

Can some art installations be considered to generate sacred place? Three installations in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.

By Stevi Gaydon

This paper considers the question of whether art installations can generate sacred space. It draws on the work of a number of theorists, including, Belden C. Lane, Mircea Eliade, Émile Durkheim, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and David Abram. It also reports on research conducted into the potential of art installations to generate sacred space which focuses on personal experience of three installations in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern; Louise Bourgeois's Maman, Olafur Eliasson's The Weather Project and Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds. Definitions of sacred place are diverse: they include an experience of the numinous, a sense spirit and/or connectedness, story, symbol and ritual. In different ways, each of the three installations was experienced as a sacred space. As the artists themselves do not seem to have intentionally set out to create a sacred place this suggests these experiences were, at least in part, a personal construct. However, this only seems to explain one ingredient of the experience and the paper concludes that sacred place is more than a human construct alone.

Introduction

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The artist, Wassily Kandinsky argued that the spiritual was an essential part of an artist's work; he thought if inner meaning was neglected, the result

was a 'vain squandering of artistic power.'¹ He argued that an artwork was born of the artist in a mysterious and secret way and 'good art' had a material and spiritual 'purposeful strength' that had the power to create a spiritual atmosphere.² He believed the *Stimmung*, which Michael Sadler translated as 'sentiment,' 'feeling' or 'essential spirit', of an artwork, could deepen and purify the *Stimmung* of the spectator.³ Artists may have a variety of different intentions for their art but Tim Ingold argued that some art is able to invite the viewer to join the artist on an unfolding journey in which neither is bound to the artist's original intention.⁴ This journey therefore, based on Sadler's arguments, has the potential to be sacred. This paper investigates whether, on those occasions, the exhibitions/installations could be described as sacred places. This notion will be discussed with reference to literature about sacred space, art reviews and the research into experience of three installations in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern; Louise Bourgeois's *Maman*⁵, Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*⁶ and Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds*⁷. The first part of this paper is concerned with the methodology followed, the use of 'place' rather than 'space', defining sacred place and an introduction to some theorists' views of sacred place. The second section reports on the research into personal experience of the three installations.

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art', (1914). <http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/phil%20of%20art/kandinskytext2.htm> [accessed: 4 December, 2013], Part 1, I Kandinsky's Introduction, accessed 4 December, 2013

² Kandinsky, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art', Part 2, VIII Art and Artists, accessed 4 December, 2013.

³ Kandinsky, 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art', Part 1, IV The Pyramid, accessed 4 December, 2013.

⁴ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), p. 216.

⁵ Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 2000-2001. Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625>, accessed 1 December, 2013.

⁶ Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003-2004. Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 1 December 2013.

⁷ Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010-2011. Tate Modern, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 1 December, 2013.

Methodology

The research will be experiential. This necessitates moving between an objective perspective and a description of my own experience. In the latter, I intend to take the work of David Abram and Tim Ingold as the basis for my approach to ensure that my subjective observations are honest, relevant and concise.⁸ As I am basing some of my arguments on my own experience, complete objectivity is impossible which means, as Jo Pearson said, 'it is necessary to apply a rigorous self-reflexivity in order to bracket off personal beliefs and values.'⁹ Pearson argued that the 'insider' researcher can maintain a deep understanding and be both 'distant' and 'involved' as a researcher, by using correct methodology and constant reflexivity.¹⁰ This is the approach I have adopted.

My background is relevant as I am using phenomenology and being self-reflective in this research. I am a woman, born in the UK of Irish parents in 1953, I have been visiting art galleries fairly regularly (about a dozen times a year) for more than thirty years. Although I have never studied art and make no claims to be any kind of critic, I enjoy the whole experience of going to an exhibition or installation, often finding that the art moves me emotionally and in some cases it prompts me to change my perspective, to see something differently. My visits to these three exhibitions took place between 1999 and 2010 when I was between the ages of forty six and fifty seven.

Sacred Place

The word place, rather than space, has been used in this paper. In Tilley's opinion, 'space is a far more abstract construct than place,' he argued that space

⁸ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 3-4; Ingold, *Being Alive*, pp.30-32.

⁹ Jo Pearson, 'Going Native in Reverse: The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca,' in *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, edited by Elisabeth Arweck and Martin Stringer (Birmingham: University Press, 2002), p.106.

¹⁰ Pearson, 'Going Native in Reverse: The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca', p. 109

derives its meaning from places for which it provided the context.¹¹ According to Yi-Fu Tuan 'space lies open ... it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed. Enclosed and humanized space is place.'¹² Aristotle (c. 384 – 322 BCE) and Plato (c. 428 – 348 BCE) had differing views of place. Aristotle saw place as *topos*, a neutral container which remained the same across space and time and geography. He said place was necessary for things to exist, that 'the innermost motionless boundary of what contains is place.'¹³ In contrast, Plato considered place to be *chora*, energetic and powerful, he described it as 'the nurse of all Becoming.'¹⁴ Tilley agreed, arguing that knowledge of place arises from human experiences, feelings and thought and that the meaning of place comes from that lived experience or from existential human consciousness of it.¹⁵ Hence it is human consciousness that creates the limits (or otherwise) of place. Place, he concluded, can have 'distinctive meanings and values' for people.¹⁶

In turning to the notion of the sacred, Rudolf Otto described the holy as numinous (from Latin, *numen*, Deity or Divine). He said it presented itself as something 'wholly other' in which the experiencer felt 'utterly abashed,' he argued the experience was both terrifying and fascinating.¹⁷ For J. Donald Hughes and Jim Swan sacred space is 'a place where human beings find a manifestation of divine power, where they experience a sense of connectedness to the universe. There, in some special way, spirit is present to them.'¹⁸ Hughes argued that people were aware of a sacred place's power and they experienced

¹¹ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p.15.

¹² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p.54.

¹³ Aristotle, *Physics*, (The Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.html> 4.1 208a 27 – 209a 31; 212a 20-2, accessed 31 December, 2013.

¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.1b.txt>, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.+Tim.+49a&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0180>, 49a, accessed 31 December, 2013.

¹⁵ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1923]),

¹⁸ J. Donald Hughes and Jim Swan, 'How Much of the Earth Is Sacred Space?,' *Environmental Review: ER* 10, no. 4 (1986), p. 247.

it as 'healing, meaning, transformation, strength or connectedness with nature; though sometimes as threat, risk, or ordeal.'¹⁹ In contrast, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal regarded sacred space as 'ritual space,' a location for formalized and, repeatable symbolic performances' which is what made them sacred.²⁰ Whilst Belden C. Lane suggested that sacred places are seen as such 'because of the symbol-making process by which humans make sense of the world around them' but, 'above all else' he said, sacred place is 'storied place.' It is always 'rich in story'.²¹ In terms of this research, the installations will be considered sacred places if the experience of them, pleasant or not, can be considered powerful and outside the 'norm', Otto's 'wholly other' and, those experiences are felt to have meaning, value and story.

Belden C. Lane argued that academics defined and described sacred space in three different and usually mutually exclusive ways; ontological, cultural and phenomenological.²² These three approaches are discussed below with reference to the work of Mircea Eliade, Émile Durkheim and Merleau-Ponty.

Mircea Eliade's was an ontological approach. He said every sacred place implied a hierophany, a point where 'something sacred shows itself' and which created a 'qualitatively different territory.'²³ He claimed that sacred places had power, 'were saturated with being' and, in them, communication with the gods was possible. He argued that for religious man, sacred space could be anywhere.²⁴

¹⁹ J. D. Hughes, 'Spirit of Place in the Western World,' in *The Power of Place: Sacred Ground in Natural and Human Environments*, edited by J. Swan (Gateway 1994 [1991]), p. 15.

²⁰ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, 'Introduction,' in *American Sacred Space*, edited by David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 9.

²¹ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002 [1988]), pp. 15; 229.

²² Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001 [1998]), pp.42-46.

²³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (London: Harcourt Inc., 1959), pp. 11; 12; 26.

²⁴ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 20-29; 12.

In contrast, Émile Durkheim asserted that culture was most significant, he viewed the distinction between the sacred and profane as essentially social.²⁵ He argued that man and nature were not inherently sacred and that the religious idea came from 'effervescence' - a special kind of energy that developed in groups and created a sense of transformation and connection between people and the gods.²⁶ In Ernest Wallwork's assessment, Durkheim saw society as a force, superior to the individual and 'the true source of the experience of transcendent authority.'²⁷ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal argued that sacred space is 'entangled' with cultural 'profane' forces including the entrepreneurial, social and political; they proposed sacred space was most readily described as contested space.²⁸ They criticised the ontological approach because it assumed sacred places were 'given or revealed' by 'gods and spirits' and took no account of all the human effort and ritual involved in making them sacred.²⁹

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty proposed taking a phenomenological approach, saying phenomenology aimed to give 'a direct description of our experience as it is' without considering its psychological origin or causal explanations.³⁰ According to Christopher Tilley, Merleau-Ponty argued that 'the human body provides the fundamental mediation point between thought and the world,' so the body is involved in perceiving, understanding and relating to the world.³¹ Abram said phenomenology challenges the assumption that there is 'a single, wholly determinable, objective reality,' aiming for a description of sensory experience rather than an explanation of the world.³² He thought there were two regions of phenomena, one occurs just for the individual, being internal and subjective, the other is still subjective but is

²⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]), p.46.

²⁶ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, pp. 76; 164.

²⁷ Ernest Wallwork, 'Durkheim's Early Sociology of Religion,' *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 3 (1985), p. 203.

²⁸ Chidester & Linenthal, 'Introduction', p. 17.

²⁹ Chidester & Linenthal, 'Introduction', p. 17.

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1978), p. vii.

³¹ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p. 14.

³² Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 30-35.

clearly also experienced by others as well, called, 'intersubjective' phenomena, by Edmund Husserl.³³ The phenomenological approach suggests that places participate with humans, according to Abram said 'each place [has] its own mind, its own psyche' and to be fully present in a place is to experience a 'reciprocal exchange between the living body and the animate world that surrounds it.'³⁴

In Lane's view each of these approaches had both value and disadvantages.³⁵ He reasoned that the ontological perspective helps to understand a believer's experience, its inner impact and the involvement of the imagination.³⁶ However, he also argued that 'sacred and profane, religion and culture are *overlapping dimensions* of human experience', not completely distinct entities and that needed to be acknowledged.³⁷ Although Lane thought the impact of social and cultural influences on sacred places needed to be considered, he argued that a purely cultural approach missed the significance of 'place' itself 'as a participant in the formation of experience.'³⁸ With regard to the phenomenological approach, Lane maintained that, although it considered the integrity of a sacred place, it did not take into account the roles the transcendent and cultural played in its identification.³⁹ Having considered the relevance and drawbacks of each method he proposed using the three together so that they could be 'mutually self-correcting.'⁴⁰

Lane argued that all three approaches, ontological, cultural and phenomenological, are needed to give a 'multidimensional understanding of how sacred place functions within the human imagination' because the individual's perception of a sacred place is 'inescapably mediated by culture' as well as the place.⁴¹ This paper will follow his method in exploring each

³³ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 38.

³⁴ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp.262; 73..

³⁵ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp.42-46.

³⁶ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 43.

³⁷ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 43.

³⁸ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp. 43-44.

³⁹ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 44.

⁴⁰ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp.42-46.

⁴¹ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p.45.

installation in terms of the 'presence of the sacred,' its cultural and social themes and 'listening' to the place/artwork itself.⁴²

Three Installations at the Turbine Hall, Tate Modern

Tate Modern is gallery for international modern and contemporary art in London. A former Power Station, the building was redeveloped and opened in 2000. It has a dramatic entrance and display area 35 metres high and 152 metres long which was created from the original turbine hall.⁴³ From 2000-2012 the Unilever group sponsored, *The Unilever Series*, an annual commission that invited an artist to make a work of art especially for the Turbine Hall.⁴⁴ Three of the installations are discussed below.

Maman by Louise Bourgeois

Maman is a massive steel spider, it is nine metres high and has a ten metre leg span which the viewer can walk around and under.⁴⁵ Each of the eight legs ends in a sharp point, underneath the spider's body there is a meshed sac containing seventeen white and grey marble eggs that hang above the viewer's head; there is also a cell that looks like a web of imprisoned prey.⁴⁶ In fact, the cell contains items that were significant to Bourgeois, part of her life story, these included fragments of antique tapestries (her mother was a tapestry restorer and as a child Bourgeois helped her) and a bottle of her favourite perfume.⁴⁷

⁴² Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp.44 -45; 57.

⁴³ Tate Modern, 'http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern, accessed 12 December, 2013.

⁴⁴ <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/who-we-are/history-of-tate#modern>, accessed 18 November, 2013.

⁴⁵ Bourgeois, *Maman*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁴⁶ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁴⁷ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

Maman or 'Mummy,' is ambiguous, her size and pointed feet are threatening but her balance seems precarious and so she also appears fragile.⁴⁸

For Bourgeois, the spider represented 'a universal symbol for the endless story of life, whose principle is continual renewal', the cycle of birth and death and the ability to mend.⁴⁹ Bourgeois' tapestry restoration experience also seems to have worked on a psychological level, she said, 'things that have broken down or have been ripped apart can be joined and mended. My art is a form of restoration in terms of my feelings to myself and to others.'⁵⁰ In an interview with Frances Morris, Bourgeois said 'I transform nasty work into good work. I transform hate into love ... that's what makes me tick.'⁵¹ Ingold argued that artists do not project from their imagination when they create but rather that they 'gather,' which seems to describe Bourgeois's approach.⁵² Ingold viewed artists as wayfarers and said 'as they make things they ... bind their own pathways or lines of becoming into the texture of the world.'⁵³ He thought art can open the mind to inner truths and 'directly touch the soul and set it in motion.'⁵⁴

My response to *Maman* was dramatic. I felt compelled to look at her and I was frightened. I am not afraid of spiders but *Maman* was towering, cold, menacing and blind, instinctively I felt that made her both stupid and very dangerous. *Maman* almost took my breath away. I could not move. I stood by a leg and looked in, feeling unable to go underneath. Partly because, like Trisha McCrea, I felt that I was 'waiting ... as if on the outside of a sacred space and

⁴⁸ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁴⁹ http://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/sites/default/files/fondation_beyeler/downloads/mm_sonderausstellungen/2011/e_maman_press_release_20.7.2011.pdf, accessed 21 November, 2013.

⁵⁰ Rachel Cooke, "My Art is a Form of Restoration " *The Observer*, 14 October 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/oct/14/art4>, accessed 21 November, 2013.

⁵¹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/tateshots-louise-bourgeois>, accessed 21 November, 2013

⁵² Ingold, *Being Alive*,, p. 178.

⁵³ Ingold, *Being Alive*, pp. 12;178.

⁵⁴ Ingold, *Being Alive*,, p. 206.

prohibited entry' and partly because 'going in' felt physically risky.⁵⁵ After a few moments I picked up my courage and went underneath the spider. The eggs in the sack were delicate and beautiful, I understood *Maman's* ferocity now, she was protecting her young but I was still extremely anxious, I felt I could be crushed, I did not linger. In contrast, McCrea said she 'felt a strong, safe, maternal presence, a positive energy directed on me like a moment's revelation.'⁵⁶

McCrea affirmed that spiders have a strong effect on people.⁵⁷ Lane suggested something similar about them, writing that the spider is a 'multivalent symbol, admired and loathed at the same time', we approve of the spider's hard work and beauty but are 'repulsed by their venom' and the ways they catch their prey.⁵⁸ McCrea thought that *Maman* tapped powerfully into a maternal collective unconscious, where mother is seen as both 'indispensable supporter and deadly enemy of the human-self.'⁵⁹ McCrea argued that *Maman* was full of meanings that were both personal and existed outside her, she said, *Maman* was 'informed by social, historical and psychical factors' that belonged to both Bourgeois and the viewer and that 'power, strength, predatoriness and control were palpable in *Maman's* space.'⁶⁰ Durkheim asserted that the sacred inspires respect and admiration; it keeps us at a distance whilst simultaneously arousing love and aspiration.⁶¹ In my experience, *Maman's* was a sacred place, storied, powerful and intimidating. I felt both fear and respect, as Lane said,

⁵⁵ Trisha McCrea, 'Louise Bourgeois Maman: From the Outside In', (2000).

<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/louise-bourgeois-maman-from-the-outside-in/> [accessed: Entering the installation-space, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁵⁶ McCrea, 'Louise Bourgeois Maman: From the Outside In', Entering the installation-space, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁵⁷ McCrea, 'Louise Bourgeois Maman: From the Outside In', Entering the installation-space, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁵⁸ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 232.

⁵⁹ McCrea, 'Louise Bourgeois Maman: From the Outside In', Gesturing towards her mother in her transitional space, accessed, 14 November, 2013.

⁶⁰ McCrea, 'Louise Bourgeois Maman: From the Outside In', Entering the installation-space, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁶¹ Wallwork, 'Durkheim's Early Sociology of Religion,' *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 3 (1985), p. 213.

Otto's '*mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, are contained in this one image of the spider.'⁶²

The Weather Project by Olafur Eliasson



Figure 1 -Olafur Eliasson: *The Weather Project*, Tate (2003), CC-NC-ND 3.0,(Unported), <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project>

The Weather Project was a representation of the sun and sky which was concerned with the climate and its social effects.⁶³ It was a huge optical illusion consisting of a giant semi-circular form made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps that emitted light at a narrow frequency so that only yellow and black were visible.⁶⁴ This arc

was reflected in a mirrored ceiling so the 'real' and reflected semi-circles 'linked' to produce the 'sun.'⁶⁵ A fine mist was emitted from haze machines which

⁶² Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 233.

⁶³ Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 2 November, 2013.

⁶⁴ Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 2 November, 2013.

⁶⁵ Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 2 November, 2013.

accumulated into faint, cloud-like formations and then dissipated.⁶⁶ Eliasson asserted that the weather has fundamentally shaped society and impacted every aspect of life because humanity has needed to withstand it in order to survive.⁶⁷

As Meredith Malone and other critics have noted Eliasson is influenced by phenomenological philosophy and apparently he often returns to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Bergson, and Edmund Husserl.⁶⁸ According to Malone, Eliasson is convinced that perception involves the whole body, not just vision and that what one perceives is dependent on what one is physically present to in that moment, hence unfolding circumstances determine how and what one perceives.⁶⁹

In *The Weather Project* Eliasson, invited the visitor to reflect on their perception of the physical world; he refers to the moment, when the visitor paused to consider what they were experiencing, as 'seeing yourself seeing'.⁷⁰ Sasha Engelmann argued that Eliasson's work changes the way the viewer sees the environment and introduces them to 'a "being in common" where they absorb a sense of unity along with sensory data.'⁷¹ It is through shared experience, according to Merleau-Ponty, that we realise 'we are all one light and participate in the One without destroying its unity.'⁷² Carolyne Quinn explained

⁶⁶ Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 2 November, 2013.

⁶⁷ Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project/olafur-eliasson-weather-project>, accessed 2 November, 2013.

⁶⁸ Meredith Malone, 'Olafur Eliasson', December (2007). <http://kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/files/spotlight12.07.pdf> [accessed: 18 August 2016],

⁶⁹ Malone, 'Olafur Eliasson', p.2.

⁷⁰ Sasha Engelmann, 'Breaking the Frame: Olafur Eliasson's Art, Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology, and the Rhetoric of Eco-Activism'. <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/breaking-the-frame-olafur-eliasson%E2%80%99s-art-merleau-ponty%E2%80%99s-phenomenology-and-the-rhetoric-of-eco-activism/> [accessed: 10 November 2013].

⁷¹ Engelmann, 'Breaking the Frame: Olafur Eliasson's Art, Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology, and the Rhetoric of Eco-Activism'.

⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xiii.

that Merleau-Ponty thought art could 'reveal the world to the viewer in a new way' and that an artwork's meaning was as dependent on the viewer as the artist. Merleau-Ponty thought art was embedded in pre-reflexive experience on which artists expanded, so artists accessed 'a fundamental realm of human experience' that was not available to others.⁷³

I found the installation exhilarating. As I walked down the ramp, I became charged with energy, my heart beat faster, I walked more quickly, I was excited. I began to understand why ancient peoples, among others had worshipped the sun, it was magnificent and I was being drawn to it. I seemed to be aware of everything, other people's enthusiasm, the hum of the generator and most of all that wonderful light, I was spellbound. I wanted to sit down, lie down, to see myself in the overhead mirror, I wanted to play. I was joyful and overwhelmed with love for the earth and for humanity.

The sun is a powerful image, Barbara Weightman said 'the sun is the supreme cosmic power; denoting centrality of existence, it is the heart of being,' and 'light symbolises holiness.'⁷⁴ In her review of the installation, Rachel Cooke seems to support that view, she said the viewers were 'like pilgrims' and reflected that the installation was 'strangely humbling' because 'the ordinary had been rendered extraordinary - numinous, even.'⁷⁵ Lane observed that the sacred is often overlooked because it is hidden by the ordinary which makes things seem dull and predictable.⁷⁶ He argued that artists and storytellers are most effective at drawing the holy out from behind the mask of the ordinary.⁷⁷ In Quinn's opinion, the artist makes visible what most people do not see and an artist's work gains meaning from the intersubjective world when the image comes to life for others.⁷⁸

⁷³ Carolyne Quinn, 'Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty's Thought'. http://www.ucd.ie/philosophy/perspectives/resources/Carolyne_Quinn.pdf [accessed: 4 December, 2013],

⁷⁴ Barbara A. Weightman, 'Sacred Landscapes and the Phenomenon of Light,' *Geographical Review* 86, no. 1 (1996), pp. 60;63.

⁷⁵ Rachel Cooke, "The Unilever Series: Olafur Eliasson The Weather Project," *The Observer*, 19 October 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2003/oct/19/features.review17>, accessed 14 December, 2013.

⁷⁶ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 68.

⁷⁷ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 68.

⁷⁸ Quinn, 'Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty's Thought', p. 15.

For Richard Dorment, the visitors made *The Weather Project* 'unforgettable.'⁷⁹ Their reactions as they moved around and made shapes trying to see themselves in the overhead mirror added more meaning to it.⁸⁰ He argued that, 'paradoxically, the less we look like individuals, the more aware we become that we share a common humanity, that we are all members of the same species.'⁸¹ He said *The Weather Project* literally held up a mirror and showed us who we are.'⁸² *The Weather Project* was a sacred place for me, a celebration of the miracle of our universe and life.

⁷⁹ Richard Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty," *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 2003, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> accessed 14 December, 2013.

⁸⁰ Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> accessed 14 December, 2013.

⁸¹ Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> accessed 14 December, 2013.

⁸² Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty," accessed 14 December, 2013.

Sunflower Seeds by Ai Weiwei

Sunflower Seeds consisted of more than one hundred million, individually hand-sculpted and hand-painted porcelain sunflower seed husks which



Figure 2 - Ai Weiwei: *Sunflower Seeds*, Tate (2010), CC-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported), <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>

covered one thousand square meters to a depth of ten centimetres, it took sixteen hundred skilled artisans and over two years to make them.⁸³ This complex work had many themes. For example, John Jarvis maintained that Ai Weiwei is motivated to encourage freedom of thought and has a strong belief in 'the transformative possibilities of society.'⁸⁴ The internet was a significant part of the installation, Ai used it to respond to the public's questions about the show and its prominence highlighted the new possibilities for the Chinese people now that hundreds of

⁸³ Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁸⁴ Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

millions of them have internet access.⁸⁵

The seeds themselves were symbols of a number of things.⁸⁶ Firstly, the manufacture of the seeds, combined mass production and traditional craftsmanship which encouraged examination of the 'Made in China' phenomenon and the global economy that drives the manufacture of what Ai described as 'useless' things.⁸⁷ Sunflower seeds also symbolised human compassion and friendship for Ai, they were a street snack he shared with friends when he and his family were poor and exiled during his childhood.⁸⁸ The seeds were also potent symbols of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when Mao was depicted as the sun and the people as sunflowers turning towards him.⁸⁹

Initially viewers could walk on and play in the installation but the ceramic dust that created caused health concerns and the installation was roped off to the public after three days. Durkheim said 'sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things ... must keep their distance from what is sacred.'⁹⁰ The prohibition attracted huge media coverage and perhaps increased visitor numbers and maybe, in Durkheim's terms, it increased the sacredness of the seeds and identified the visitors as profane.

My first reaction to the exhibition was shock, the whole area was very grey and quiet which was unexpected. I then became fascinated by the seeds and

⁸⁵ Weiwei, Sunflower Seeds, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁸⁶ Weiwei, Sunflower Seeds, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁸⁷ Weiwei, Sunflower Seeds, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁸⁸ Weiwei, Sunflower Seeds, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁸⁹ Weiwei, Sunflower Seeds, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei/interpretation-text>, accessed 14 November, 2013.

⁹⁰ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 40.

wanted to jump into them, to run and make a noise; that it was prohibited by then was very disappointing, the seeds seemed to call out for interaction. Looking at the seeds I became confused, trying to grasp the sheer number of them. I picked one up and was surprised by its weight and size, it was much bigger and heavier than a real sunflower but the work was exquisite. I could 'feel' the love and skill involved its painstaking manufacture. I was deeply moved, I wanted to cry. I imagined the artisans working; I felt I was one of them, focused, precise, and careful; they were somehow communicating with me through a small piece of porcelain and I experienced a sense of unity with them and all humanity. The Turbine Hall disappeared for a time. When I read Ai's explanation of the installation and by implication, the suffering he and others had endured, his story seemed to become embedded deep within me.

Abram argued that human-made artefacts inevitably retain an 'element of more-than-human otherness' usually from the materials they are made from, 'they still carry, like our bodies, the textures and rhythms of a pattern that we ourselves did not devise, and their quiet dynamism responds directly to our senses' so the materials 'contribute their more-than-human resonances to human culture.'⁹¹ Lane concurred, he said 'one begins to suspect that the contemplation of any ordinary thing, made extraordinary by attention and love, can become an occasion for glimpsing the profound.'⁹² *Sunflower Seeds* constituted a sacred place for me. As Weightman suggested, 'in sacred places, material phenomena are dematerialised and worldly substance becomes diaphanous as spirituality pervades.'⁹³

Conclusion

The definitions of sacred place above included an experience of the numinous, a sense spirit and/or connectedness, story, symbol and ritual. In different ways, each of the three installations became a sacred space for me. I experienced awe, terror, excitement, joy, and the connectedness of everyone on the planet. From contemporaneous reports, the installations seem to have

⁹¹ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 64; 278 note 22

⁹² Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, p. 68.

⁹³ Weightman, 'Sacred Landscapes and the Phenomenon of Light,' *Geographical Review* 86, no. 1 (1996), p. 67.

caused similar responses in others, although it is impossible to assess whether or not they viewed the installations as sacred places and assuredly, some people had very different experiences to mine. The artists themselves do not seem to have set out intentionally to create a sacred place. This implies that my experiences, at least in part, were connected to a personal construct. As Lane suggested, perhaps a sacred place ... 'is transformed by the imagination to that which is awe-inspiring and grand.'⁹⁴

Is sacred space a human construct? From a cultural perspective it is, undoubtedly. Chidester and Linenthal argued that every human attribution of sacredness is always a social construction of reality and that 'virtually any place can become sacred' because of the human activity involved in its 'sacralisation.'⁹⁵ However, Lane argued that the idea of sacred place is more complicated, it can be 'ephemeral, subjective, and hard to define,' he said, it shared the 'ultimate impenetrability of all spiritual experience.'⁹⁶ From phenomenological and ontological perspectives it is more difficult to be certain. The unexpected, phenomenological experience of place as 'chora,' in which, like Abram, we find the world '*speaks*,' seems to involve something other than an individual's idea of the world and their imagination.⁹⁷ All experiences of the numinous seem to originate in something 'other,' as Otto described and to attempt to categorise that as a human construct is counter-intuitive. Lane thought sacred place 'was more than a construction of the human imagination alone.'⁹⁸ This paper is in agreement with him and asserts that some art installations do generate sacred space.

⁹⁴ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp. 29.

⁹⁵ Chidester & Linenthal, 'Introduction', pp. 1-42.

⁹⁶ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp. 217-218.

⁹⁷ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 81.

⁹⁸ Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred*, pp. 4.

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