

[Sur] face: The Subjectivity of Space

Figure 1. col Fay, *[Sur] face* (2011). Interior view of exhibition capturing the atmospheric condition of light, space and form. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

In this article, I discuss the public installation *[Sur]face*, held in 2011 in the Dunedin School of Art Gallery, with regard to contemporary interdisciplinary practice and its engagement with modernist practices. It employed the language of architecture, through concepts of façade, decoration and threshold, in relation to notions of the body. Here I emphasise how light was addressed in the exhibition as liminal space. The term liminality, originating in the Latin for “threshold,”¹ is used in this context as a term to link ideas about the relationship between body, architecture and surface, and in so doing marks the juncture between one condition and another, a potential space. Architecture, for example, addresses this notion of “in between”² at the threshold of a building.

By utilising the topography of the gallery wall, ideas of erasure were investigated through the interrogation of the wall as a surface. Its whiteness provided a platform for viewing, as the artwork was made obvious in contrast to it. Painted white, the gallery wall removed suggestions of context, much like the notion of liminality in a psychological sense. Through notions of decoration, the parallel between the body and architecture epitomises a modernist model of looking—a purifying process. Attaching visual elements to a surface is suggestive of a decorative approach. It attends to the



Figure 2. col Fay, *[Sur] face* (2011), detail of hidden text meeting body. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

visibility of the social body while masking the physical body of the gallery space; the artwork, and in this case the body, becomes decorative, ornamentally staining the pure surface of the gallery wall and confusing the form.

Around the installation, the room was filled with pools of light infusing the space with a soft glow. Viewers were encouraged to move through a perceived empty space to a mirrored form on the periphery, thereby unconsciously activating hidden messages.

Although light as liminal space is not a space with boundaries, it is the locus for transformations, a space of becoming. This concept lacks a fundamental form or identity because it receives its form from elsewhere; it is defined through the relationship of binaries and dualisms. The liminality of the surface suggests that the inscribed surface of skin—that which transliterates social messages—is receptive and allows for interchangeable linkages to be made with other bodies, both inanimate and animate. While these interactions occur on the surface, they are not superficial. They form an interior, a depth or consciousness. Text has been used subliminally to mark the body in a performance marked by duplicity, an interchange of appearance and concealment.

Light carries the mechanics of disclosure by operating as a transitional zone, inserted into the gap between structure and decoration, an interface that supports the inscription of the body, enabling it to perform in a social context. The idea of an intangible substance made visible through the interconnectivity of body meeting surface is investigated in this spatial construct using light. Objects occupying this visual space have the immediate effect of “ornamentally staining” that surface through being made visually obvious by it.



Figure 3. col Fay, *[Sur] face* (2011), detail exploring consciousness of seeing and been seen. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

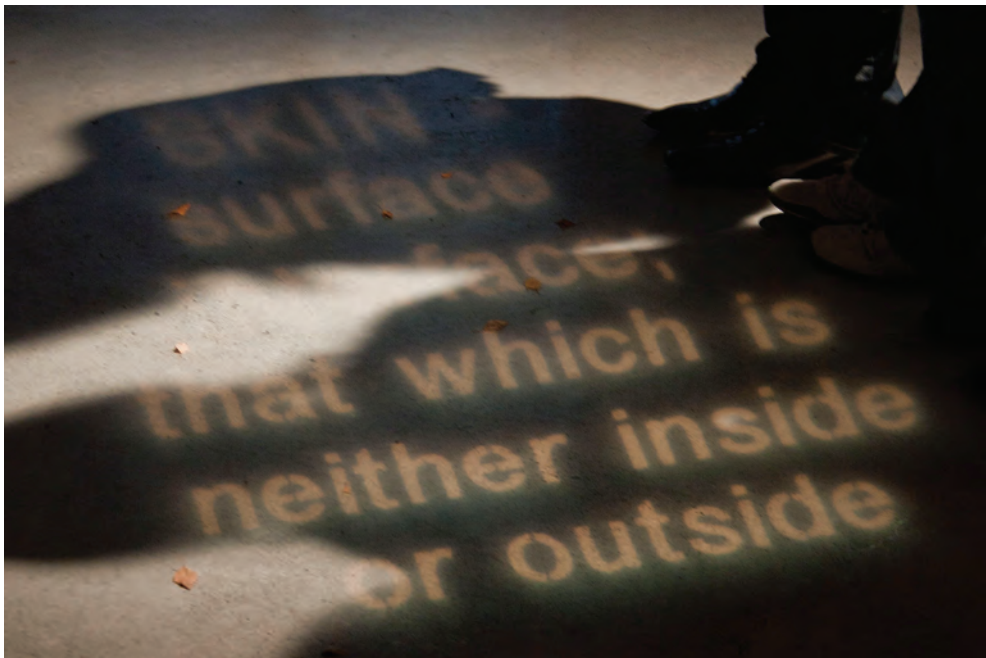


Figure 4. col Fay, *[Sur] face* (2011), detail showing text appearing when connecting to the body. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

At the point at which interiority³ moves from a spatial condition to a sensual one, it goes beyond vision to include the phenomenological experience.⁴ This condition conceptualises the interior as a place where the experience of space is activated. The idea of seeing meets the idea of touching. Touch returns us to *[Sur]face* as a meeting point, a suggestive boundary of connection between touch and trace. Touch imparts an impression, leaving a temporary mark on the surface of the body as evidence.

Conceptually, the architectural envelope of the exterior is articulated as a porous membrane that promotes fluidity between the body and the environment. The façade, the outermost layer of a building, poses as a mask and performs a reflective articulation of an interior state, or disguises it. This positions the façade within a relationship between external and internal spaces.



Figure 5. col Fay, *[Sur] face* (2011). Exhibition entry via public carpark. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

The exhibition explicitly explored the modernist ideal of pure space. Entry via a secondary door accessed from the car park (Figure 5) was intentional in order to accentuate the condition of being both inside and outside. The architectural practice of extending the threshold through the use of corridors and pathways was thus elided. This treatment of the threshold unnerves the body, as visitors feel cheated of the sense of preparation that normally occurs when moving between spaces. The experience of liminality is removed as the body becomes aware of already having passed a point of transition, unaware and unprepared. What viewers experience is the impression of a room laid bare, empty, devoid of decoration. Any sense of comfort that might have come from the notion of being inside and sheltered was experienced as the direct opposite—outside and exposed.



Figure 6. col Fay, *[Sur]face* (2011), detail showing text written on the body through liminal qualities explored through light. Photograph: Emily Hlavac-Green.

This duality posits a tension on the surface of the body. As the body moves through space, light provides the surface of readability and works as a transitional zone or membrane, an interface between the object and the subject. As a consequence, the body is marked by this socially constructed effect; it is constrained by the conventions of the language within which it appears. In this sense, the body may not appear to be a free expression of “self,” but rather a constructed expression constrained to perform in the social context in which it finds itself. The skin that has been inscribed is both connected and separated from the body by means of decoration, an ornamental staining contained within the purified space of the gallery.

[Sur]face acts to address the subjectivity of what constitutes an inside/outside dichotomy of architecture and the body, and underlines the interdisciplinarity of contemporary practices that challenge traditional paradigms.⁵

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1. A term widely used by social anthropologists, here I use "liminality" to refer to the ritualistic notion of stripping the body of all prior social markings in order attain a new "skin," conceptually presenting the individual body as invisible, a non-entity—un-inscribed and in transition. The relationships created between the human body and architecture through the notions of ornamentation and modernist concepts of decoration are discussed in col Fay, "cite/sight/site," unpub. MFA diss., Dunedin School of Art, 2011.
2. Concepts of "in between" space are discussed by Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 57-108. See also Georgina Cole, "'Wavering Between Two Worlds: The Doorway in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," *Philament*, 9 (December 2006), 18-37.
3. Christine McCarthy, "Toward a Definition of Interiority," *Space and Culture*, 8:2 (2005), 112-25. For an analysis of modernist practices that incorporate an inside/outside dichotomy, see Fay:2011.
4. For an understanding of phenomenology in terms of ideas of the architectural experience of space as something that is tasted, memorised, measured and seen by the body as a whole embodied experience, see Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses: [Polemics]* (London: Academy Editions, 1996). See also idem, "An Architecture of the Seven Senses," in *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, eds Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa and Alberto Pérez-Gómez (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2006), 28-42.
5. While credited to photographer Emily Hlavac-Green, the images reproduced here are the sole property of the author col Fay and full permission to use them in other contexts is hereby given.