

INVESTIGATIONS: BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

by ANNE WEST

In all our voluntary thinking there is some topic or subject about which all the members of the thought revolve. Half the time this topic is a problem, a gap we cannot yet fill with a definite picture, word, or phrase, but which... influences us in an intensely active and determinate psychic way. Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. To fill it up is our thoughts' destiny. Some bring us nearer to that consummation. Some the gap negates as quite irrelevant. Each swims in a felt fringe of relations of which the aforesaid gap is the term.¹

— William James

I'd like to offer myself as witness to a process in which a group of graduate students at Rhode Island School of Design pursued explorations of "the space between" in my seminar *Investigations: Betwixt and Between*. All entered this class knowing that the nature of this space was worthy of examination; that it could serve and nourish their practice as a zone for inquiry, inspiration, and translation. Through a close review of a repertoire of readings, and through sustained, facilitated interaction in writing and discussion, the class became a direct opportunity to deepen reflection and to integrate a personal perspective on the character of this space.

On an intellectual and emotional level, an exploration of the between is an abstract and mysterious process, yet on a formal level, it presents an opportunity for concrete and precise action. What follows are principles of inflection that map a pedagogy. I've structured these writings to include a concise view of students' process to show how they consider various forms, states, and contexts of the between.

Such a pedagogy is not merely a method; rather it is a path to awareness or, as architect and educator David Gersten points out, to spatial literacy: "There is no architecture without the humanities, there is no space without breath, voice, poetry."² It has far greater power expressed through the cultivation of perceptions, attitudes, and interventions that



are necessary to work effectively as a practitioner in the space between. What I observed in this community of inquiry, both in discussion and as the students read aloud their insights at the end of the seminar, was straight-ahead clarity for what matters for living in a habitable world.

I THE GAP

One must listen to space.

We gather a glimpse of what is experienced and absorbed through this practice of exploring the unscripted gap as Thomas Wilder, a graduate student in photography (MFA 2020), comes into attunement with the identity of a site: his studio space. For Wilder, this inherited workspace becomes a light- and texturally-sensitive surface upon which, and through which, he locates himself in the gap between perceiving and knowing. Through close inhabitation, and through the development and replication of images and gestures, he reveals what is latent in the myriad particularities of the studio. A path of light caused by the artificial light from surrounding buildings comes to life, as both phenomena and document, after dark. A palimpsest of scuff marks tracking movement across the threshold returns to the threshold as a single image.

Wilder brings to awareness multiple thought processes subtly archived in the walls: an index of in-

tentional, shifting or misplaced calculations as previous artists worked out the display of their work for review. These spectral presences come into visibility as singular moments yet also in indeterminate replications in space intimately connecting us to undocumented narratives. In the art of photography, aren't all images evidence of transient phenomena stilled through exposure? Wilder's insertion in space as an observer involves a temporality in *medias res*. And, as he comes into relation with the experience of presence and absence, we discover through the traces, a new composition emerging in the gap. Here the potential of his work links us to a fresh perception of space as an interval in the flow of both light and shadow.

II A LIMINAL CONDITION

It inspires us to a great sense of care and responsibility toward self and others.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's "communitas"³ and physicist David Bohm's articulation of dialogue⁴ helped graphic designer Elaine Lopez (MFA, 2019) uncover the driving force behind her empathic design practice.

A brief synopsis of the writings of Turner and Bohm may help to provide context for an understanding of Lopez's work on human interaction.

Victor Turner offers a perspective on the "between"



as a liminal condition — a real or symbolic threshold. It is a space in which society can take cognizance of itself. To enter this space requires a break from structure and a stripping away of hierarchies. When under this condition, one can never be too parochial as it alters understanding in relation to others, place and time, which in turn feeds the spirit of communitas or social interrelatedness. Turner asserts that cultures suffer without communitas; this time without structure nurtures the potential for a higher pitch of self and social consciousness.

David Bohm adds to an understanding of the potential of the space between as one for dialogue (dia—through and logos—meaning of the word). Dialogue, in the Bohmian sense, is a free-flowing stream of meaning between individuals, which in turn leads to a broader understanding. As we grow beyond our tendency toward proclamation, through practices of deep listening to one another and in an authentic exchange with our curiosities and the deeper questions in our hearts, we become changed. New potential for communication opens, which in turn leads to community.

In her project, *Hot Air*, Lopez uses the platform of design to highlight these relational concerns, asking us to look at the tense boundaries that emerge when competition defines an encounter rather than dialogue. Framed as an interactive workshop, two participants are invited to select balloons of their choosing and to insert and inflate them in a transparent, acrylic box. Each balloon, marked by a specific color, becomes a character in the scenario. As each balloon grows in size within an

individualistic power play, the participants become obscured from sight. The dynamic ends when one balloon bursts. In this non-dialogic space, no one sees the other, no one is listening.

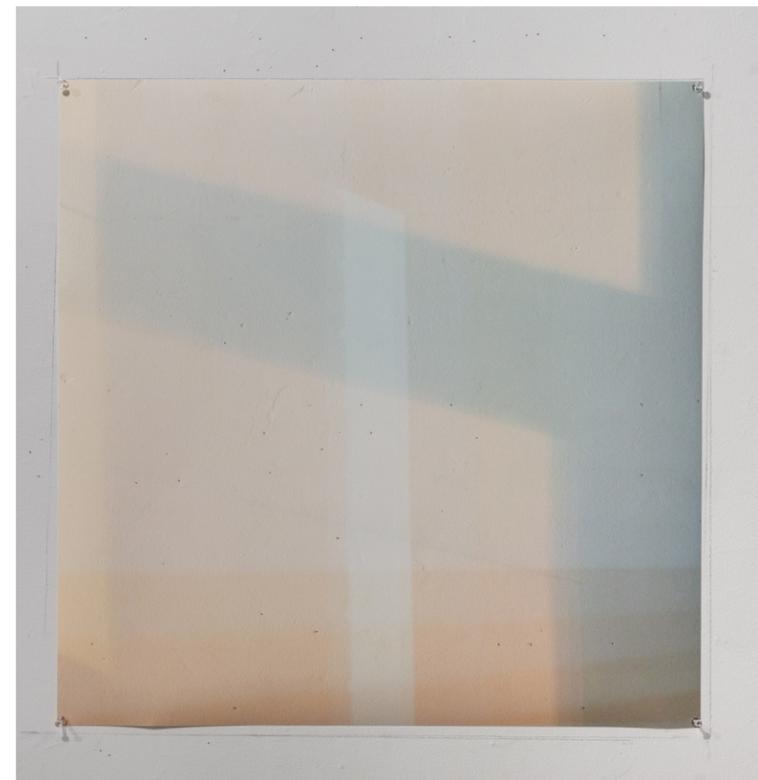
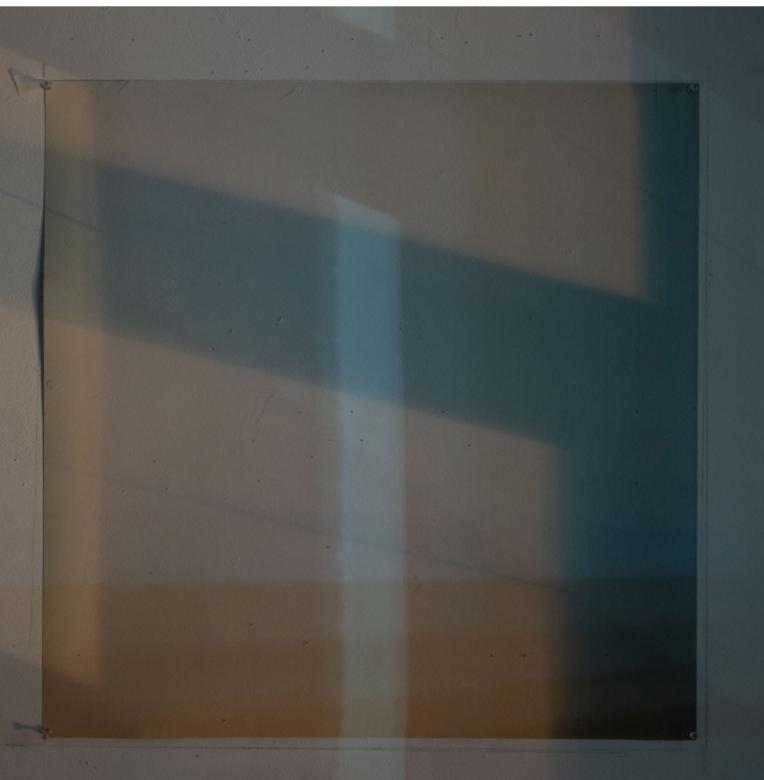
Since the emphasis of her work is on building conditions for empathy with perspectives other than our own, dialogue is essential. Lopez understands (and asserts through her work) the importance of keeping access between individuals open, which involves a constant inner and outer motion of building connection through awareness of another's condition. In the free-flowing stream of meaning in the space between, communitas becomes possible.

III DOUBLENESS

Introducing into play the duality of the liminal condition coaxes the living tension alive in the work.

One of the exercises that I give the students is to explore the double nature of their work. According to French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, things that matter happen along binary lines.⁵ In other words, everything has a built-in dichotomy. Familiar to our daily life are dualities such as night and day, moist and dry, open and hidden, order and chaos, for example. In one of our writing exercises, we record the binary pairings that appear in the work and then we move toward an understanding of how they play out as a discernible design language.

Anna Albrecht, a graduate student in Interior Architecture (MDes, 2019) discovered her design process in the between. With an eye to her graduate thesis, she





had for some time felt an inexplicable draw to a series of abandoned fire stations in the Allegheny Mountain region of West Virginia. These towers, which she refers to as “super-terrestrials”, are set deep in the Monongahela National Forest, requiring on-foot access. Her desire was to develop a spatial design that realized her infrastructural dream of bringing reliable broadband internet to people of this region.

Despite a restless nudge over several months, she was unable to lay down the conceptual particulars of a design scheme. A reservoir of understanding emerged for Albrecht when she was asked to investigate the double nature of these towers. Only by paying attention to the paradoxes expressed in their pronounced verticality, uncanny form, materiality, and location did the unique character of this site come forward. Exploring the liminal condition of these towers opened awareness to the contradictory imperatives expressed between lightness and solidity, earth and sky, mundane and sacred, progress and wildness, connected and empty, grounded and sublime.

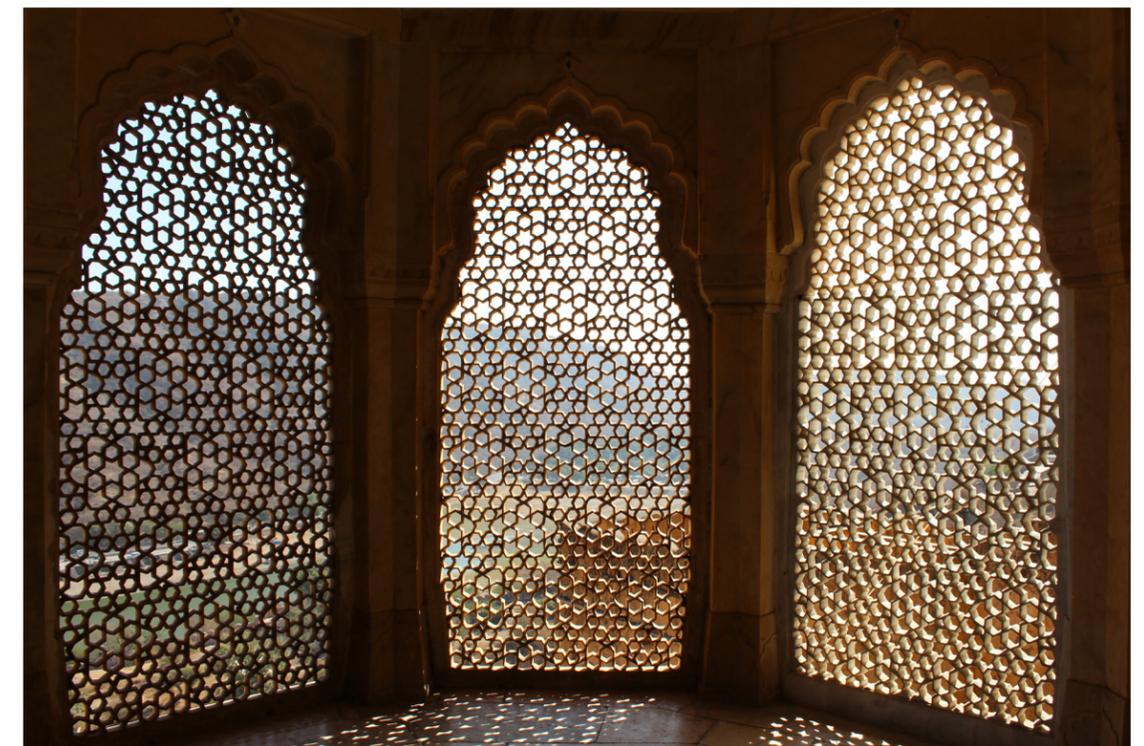
The towers have a web-like structure with ample negative space, yet they are also massively solid, weighing between 6,000 to 18,000 pounds. They are set deep within the forest, yet pierce the tree canopy reaching into the open sky with generous panoramic views. From a “both and” perspective, her design invites trekkers to hike to a tower for a private sleeping quarter. Yet in this

silent refuge in nature, they find the terms of community as both through communal internet and the infinity of the night sky. As Albrecht writes, “Trekking who undertake this route, while walking for their own reasons, will come upon a tower after a day of private rumination, only to become overcome with a sense of wonder.”⁶ From this elevated platform, one is launched into the silent, deep space of darkness.

IV THRESHOLDS OF THE BETWEEN Liminality is a threshold condition.

Whether outside looking in or inside looking out, the condition of the threshold involves complex connections with space and phenomena where specific qualities of material, light difference, and elements of time come into play.

IntAR graduate Rhea Roy Thomas (MA, 2019) maintains that to consider the threshold from the perspective of architecture adds meaning to movement as well as clarity to how spaces should be interpreted and used. In exploring numerous variations of threshold forms, Thomas was able to understand ways of linking and separating spaces, mediating movement from very public to private. In assessing the movement from one spatial status to another, she explored how interior worlds associate and open to adjacencies affecting user experience. Defining elements such as doors, arches,



A Jaali wall at the Amer Fort, located in the city of Jaipur, Rajasthan, India



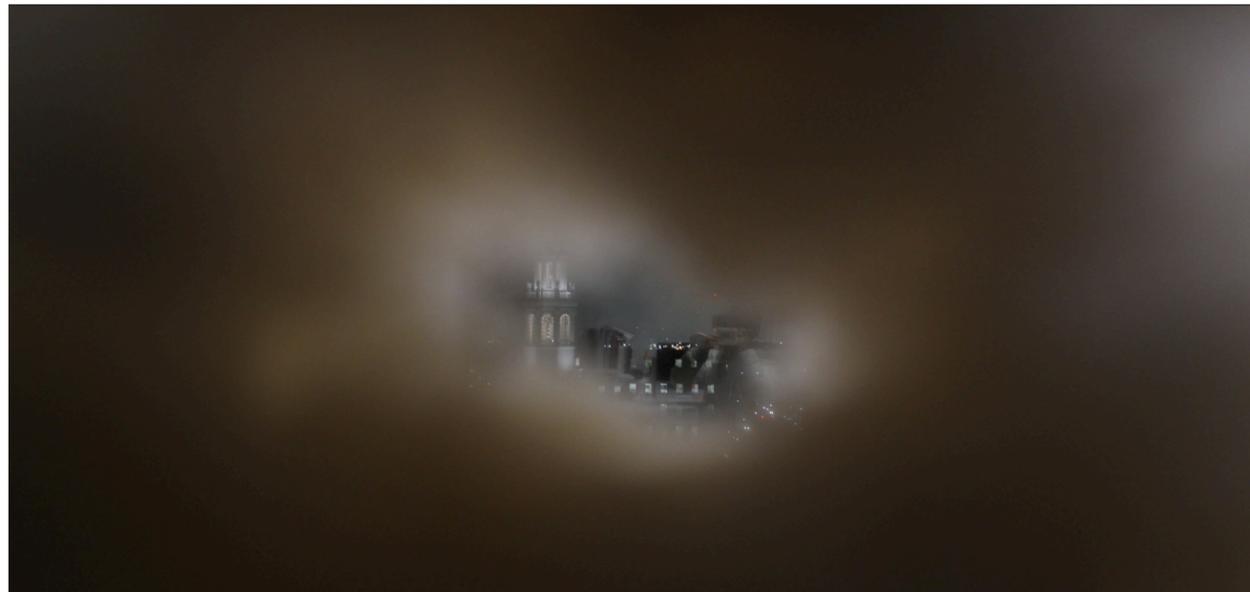
dividing walls, columns, and screens were considered, as well as degrees of opacity and position. For example, with a more opaque threshold, comes a more abrupt transition. Open thresholds with more ambiguous boundaries allow a free-flowing movement.

Highlighted in her study, as a strong example of threshold form, is *jaali* (meaning “net” in Hindi) which appears in Indian architecture. According to Thomas, *jaali* decoration allows both privacy and publicness. With many small perforations in a stone wall or as latticed screen, a boundary is created that gives interiority an external presence by allowing eternal elements of light and heat to pass through. Through *jaali* holes from within, everything outside is visible, but from the outside, nothing is visible due to the light difference. The cuts reduce the glare but allow for illumination, without affecting the intensity of the light. These walls or screens provide varying degrees of transparency and opacity and are climatologically suitable for the hot and humid Indian climate. In Thomas’s words, “*Jaali* achieved the glamor of glass with an uninterrupted view with aesthetic grace as well as environmental management—all within socio-cultural denominations of privacy and security.”⁷

V BECOMING THRESHOLD

It opens us to something immeasurable, to what may exist outside human knowledge.

A threshold represents a transitional passage, moving from one state to another. It is neither here nor there. What is known falls behind as we go beyond a previous order, into a new perspective, a new structure of thought, a new process perhaps. It is important to note that our emotional and perceptual interactions during this



BOTTOM
Zhiqing Guo, *Senseutopia*, 2019,
Digital photograph

TOP
Zhiqing Guo, *Senseutopia*, 2019,
Daisy petals, wool felt, canvas petals,
candlestick



liminal state have a precise form of understanding; they carry a level of depth.

With her focal device *Senseutopia*, 2019, Jewelry and Metals student Zhiqing Guo (MFA, 2019) asks us to become aware of her felt experience of seeing. With this device, she engages with the psychological and poetic inflections that emerge between self and space as we look into the boundless emptiness of sky. In this limbo state, there is only the subtle play of light that activates a sight threshold. Devoid of gravity, yet tethered to the intimacy of the body, we see augmented transparency, holding empty air. And it is precisely in this emergence of awareness that Guo understands that she is in a state of being within exteriority. Through the sensing bridge of her device, we are given a sublime launch into reverie. Boundaries become porous.

“My work is born in an invisible between space—a placeless place that offers itself as a translucent layer of the space in which I live. It seems true somehow as it appears in front of my eyes but then disappears. Always fleeting, I do not have enough time to perceive it or even to speak out...The space I am trying to articulate is the most familiar unknown. It’s evanescent with an unstable sensuous boundary. That familiar unknown space is the presence in my work.”⁸

Conclusion

To occupy “the space between” demands a perceptual orientation where we pay close attention to the spatial environment and to the relational nature of experience. We are present in our perceptions and in our lives fully as we become alert to what are we opening into. The transformations that we generate in the work—whether an object, architecture, or design initiative—we also generate in ourselves. It is this deeper responsiveness

LEFT
Gonzalo Nuñez Galetto, *Transmission*
#14, 2015, Acrylic and oil on wood panel
9 X 9 inches



and sensitivity within the liminal condition that is, in fact, fundamental to our humanity. To reach an understanding of this condition means becoming liminal ourselves.

Gonzalo Nuñez Galetto (MFA, 2020) offers this reflective summary:

“It’s a fluid, adaptive process of continually emptying out, responding to conditions, and coming into collaborative participation with others that invites listening, observing, and intuiting in different directions...The complexity for interaction and possibility for complication grow even larger when one considers living environments and the diverse forms of sentient life that also occupy these spaces.”⁹

ENDNOTES:

- 1 From William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), as quotes in Laing, Katherine Knight, 259.
- 2 David Gersten, email message to author, February 10, 2019.
- 3 Victor Turner. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, 1975, 231-271.
- 4 David Bohm. *On Dialogue*, Routledge, 2014.
- 5 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). Levi-Strauss extended the ideas of binary pairings to anthropology, in such oppositions as nature/culture, raw/cooked, inedible/edible.
- 6 From class writing exercise, Anna Albrecht, RISD, 2019.
- 7 From class writing exercise, Rhea Roy Thomas, RISD, 2019.
- 8 From class writing exercise, Zhiqing Guo, RISD, 2019.
- 9 From class writing exercise, Gonzalo Nuñez Galetto, RISD, 2019.

RIGHT
Gonzalo Nuñez Galetto, *Transmission*
#19, 2015, Acrylic and oil on wood panel
9 X 9 inches