded in rooms, like smells, light levels, or temperature, that affect us? Perhaps it could be the interiors, the contents of the room like curtains, wallpaper, rugs or furniture that trigger feelings within the space. Or indications of people that were once in the room, furniture or objects made, used or placed there by them.

The chair is among those fundamental human objects that really echo the human body and speaks to us of human absence, as Alice Rayner discusses in her book *GHOST: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*:

*An empty chair speaks of a future arrival or loss: it anticipates the person who will sit; it remembers the person who did sit. A body leaves its imprint on the chair, which holds the memory of the body in place.*
Furniture, architecture and interiority seem to have an effect on us both physically and emotionally, perhaps even spiritually. Yet, a further aspect of the experience of rooms is the human movement in space. Inger Bergström, architect and writer, investigates this idea and explores how we talk about and describe rooms. Architectural forms can be described as aggressive or calm, colours as happy or cold, lighting as friendly, relaxed or active, and materials as warm, welcoming or dominant. Bergström argues that the details of the room, materials, colours and lighting arouse corresponding feelings within us:

We experience the room in relation to our body; we subjectify the room to understand it, interpret it and interact with it in the way we know best, in the way in which we interact with other human beings.  

Perhaps by allocating a room and its content as characters as if they were living beings, animating them through particular interiority, form and contents and controlled movements, we could design moods and atmospheres of places. In his study *Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics*, Gernot Böhme discusses how we experience forms and their effect on the room:

The form of a thing, however, also exerts an external effect. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and suggestions of movement.

Could some type of rooms capture atmospheres better than others? I wonder whether ‘more dramatic’ rooms could? Rooms with strong architectural character and intense interiors seem more stirring than the simpler, minimal design of which the art exhibition space, the white cube, is a prominent example. These rooms appear naturally loaded with meaning and history and thus seem to say more in relation to possible absences of someone or something that were once there. Furthermore, I find the ‘dramatic’ room particularly interesting if it has not changed for some time, if it has ‘stood still in time’. That type of room seems to somehow tell us the most regarding absence and emptiness with its ‘untouched’ indications and remnants of previous occupants.

It is fascinating how an atmosphere of an deserted room can have a particular effect on a visitor, create an experience and build suspense of that something has occurred or is occurring in the space, where actually ‘nothing’ is going on. That somehow the evasion of one presence creates another. Perceptions, memory, judgments and emotions of the visitor seem to create a narrative, or a reading of the room, and that the room might perhaps play on the awareness of something within the visitor itself.

Similarly, the empty room in the moving image seem to tell us stories in the absence of people. What is spatiality and atmosphere in the moving image and how are sensory perceptions induced in the medium of video and film?

As spatiality in the moving image is not as dependent on the body as the physical spatiality, the focus in video and film is essentially on the framing and editing of the image, along with sound and text to suggest a mood or an atmosphere in the space. Perhaps the moving image with its wide range of techniques – repeated imagery, dissolves, feedback, slow-motion time-lapse, zoom, sound effects, voice over and text elements – makes the experience of the atmosphere of the filmed room more prevailing than that of the bodily experience of a room?

Alice Rayner:

By failing to recognise the force of the technological apparatus, even though knowing it is formative, we are more easily seduced by the power of the image that has none of the
distractions or limitations of the real body.\textsuperscript{6}

Further, artist and filmmaker Eija-Liisa Ahtila, who predominately works with film installations, tells us how she works with both the filmed room and the physical room, to direct attention to the \textit{mood} of the work. How the story and the spatiality in her films are supported by the physical spatiality of her installations. Ahtila talks about the importance of the narration, both in her films and in her installations and to leave empty space for the audience to easily follow an idea and just \textit{experience}. The narrative here mainly stands for ‘the order’ of events, when there is ‘no point’ with the narrative it gives focus on the feeling or the atmosphere instead of a conventional story or plot.

\textit{I don’t want to make the situation confusing but direct all attention to the mood of the place.}\textsuperscript{7}

Perhaps the most pungent atmosphere is created between the narrative or the context of the work, and the image spatiality and the physical spatiality of the art installation? Equally contributing to the mood or the atmosphere of the work, where the viewer enter into an experience, where the space in the image and the physical space communicate the atmosphere of the same event or ‘story’, where the atmosphere perhaps \textit{is} the ‘story’.

\textit{The particular quality of a story, whether read or heard, lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself.}\textsuperscript{8}

The depiction of an experience is undoubtedly different from the experience itself. In the exhibition \textit{Life before Death}, the German photographer Walter Schels and journalist Beate Lakotta however seem at least to come close, through their photographic portraits of people before and after death, to communicate a compelling, mental and emotional mood of the space. The physical, bodily experience of moving between the large portraits in the room along with the short personal life stories, confronts us, and it is impossible to escape our own mortality. The portraits of these people at the end of their lives trigger a mood within the exhibition room and our psyche that seems to portray not just the dying process in the photographs but our \textit{own} dying too.

\textit{Art is dealing with these things you cannot reach.}\textsuperscript{9}

Essentially my practice looks at how we perceive, understand and relate to the world we live in, in particular existential life events that we might struggle to comprehend, explain or accept. How our understanding of the world and concepts of reality can be fundamentally challenged when for example experiencing a mental breakdown, death, spiritual enlightenment or a paranormal event. Experiences that seem difficult or impossible to comprehend and explain with conventional means and that tend to be more of a \textit{sensory} or \textit{psychical} experience.

The core of my practice is based around my interest in the above issues \textit{in relation to} atmosphere, spatiality and the psychology of space, and the possibility of rooms and interiors somehow communicating these feelings and ideas to us. How rooms are experienced by the mood transmitted within them. How rooms and interiors seem to tell stories about \textit{us} and to us in the absence of others; they talk about the passing of time, they deal with feelings and fears of being alone with oneself, and sometimes they even deal with feelings and the fear of dying.

Through experimenting with materials from ‘captured’ experiences of spaces, moods and extraordinary events, I develop atmospheric, investigatory video-installation works based on the interaction between the physical room and its interiority, the constructed installation, the
video image and the human psyche of the visitor. The objective is to create artworks that portray a particular atmosphere existing somewhere else and also evokes this atmosphere itself.

In the artist book part of this master essay I have tried to communicate precisely this interest, whilst presenting a collection of images, texts, quotes and thoughts that have interested and intrigued me and profoundly influenced my art practice.