

THE DOUBLE BODY BEING IN SPACE

ANTHEA BUYS

The Double Body: being in space is an exhibition of new installation and performance art by South African artists that explores the implicit relationship between physical performance, or presence, and architectural spaces. Drawing from a theoretical tradition, rooted in minimalism, that makes a case for a corporeal "knowledge" of objects and space, the works in this exhibition are invested in how the body articulates itself in space and develops a sense of place, how installation environments may bear the traces of bodily presences and the different levels at which a viewer accesses and experiences an artwork.

This exhibition treats the notion of architectural space broadly, and suggests that non-functional spatial interventions and artistic gestures that respond to a formally architectural environment are themselves architectural works. It also proposes, through constructing a physically immersive network of installation environments, that the very notion of architectural space is derived directly in relation to the bodies that would inhabit, look at, move through or construct it. There is a strong precedent in recent exhibition-making for the blurring of distinctions between architecture, as the vessel that would contain art, and the installation artwork that cohabits with it, or exists under its watch. *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take on Architecture*, curated by Ralph Rugoff for London's Hayward Gallery in 2008 provided a frame within which installation works could challenge the architectural sanctity of the gallery space, whether by working on a scale that unsettled the relationship of spatial subordination of the artwork to its exhibition space, or by actively adding to or destroying existing architectural elements in the gallery. *Psycho Buildings* arrived as an innovative utterance in contemporary curating, but its historical roots are entwined in the minimalist avant-garde spatial practices of artists like Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, both of whom revolutionised the relationship between the space of the artwork and that of its containing building or alternative environment.

The Double Body owes a debt to Rugoff's exhibition for its concentrated attention to architectural spaces, but even more so to minimalism, which is firmly rooted philosophically in continental phenomenology – the study of experience. Although most of the works in *The Double Body* do not betray any formal nostalgia for minimalist or post-minimalist sculpture and installation, they do reiterate what is central to both moments in the history of art: the elevation of the subject. The latter is not just a cerebral subject, capable of locating a work conceptually, but a sensorially aware and susceptible agent who experiences and responds to an artwork, or any other object or environment, corporally. This is an exhibition centred on the body in that each work included creates a unique sensory, spatial experience for the viewer. This can be effected through a gesture as small as the work inviting the viewer to peer into it in response to its smallness, as is the case with Marcus Neustetter's maquette for an artists' telescope titled *The Observatory 1* (2009), or as grand as dramatically altering movement though the gallery by sealing off the ground and first-floor levels from one another, as Alexander Oppel does in his architectural intervention *Auseinandersetzung* (2009). The two performances included in the show, Bronwyn Lace's *Verticality, Height and Mass* (2009) and Lerato Shadi's *Hema* (2008), reiterate the connection between bodily presence and space. Bronwyn Lace uses a matrix of vertical and horizontal lines plotted on the gallery wall and nylon thread to manipulate her eighty fishing line sinkers that together match her body weight. In *Hema*, as Lerato Shadi inflates balloons with her own breath and lets them fall from the roof of the gallery, the balloons become vessels in which something of the artist's own body is contained – their construction is entirely contingent on a corporeal act – and in this way they are architectural objects.

In 1991, years after the heyday of minimalism, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre highlighted the necessity of the corporeal encounter for the realisation of social space. In *The Production of Space* he writes:

The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether – even though it may separate itself from the body so radically as to kill it. ... Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses (from the sense of smell to sight, treated as different within a differentiated field) prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections. The passive body (the senses) and the active body (labour) converge in space. (405)

The relationship of this exhibition to its institutional context, the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, is crucial not only because of the central role of the faculty's building as a spatial armature for the exhibition, but also because of the social milieu that plays itself out within the spoken and unspoken laws of the academic institution on a daily basis. The recurring visual motif of the grid, which is so apparent in the upstairs space of the gallery, alludes to the structured system of social, pedagogical and intellectual laws which regulate the ways in which individual subjects inhabit the site of the university, as well as broader social spaces. At the same time, the grid of rocks and white tape which carves up the upper-level floor also serves as a type of map with which we can locate the presence of our own bodies as we stand in the space, in relation to increments and planes that make this built environment architecturally legible. The individual's physical negotiation of this gridded space "prefigures", in Lefebvre's words, his or her navigation of "layers of social space and their interconnections".

Although the curation of the downstairs and outside gallery spaces, with their wall-drawings, wafting balloons and moving boats, may read as the antithesis of the upstairs space, these more exuberant environments have not altogether abandoned the idea of the grid. They merely treat the grid as a point of departure and a potentiality, rather than a map or a code for being.

David Andrew's *Classroom (Recovery Room)* (2009) modifies its gallery environment by creating a navigable topography using broken school chairs and desks, tape, cable-ties, various other found objects and wall drawings. The installation could be a moment of movement frozen in time, or the elements of a classroom left loose from gravity and suspended in space. The work invites the viewer to walk through it and in so doing, explore its narrative possibilities. In spite of what may look like chaos to the viewer acquainted with what the conventional teaching environment is like, the work is in some ways predicated on an ecology of restraint. Because it is still physically navigable and coherent, it is not a purely entropic environment. It exists in a certain contract with the metaphorical grid, using the grid as a common spatial and referential language to anchor the work so that the viewer has recourse to begin to engage with it.

Rodan Kane Hart's and Murray Kruger's paths through the outdoor amphitheatre, *Direction (O)* and *Route (B)* entertain a contract with the grid in a similar way. Both paths track potential movement through the amphitheatre space. Hart's *Direction (O)*, a bright orange vinyl strip running across the FDA bridge, between the entrances to the top and bottom levels of the gallery, tracks the path visitors to the exhibition will have to take in order to see the exhibition in its entirety. By walking alongside Hart's trail, the viewer implicitly aligns him or herself with the codes of access that govern the viewing of this exhibition. Kruger's meandering bubble-wrap path, *Route (B)*, is less specific in its purpose. It invites the viewer to follow it on a sonic, tactile, fairly random exploration of the surface of the amphitheatre steps. The viewer can choose to ignore the path and make his or her own through the space, or to follow the whole path, or parts of it, leaving a sonic trace, as the bubbles pop underfoot, as well as visual and tactile traces, as the plastic whitens and softens through being trodden on.

This exhibition establishes a further layer of environmental relationality in that it has been designed to read most coherently (aesthetically and conceptually) after dark. Unconventional lighting has been used to meet the display demands of each work individually, and this means that during the day certain light-dependent qualities of the works – the play of shadows, for instance, – are partially lost. This overarching design choice limits the legibility of the exhibition in some sense, but it also makes explicit certain highly manipulated sensory conventions of gallery exhibitions in which viewers are complicit. For example, in South Africa, gallery opening hours seldom run over either side of daylight and we therefore experience a certain time and quality of light as appropriate to the display of art. In breaking with the temporal conventions of gallery viewing, this exhibition reminds us that art relies on its external environment to determine the conditions of its accessibility and meaning and we, the viewers, participate in this external environment.

University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture Gallery

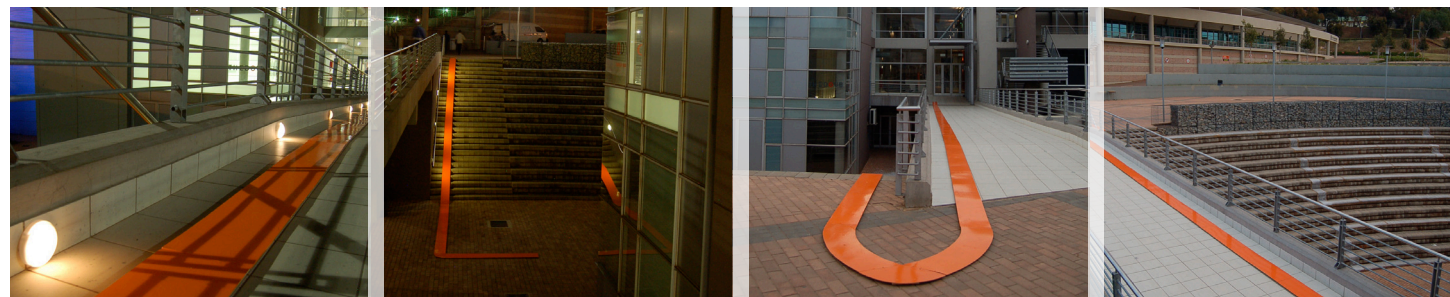
David Andrew Classroom (Recovery Room)



Nina Barnett Same Seine



Rodan Kane Hart Direction (O)



Phillip Raiford Johnson

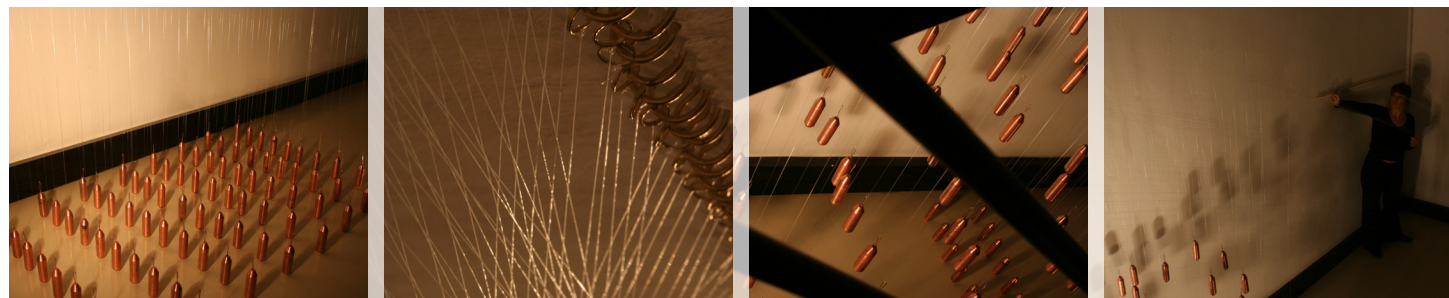


Murray Kruger Route (B)

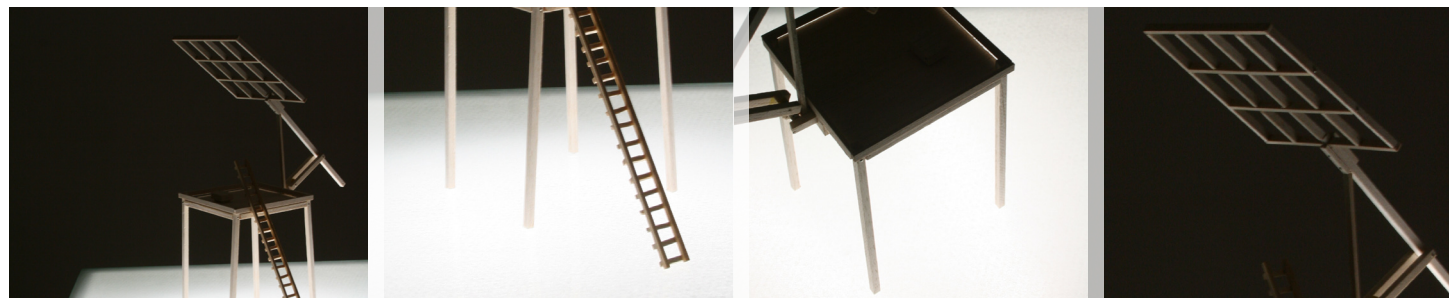


Bronwyn Lace

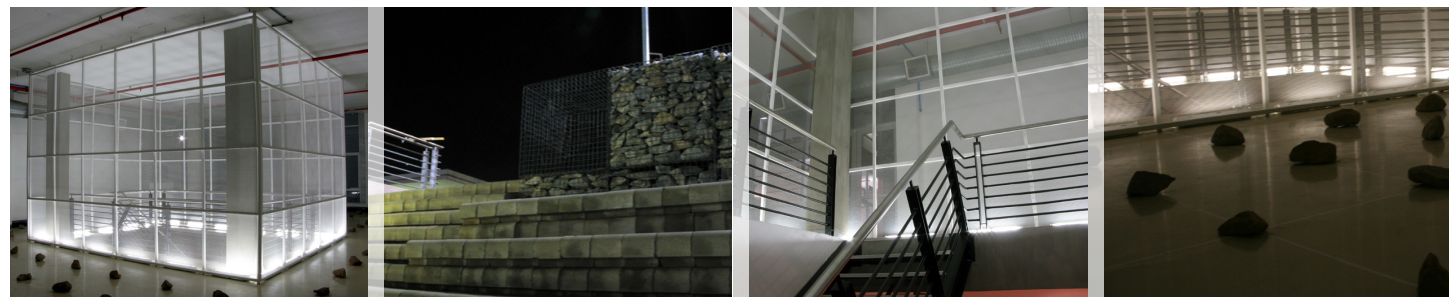
Verticality, Height and Mass



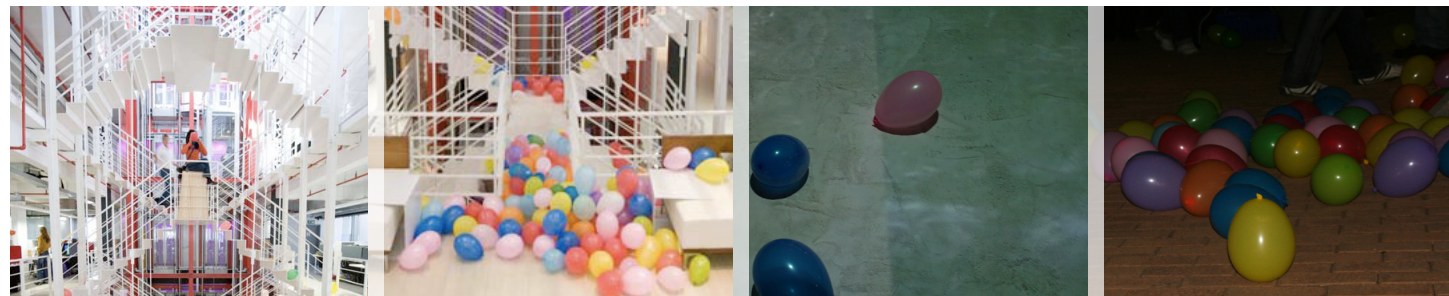
Marcus Neustetter



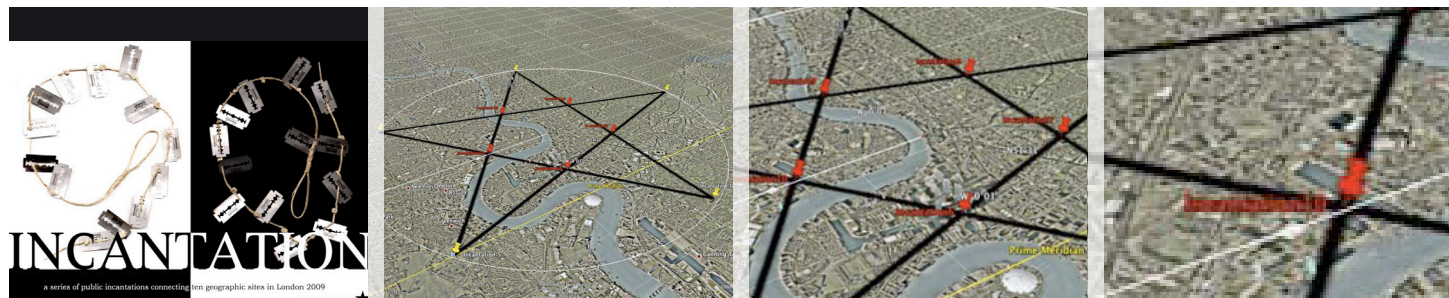
Alexander Oppen



Lerato Shadi Hema



Johan Thom Incantation



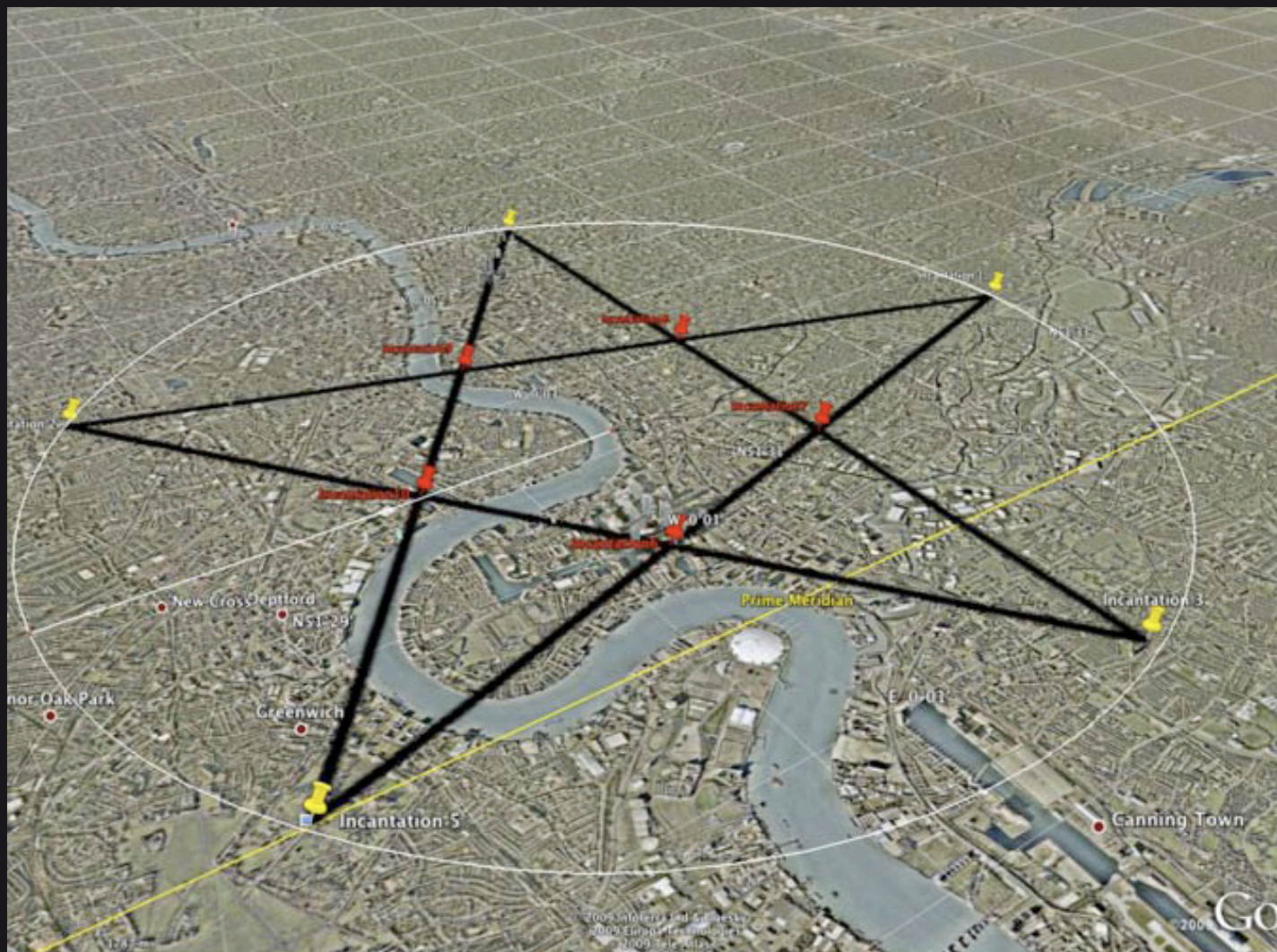
Phillip Raiford Johnson Nightscape (Thoughts About A Machine)



Alexander Oppen Auseinandersetzung



Johan Thom Incantation



Marcus Neustetter The Observatory I

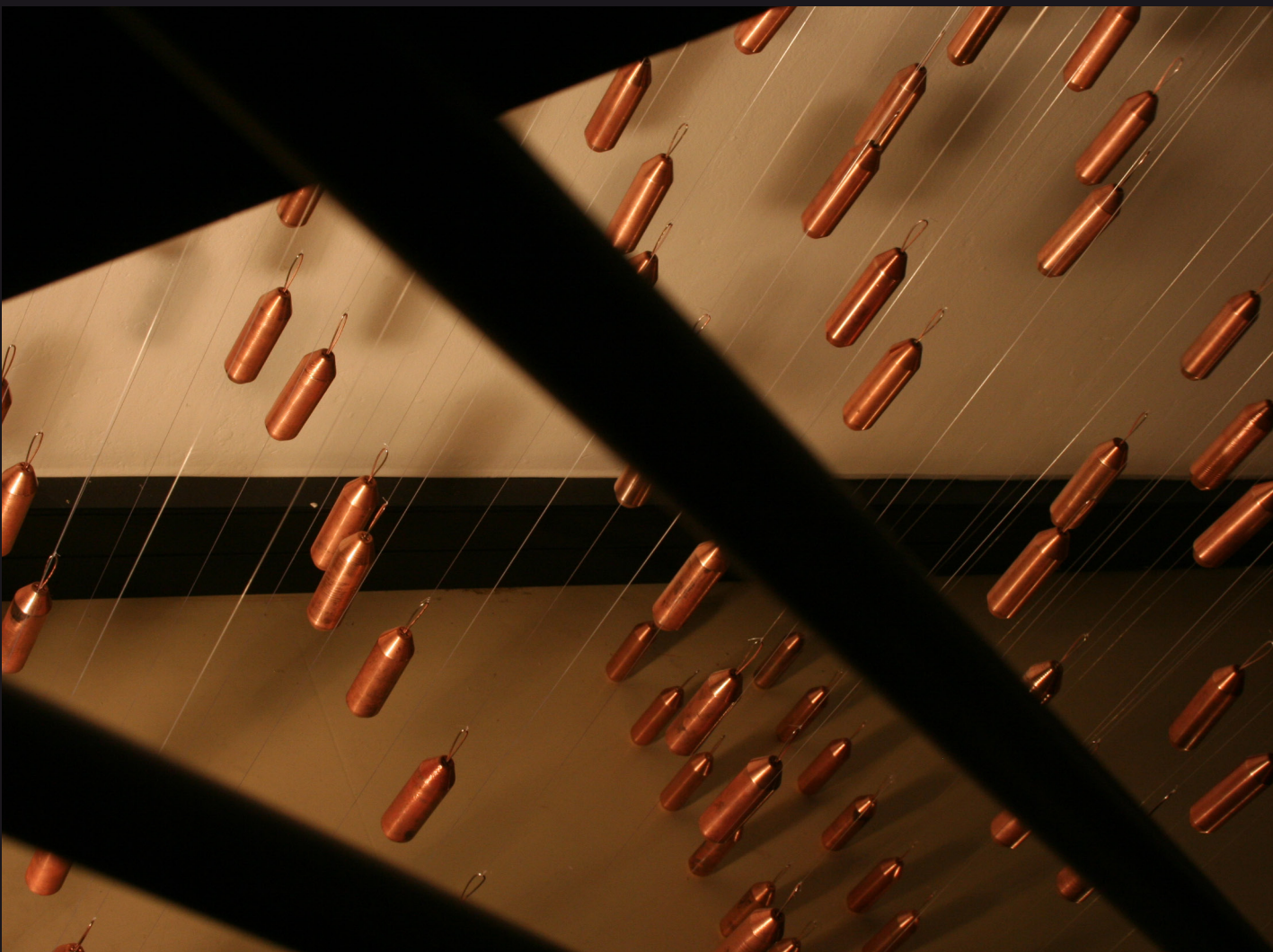


David Andrew Classroom (Recovery Room)

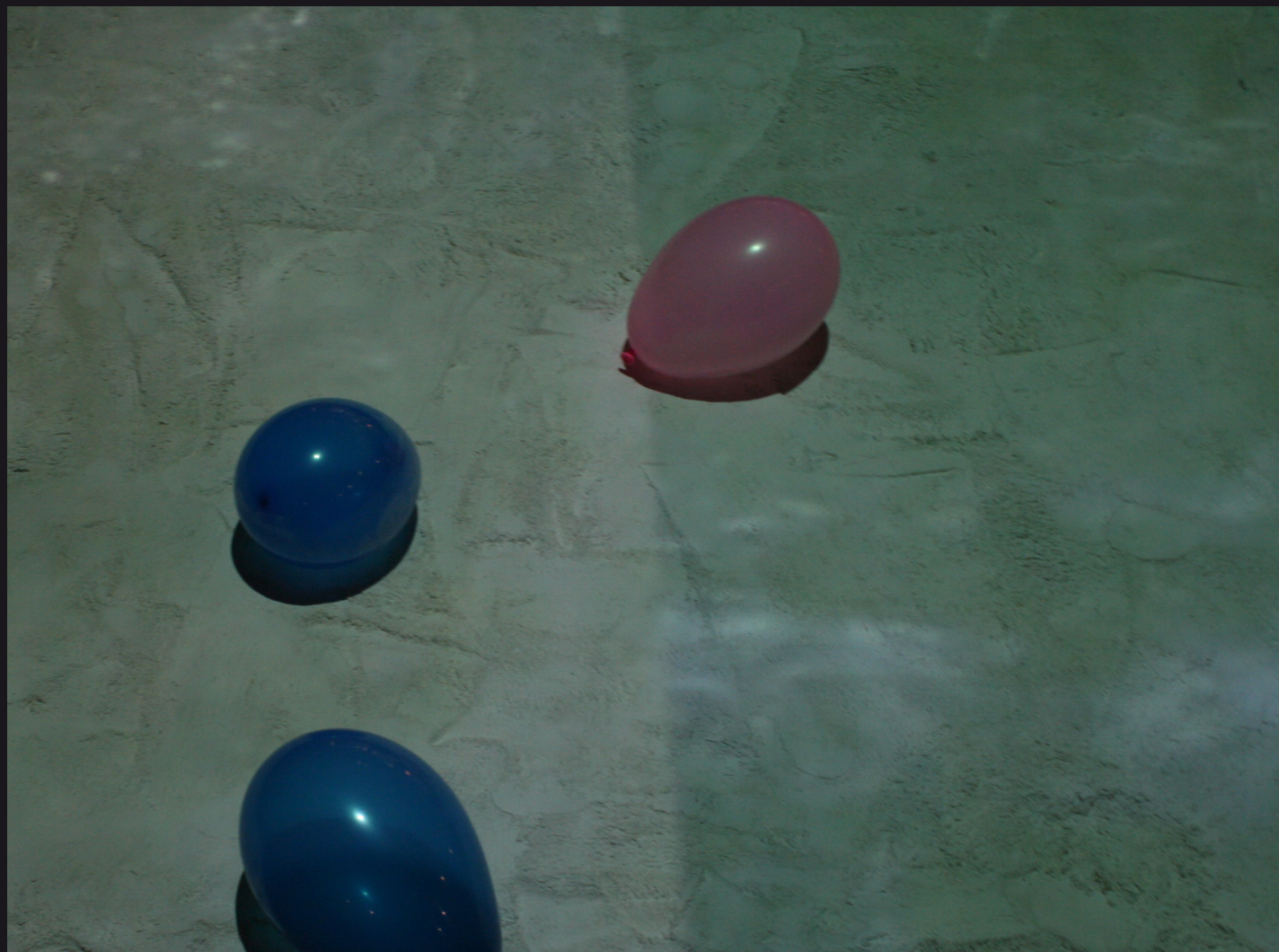
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Rodan Kane Hart Direction (O)



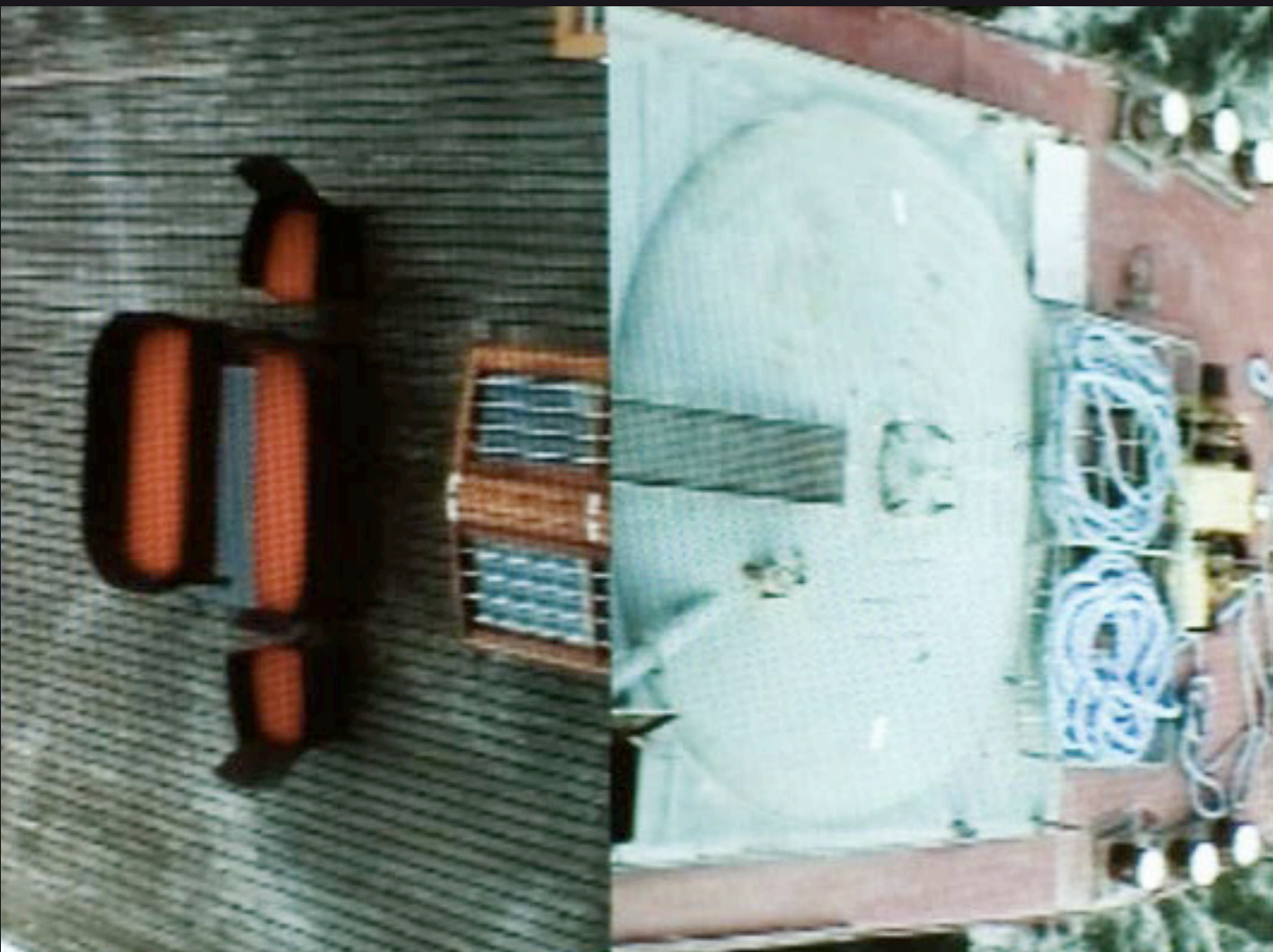
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