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# Perception and the Loss of the Sensuous

Master of Fine Art Exegesis  
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# Perception and the loss of the Sensuous

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**Abstract:**

This exegesis documents a practice-led Master of Fine Art research project investigating how light, space, and embodied experience can be used to destabilise perception and cultivate empathy, connection, and collective awareness. Situated at the intersection of installation, scenography, and phenomenology, the research explores how experiences of wonder and illusion may shift audiences away from ocular-centric modes of knowing and towards a more sensuous, relational engagement with the world.

Drawing on the philosophies of David Abram, Juhani Pallasmaa, and the practices of Es Devlin and Olafur Eliasson, the research critiques Western traditions of visual dominance and explores perception as an embodied, multi-sensory, and phenomenological destabilisation to invoke reciprocity. Concepts of magic, chaos theory, and the labyrinth provide structural and conceptual frameworks for understanding interconnectedness, multiplicity, and non-linear experience.

Through a series of experimental installations, including ‘Suspension of Time’, ‘The Presence of Light’, ‘Life’s Labyrinth’, and ‘The Aleph’, this research examines how light can function as both material and mediator—concealing and revealing, destabilising expectation, and fostering moments of collective contemplation. Audience participation is central to the work, positioning viewers as co-producers of meaning within what Es Devlin describes as “temporal societies”: transient spaces of shared experience and transformation.

Ultimately, this research argues that art and design possess a unique capacity to “amaze” rather than persuade, enabling shifts in perception that extend beyond intellectual understanding. By creating phenomenologically destabilising environments grounded in wonder and magic, the practice seeks to reveal the invisible networks that connect individuals to one another and to a more-than-human world.

# Introduction

It is my belief that Art and Design are humans' best tools to shift people's perspectives about how we interact with the world. It is our ability to create experiences that go beyond the factual and are able to connect to the emotions of people that will form the greatest transformations in our thinking. When Es Devlin asked Ecologist Timothy Morton how artists could be of most help, his reply was 'I think we should not be in the persuasion business anymore ... we should be in the amazing people business. We should do some kind of magic ... where people are so compelled by this miracle that before they realise they've changed their belief, they've already changed' —Timothy Morton (qtd. in Devlin and Devlin 10) These transformations that society needs to under-go is not one of pure understanding, as facts will only take us so far. The shift towards a more empathetic view of the things that exist outside ourselves will, in my view, open us up to the stories of others. I wish to break down the feeling in people that they are alone in their experiences. We are always connected to each other; it is my role to reveal these connections.

Es Devlin has been a huge inspiration to my practice; I was introduced to her during my time as a theatre maker. Es is best known for her large-scale kinetic stage sculptures for the likes of Lady Gaga, Adele and Beyoncé. But it was her humble beginnings in theatre that led me to her practice. I found myself returning to her throughout my undergraduate studies. Es's work now spans into full-scale installations where the audience is invited to be active participants in worlds of her own making; often fusing light, projections, and new technology. She plays with people's perception and brings them to the understanding that their degrees of separation are not as far apart as they may seem. Es's practice has been heavily influenced by the teachings of Dr. David Abram and his concept of the 'Sensuous Experience'. Like Pallasmaa, Dr. Abram believes that we have become disconnected from our surroundings. Dr. Abram talks of a need to return to reciprocity with the things around us and how we have objectified the world. But in his view 'the "real world" is an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and —as I must assume—of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or "reality"'. (Abram 32). It is this reciprocity that Dr. Abram calls the "Sensuous Experience"; our ability to sense the experiences outside our own, as they also sense ours.

My work attempts to create spaces of phenomenological destabilisation, using light and space, for an audience to break down preconceived notions that are embedded in our minds. It is my view that if I can destabilise how people expect to experience the work, they no longer can trust the connection between the eye and pre-frontal cortex. This destabilisation through experienced phenomena will decentralise the eye as our primary sense, and force us into a more synaesthetic way of moving through the world. In Pallasmaa's *Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, he sets up a philosophy about how we centralised the sense of vision. This centralisation has alienated us from our other senses and a more holistic experience of our world. 'The inhumanity of modern architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the neglect of the body and the senses, and the imbalance of our sensory system' (Pallasmaa 21) Talked about through the lens of architecture, Pallasmaa shows us that we have become disconnected to the world around us. 'The nihilistic eye deliberately advances sensory and mental detachment and alienation. Instead of reinforcing one's body-centred and integrated experience of the world, nihilistic architecture disengages and isolates the body' (Pallasmaa 25) This disconnection to our environment places us separate from the things outside our individual experience.

The way I choose to destabilise people's perception is to destabilise their expectations and evoke a sense of wonder and magic. Illusion has become a central tool in my practice. It is a way of making people question what it is they see, and begin to feel; such as the impossible line of light in my work 'Suspension of Time', or the illusionary materiality of mylar mirror in my work 'The Aleph'. Dr. Abram, in his book *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, talks of the role of magic people being the intermediate between our world and the world of greater experience. 'The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence.' (Abram 16). Dr. Abram, through his time as a sleight-of-hand magician, came to understand that if we can destabilise people's expectations of what they see, then they destabilise the way they have been experiencing the world.

Es talks of her work as places of congregation that forms, what she calls, “Temporal Societies”. These are places where collective transformation can occur through the sharing of stories and experiences. Bringing people into a place of connectedness to facilitate a collective shift in their perspective of how separate they truly are to what that goes on around them. When we don’t feel alone in the changes we must make, it makes that journey easier to navigate. I now too am starting to see the collection of my audience as one of these temporal societies. Places of mass gathering where an exchange of energy can occur between every individual adding to a collective experience. This can be seen explored in my works ‘The Presence of Light’ and ‘Life’s Labyrinth’ where I invite the audience to congregate and consider their experience in conjunction with others.

Two artists that have had a huge influence on my practice are Es Devlin and Olafur Eliasson. These practices form a network around my own, having a reciprocity of ideas between them and both taking inspiration from Dr. Abram. Both are artists that use light and space to create phenomenological destabilising experiences. Es, coming from her background in theatre, aims to use this destabilisation as a way for her audience to inhabit the experience of others. While Eliasson draws from the world of science and uses light as a way for us to explore phenomena that destabilise us and heightens our awareness of our surroundings. Both these artists use the sense of wonder in their works to open our senses to more than what we see.

Two other great influences on Es’s practice are Labyrinths and James Gleick’s book ‘*Chaos: A New Science in the Making*’. A labyrinth, unlike a maze, does not have any wrong turns or dead ends. Traditionally a singular path that leads one on a journey of thought, through active walking mediation. Chaos is the study of complex, dynamic systems that seem random, but when looked at from a “scaled-out” perspective, they really follow a deterministic pattern. “There is pretty much one equation that governs all the underlying structures of our world: the way you begin to understand that these phenomena are all governed by the same maths.’ (Devlin and Devlin 44 xiii) This math is what forms the bifurcating patterns we see in nature. Es talks of her ability in her practice, that when met with a fork in the road of her thought, that she chooses to take both. Her practice creates a bifurcating labyrinth of ideas and collaborations. I have also formed my own labyrinth

of a practice that interweaves with that of others like Es’s and Olafur’s, creating a greater network of practices. I have built a way of thinking that sees both paths as truth. I am becoming more comfortable in realising that my thinking is not a process of “or” but “and”. The reason I came to do a master of Fine Art centred round Scenography, after studying an undergraduate in Visual Communication Design, was that I could see, at their heart, they share the same goal; to create systems of communication to be experienced. I also hold a similar philosophy around science and religion; at their core can be seen attempting to answer why and how we got here, just from different perspectives. I even see the birthplace of science coming from older magic; sorcerers turned physicists, alchemists turned chemists.

**Intent**

## Magic and Wonder

I have always had an affinity for magic and wonder. The things in theatre that drew my interests were the moments where our sense of reality would be messed with and logic was asked to be left outside the theatre; like when gravity might stop working and things begin to float, or when the walls of the room disappear and we can believe we are in an imaginary new world. Asking the audience to suspend their disbelief. Allowing them to open up to the multi-sensory experience that sat before them. Rather than trying to make sense of what their eyes see, they had to use their bodily experience. ‘The human nervous system includes the brain, spinal cord, and neurons throughout our body. It modulates our physiology and behaviour to maintain holistic equilibrium within our bodies and allows our inner “self” to interface with the outside world’ (Asher et al. 117). We have separated out our senses and limited them to just the five classical interpretations. Our loss of connection to these other senses, and largely knowing the world through our eyes, we have lost a true experience of our environment.

The need to understand with our eyes comes from the Western tradition of ocularcentrism. ‘There is a strong tendency to grasp and fixate, to reify and totalise: a tendency to dominate, secure, and control’ (Pallasmaa 21). There is belief the eye is the dominant sense, therefore is our most powerful tool to understand the world around us. This need comes from the western tradition of gaining control over our environment. But to take control we must take ourselves out of our environment and place our own experiences as central. ‘In the process of reflecting

the world, we organize it into entities: we conceive of the world by grouping and segmenting it as best we can in a continuous process that is more or less uniform and stable, the better to interact with it’ (Rovelli 174). Through trying to understand our world, we may have lost touch with the experience of it.

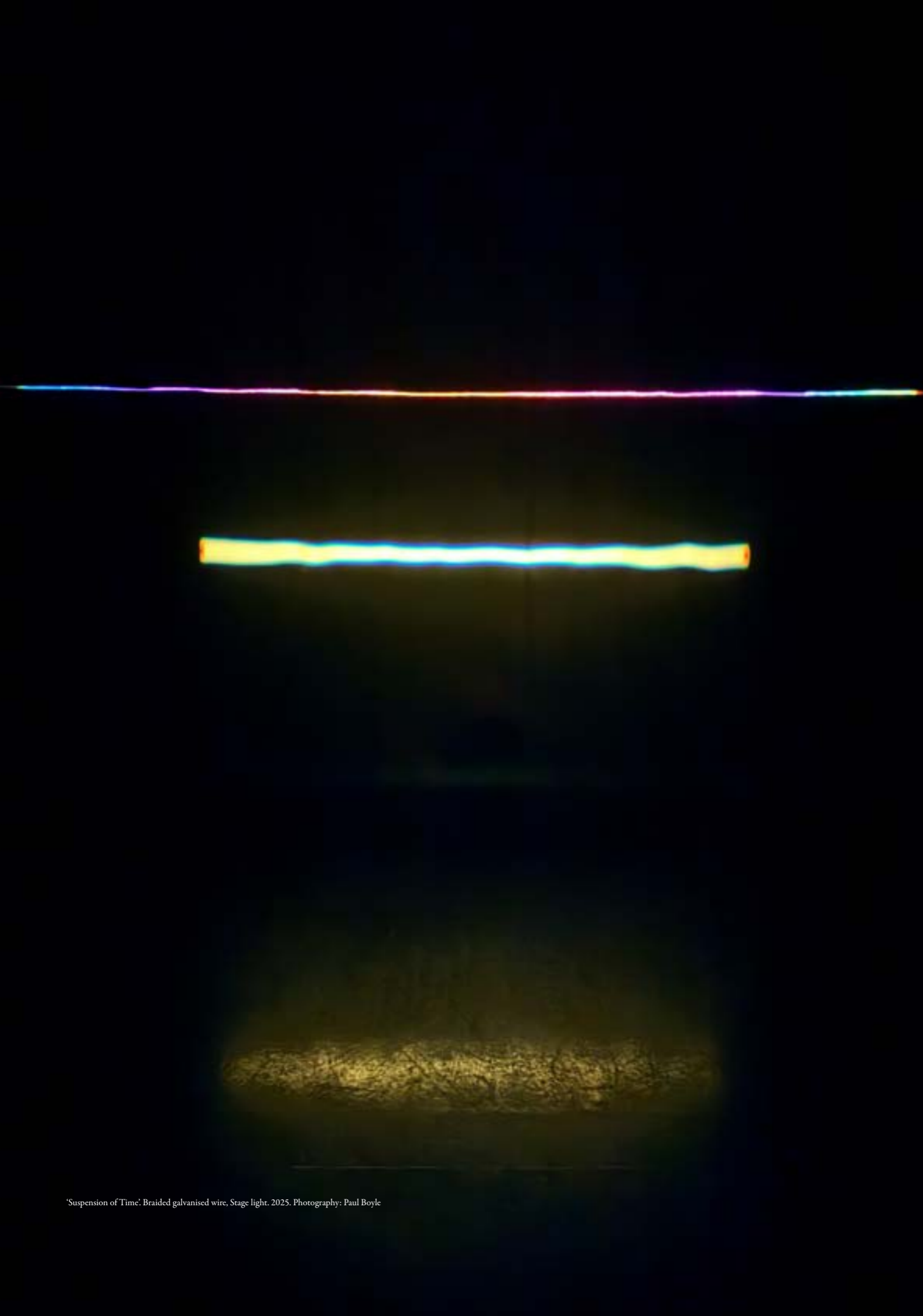
Knowledge about things can only take us so far in changing our minds. The strongest tool to shift perspectives is an emotional reaction to experience. This will open us up to the things that are beyond ourselves. ‘Our direct experience is necessarily subjective, necessarily relative to our own position or place in the midst of things, to our particular desires, tastes, and concerns’ (Abram 29). Even being someone who is immensely interested in the world of science and knowledge, the largest changes in my own mindset have more often than not come through an emotional reaction to something. In 2015 I became vegan. At that time I had been learning about the effects of animal farming on the planet. I had encountered many facts that proved that this amount of farming was having negative impacts on our environment. But it wasn’t until the problem was presented as something not just about the planet, but about myself. About the children in my life—cousins, friends, children, and later my own nieces—that would inherit a lesser quality of life due to the changes in our climate. Did I make a conscious change to reduce my harm on the planet? According to Es ‘people remember how they felt when they received a piece of information more than the information itself’ (Piotti)

Magic people have, across history, been the people to keep societies connected to the world and beyond; the intermediary between ourselves and the other. ‘For the magician’s intelligence is not encompassed within the society; it’s placed at the edge of the community, mediating between the human community and the larger community of beings upon which the village depends’ (Abram 14). Magic is a way of decentralise the self and rigid ways of thinking about relationality. I have begun to see myself as a bridge that brings the self and outer experience together.

Many of my works attempt to suspend the disbelief of my audience, such as ‘Suspension of Time’. The inspiration for this work came from the performance ‘DARKDARKDARK!’, part of the Kia Mau Festival. The lighting designer was a friend of mine, artist Elekis Poblete Teirney. This promenade piece broke the boundaries between worlds, asking the audience to transition between their world, the dissolving world of the show, and the new that would rise.

It was a single perceptual tool she used during the show that was the starting point for this work. Two actors stood either side of a thin line of light. Each holding one side of a rope, they began to move it, as if they were playing a game of jump-rope. As the rope passed through the light it caught, frozen in time, the pattern created by the opposing force of the actors. This demonstrated not only their connection in space, but also to time and energy. This phenomenal event within the piece added to the overall feeling of destabilisation being evoked in us, the audience.

I wanted to create an experience where people would walk into the room and be confronted with the impossible. As people entered the space, they were met with a pitch black space and nothing more than a thin line of light catching a length of braided hanging wire that divided the room above people’s heads. The light refracted the woven structure and made a spectrum of colour suspended in space. This line looked as if it was floating in mid-air. The audience weren’t sure what to expect when walking in, as I had given no context to the work. I wanted them with no preconceived notion of what the work might be. This allowed me to effectively challenge any ideas of what they might have expected. This phenomenological destabilisation in the audience disoriented them in space. This decentered their individual experience and made them aware of the other presences in the room. They couldn’t see each other all staring at this line, but said they were able to feel others’ presence in the dark room all focused on one spot.



'Suspension of Time'. Braided galvanised wire, Stage light, 2025. Photography: Paul Boyle

I had used a technique used by the magicians of the 18th–19th century to hide the mechanisms that held the work together. If you shine a bright light into the eyes of an audience, each iris will collectively contract. This means they see a darker black and you are able to hide the mechanics needed to create the illusion. (Rubin and Devlin 00:04:56). Outside the doors of the SpaceLab is a wide open space with lots of natural light. I had used to my advantage that the audience's eyes would already be adjusted to a brighter light. Then when they entered the dark room they could not see the stands directly in front of them, just the light. This mechanic instantly instilled a sense of wonder within the audience, asking them to suspend their disbelief. I gave them an experience they didn't know how to question, so all they could do was experience. I plucked the wire and again their sense of reality was destabilised. Something that appeared stable transformed into something magical and dynamic, like time itself. The audience could feel each other transfixed by the movement of the line together as gasps of amazement simultaneously erupted in space. I became a bridge between their understanding of what is "normal" and what could be.



Photography: Paul Boyle

**“We will never succeed in a peaceful society if we cannot inhabit the stories of others. If we cannot practice, through theatre and through art, the inhabitancy of another’s mind and perspective, then we have no rehearsal for the real thing.”**

**(Devlin 1:04:18)**

### **Connections and Temporal Societies**

One thing that has been true of all of the work I have done over my creative life, I have always sought to bring people into a space where they can connect through shared stories. To create a collective shift in people, to make them feel as if they are not alone. There is a need for major change in the perspectives of humans; around climate, around culture, and around how we engage with the world around us. The way we will get there, in my opinion, is through empathy. To open our hearts and minds to the experiences that are not our own; to the “Other”.

Humans have a long history of gathering in spaces of light. There is something ancient in the act of all sitting in light and sharing in others stories. Since the invention of the fire, we would have been gathering at night together to stay warm and share stories. The ritual of gathering by light has carried with us through time, though the lights may have advanced. Connecting my practice to this old tradition contextualises my work within the shared experiences that have been going on for millennia through the magic of light.

The Light and Space movement that started in the sixties is an example of how we still have a need to gather in light. Light has long been a central preoccupation in art, with painters like Caravaggio creating a practice of painting light. The Light and Art movement sought to take it off the canvas and created experiences of light, rather than representations. One major influence in this movement is the practice of Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson is known for creating illusionary spaces of light that take the viewer out

of their individual experience and asks them to question the nature of phenomenology and their place in the world. Many of his works have a focus on the body and collective movements through space. In ‘I only see things when they move’ (2004), he placed a motorised light sculpture into a dark gallery and allowed the movement of the reflections to interact with the shadows of the audience. ‘Multiple Shadow House’ (2010) he constructed from wooden frames and large screen walls that partitioned the space into rooms within a single room. Di-chromatic lights were placed in such a way that shadows would scatter and fragment and colours blended into soft tones. ‘These dynamic silhouettes, visible from both sides of the screens, enlarge and multiply visitors’ every movement, inviting them to co-produce an architecture of ephemeral gestures’ (Studio Olafur Eliasson, par. 3)

What bought me into the masters was that I wanted to craft a practice in designing for performance. I saw the intersectionality of the lines of enquiry I had been picking up over the years pointing me towards this. I wished to collaborate with performers and other artists over the course of my study. My practice is not only about the connections between my audience or of the audience to the work, but the connections I had been making through collaboration over the years. Unfortunately these collaborations did not come to fruition for various reasons. So I directed my energy to collaborate with my audience instead.



"The Presence of Light". Mirror, RGB lights, foam board. 2024

Photography: Paul Boyle

I tested this in my work I made at the end of 2024, 'The Presence of Light'. The audience were invited into the space where they were met with a hexagonal sculpture of inward-facing mirrors sitting in the middle of space refracting light infinitely within the form. Thin apertures allowed light to spill out. The lights used in this were RGB spectrum putting out a full intensity of light-waves. The homogeneous chaos inside the room is now finding its way out in new configurations; each new colour a different amalgamation of knowledge.

At the time I had been reading Jorge Louis Borges' story 'The Library of Babel' from his collection of writing, Labyrinths. A story where all knowledge, all ideas, and all experiences are held within an infinite labyrinthine library made of hexagonal rooms. Infinite knowledge held in books, but 'for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences.' (Borges 80). The story deals with themes of the infinite, chaos and order. If light could hold the memory of all it has experienced through time, all of our experiences and knowledge, I would imagine it to be something like this library. I wanted to find order in the knowledge of light and bring people in as active participants in that experience like Eliasson did for 'Multiple Shadow House'. To bring about a collective wisdom about their engagement in space, one that can only be felt when in the presence of others.

This work turned out to be a breakthrough for me. I still think it has been the closest I've gotten to delivering on the types of experiences I want for my audience. It became a place of joint meditation. The soft light that danced on

the wall drew the audience into the space together, while their cast shadows made them active participants within the work; making them able to step outside their individual experience and have their own experience simultaneously with others. Some had mentioned that they felt as if they could spend hours there. The calming effects of the light drew the gravity of the space down, relaxing people into spending more time in the experience.

A part of what Es Devlin's work sets out to achieve is what she calls "Temporal Societies", bringing people into a place of connectedness to facilitate a collective shift in their perspective of how separate they truly are to what that goes on around them. When we don't feel alone in the changes we must make, it makes that journey easier to navigate. I now too am starting to see the collectivity of my audience as one of these temporal societies. Places of mass gathering where an exchange of energy can occur between every individual adding to a collective experience.



Development of 'Life's Labyrinth'. Barbarian Ruckus Week, Vogelhorn Bowling Club. Projected Video (00:06:10 — looped), white cotton sheet. 2024. Photography: Paul Boyle

The work I made in April of 2024, 'Life's Labyrinth' was another exercise in collective experience, developed during Barbarian Production's 'Ruckus Week' held at the Vogelhorn Bowling Club. This is a week of intensive creativity that invites artists into a temporal society of creativity; allowing them to develop works-in-progress in the company of other creatives. My exploration into labyrinths drew me to make a work that explores ideas of the multiplicity of possibility and decision. I had just finished reading Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths,' a story that represents the infinite branching paths of time and possibility. Each decision creates a new path, leading to different outcomes and realities. Borges suggests that our perception of time and reality is non-linear, and that all possible outcomes coexist simultaneously. He explores the

idea that, although we may feel like we have agency in our choices, our actions are ultimately predetermined by the vast network of causality and interconnected events. This encourages readers to contemplate the complexity of time and the multiplicity of reality. It challenges conventional notions of linear time and highlights the interconnectedness of all events, suggesting that every decision we make creates a ripple effect that shapes the course of our lives and the world around us and our actions are only a small part of this bigger network.

I had wanted to create a work that explored the map of decisions we all make to gather together in one place; multiple life paths all converging in one place. How the intersectionality of each individual experience forms a network that connects us all. To take one's perspective

out, to see the full system at play, made me think of the way Borges compares decisions and possible outcomes to a bifurcating labyrinth. 'In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them.' (Borges et al, pg 51). It had me pondering on the multiplicity of possible decisions we must make independently to be able to all congregate in one place at the same time; like the array of decisions made for both audience and artists to all attend the Ruckus week showing and share in one experience. It made me think of the tangling of all our paths at different points. The mapping of the individual experience in a greater network. When a person in their 20s meets a person in their 60s, how that is both a past and future meeting in a present moment. How might these two have connected before this moment through a degree of separation of other moments in their lives?

I began the process by making charcoal marks on paper, forming continuous lines that diverged as I made decisions to rotate the charcoal. I made many iterations to explore the multiple possibilities that could exist within a single line. I then started layering them over each other. Thinking if one line was a single person's path of decisions, what would all of our paths together look like? What shape would that map take?

I wanted to present the action of decision making I had been exploring through these lines to an audience that would make them reflect on their own decisions that led them to congregate in one space for the collective showing

of Ruckus week. I decided to make a video work of myself drawing these lines. Layering them over each other to create a multi-faceted labyrinth that both is born and ends in the same place, but the space between is full of infinite possibilities. I projected the work onto a sheet at the gates of the Vogelmorn Bowling Club so that it was the first work they would encounter. Forcing the audience to walk through the work made them active participants in the work. As I watched these interactions I soon realised that I had also made a moment for audience members to connect with those around them. They would see others in the work as others had seen them. This unprompted plunging into the work took people out of their individual experience and made them suddenly aware of the temporary society that would be the gathering for Ruckus.



'Life's Labyrinth', 270° Video Projection (00:06:10), butchers paper, compressed charcoal, 2024

Photography: Paul Boyle

After my discoveries from the Ruckus week showing, I felt the need to progress the work into something more interactive; an active space to meditate on the vast amount of connections that interlace our lives together. I had been looking into the history of the labyrinth and its use as a tool of meditation. A point of interest that I found about labyrinths that was not common knowledge is that, unlike mazes which have dead ends and wrong decisions, a labyrinth has no possibility of making mistakes. A labyrinth is a continuous single line that one walks from the circumference to the centre, and back. I wanted to give people an experience of this meditative action whilst exploring the multiplicity within the work; I wanted them to follow my decisions and make their own. I stitched the iterative lines together and laid the line leading into the space. I used the SpaceLab of block 10 to place this iteration of the work. Using the 270° projection theatre to scale up the size of the video, using it as the centre of the labyrinth—a place of reflection.

I relied on the audience's free will to intertwine their agency within the work. I had given everyone the same invitation to the space. What interested me in the engagement of the work was the various ways that line was walked. Some took the path with meticulous care, experiencing each decision made along the way. Some walked right over it, with a need to complete the journey. Some were too scared to even step foot on it until others had made that decision for them. This accomplished the experience I wanted to deliver. Like the formation of the line, everyone started and ended in the same place, but the way in which they got there was filled with possibilities. I thought this was a good analogy for how we all move through our lives together in our own ways.

## Perception, Awareness and the Sensuous Experience

*'Phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience' (Abram 31)*

Two texts that have been a great influence in my own philosophy around perception and awareness are slight-of-hand magician, eco-philosopher, and anthropologist Dr. David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* and architect Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Both philosophies are heavily influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and their thinking around the nature of perception and phenomenology. 'The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and the world.' (Abram 39). Both texts form a critique of modern ocularcentrism and make a case for the return to a multi-sensory and embodied experience of reciprocity with the world around us. In the way that we don't just see a room, but we feel its presence, and ours has change on the space. Ponty believes that perception is the 'ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it.' (Abram 41)

The Renaissance sought to categorise sense into the five senses most of us know of today, separating them out from each other and placing them on a hierarchy, with sight being at the top. However, psychologist James J Gibson 'categorises the senses in five sensory systems: visual system, auditory system, the taste-smell system, the basic-orientating system and the haptic system. Steinerian philosophy assumes that we actually utilise no fewer than 12 senses' (Pallasmaa 45). Neuroscience has currently found potentially thirty-three different senses. Dr. Abram talks of perception as the 'activity of all the body's senses as they function and flourish together... the intertwining of sensory modalities seems unusual to us only to the extent

that we have become estranged from our direct experience' (Abram 45) 'The eyes want to collaborate with the other senses' (Pallasmaa 45). Both Dr. Abram and Pallasmaa argue that a connection back to the sensuous is the way forward to gaining understanding and empathy for our environments. Like in 'Suspension of time', the light being able to be touched as a physical form from refracting off the braided wire, it triggers the haptic system. I not only created something to look at, but something to touch.

Dr. Abram makes the connection between magic and the senses. It is his belief that by destabilising our understanding of the world, we will open ourselves up to a more sensuous experience. Dr. Abram's time as a magician is a great example of this. During one of his shows there were allegations made of him spiking patrons' drinks as they experienced the strangest things after his show; saturation of the sky, things that were once inanimate seemed to move on their own accord. Dr. Abram replied "when you destabilize people's expectations about how coins and cards behave, then you destabilize their expectations about how blue the sky is or how interesting the cracks in the pavement are. And then instead of looking through the lens of what they are expecting to see, which is what we do by all accounts according to the neuroscientists 85% of the time ... Instead of looking through that lens, you look sensuously with your actual senses" (Rubin and Devlin 00:24:39)

During 2024 I got the chance to see Olafur Eliasson's 'Your Curious Journey' exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Each independent work within the exhibition sought to destabilise the viewer's perception of what it was they were looking at, while the journey through the exhibition activated different sensual experiences as you progressed through the space; that of warmth, of cold, and of humidity. All things that connect us sensuously back to the wider natural ecosystem. Upon entering the exhibition, the viewer is plunged into the first work, 'Yellow Corridor' (1997), a long corridor illuminated with mono-frequency yellow lighting, reducing our colour perception to shades

of yellow, greys and black. As soon as I entered the space it appeared as if my own body had become completely black and white. By only allowing yellow light frequencies into the space, Eliasson had taken out all colours that were not yellow. What was the most destabilising of this work for me was the strange sense of being in the enclosed space of a corridor, but because of the lack of colour apart from the intense yellow light, the space felt as if it was expanding at the same time. This gave me a slight feeling of vertigo as I walked down the path unbalanced. Had it not been for this instant destabilisation setting the tone for the rest of the exhibition, I may have not been so open to the sensuality of the works that were to come.

**Practice**

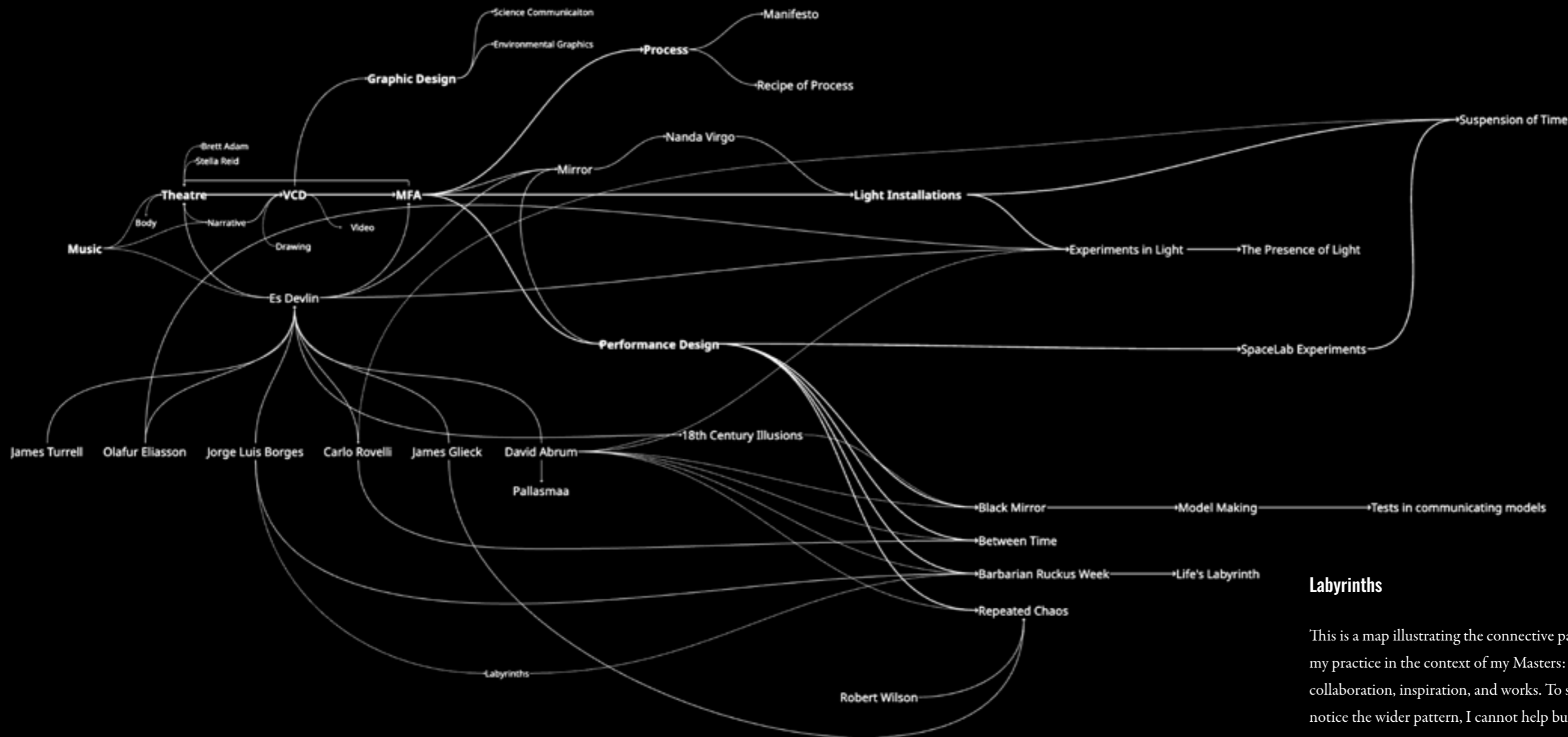
## Chaos

Chaos Theory is an umbrella term for the multiple fields of mathematics that concern themselves with the studies of complex unpredictable dynamic systems that are deterministic; the study of seeing the patterns amongst the chaos. James Gleick's book *Chaos: A New Science in the Making* maps out the various discoveries that led mathematician James A. Yorke to coin the term chaos theory in 1975 and develop it as a branch of system theory. 'It guides you to understand that there is pretty much one equation that governs all underlying structures of our world ... You begin to understand that these phenomena are governed by the same maths' (Devlin and Devlin xiii). Chaos teaches that there is an underlying geometry to any exchange of energy. It teaches that the various bifurcating systems that make up these exchanges interconnect everything. It also teaches how small actions can lead to major changes in the greater pattern; like the theory of sensitive dependence on initial conditions, or, The Butterfly Effect.

*"Allow your research to take you as you want. Allow one thought to lead to another. Don't be afraid to go down the rabbit hole"* (Devlin "Culture in Quarantine" 00:05:40)

I relate the way systems bifurcate to the way I pick up lines of enquiry. One idea leading to a multiplicity of others. I used to struggle in my creativity, thinking that I was yet to find where my specific interest lay. I thought I had been changing my work to try on new versions of myself; theatre, graphic design, spatial design. Even the concepts

I was looking into used to seem disconnected from each other. Mapping out my trajectory over the last 15 years has allowed me to stand back on my own practice and see the patterns in the lines of inquiry I had been making; light, body, experience, narrative.



## Labyrinths

This is a map illustrating the connective parts that form my practice in the context of my Masters: theory, fields, collaboration, inspiration, and works. To stand back and notice the wider pattern, I cannot help but see it as a dynamic, non-linear labyrinth that will grow bigger and more intricate with time. This Masters has taught me that when met with a fork in the path, it is okay to take both paths. “It is Jorge Luis Borges who said, “I do not think I really exist. I am the sum total of every book I’ve ever read, every one I’ve ever loved, every street I’ve ever walked down, every horse I’ve ever rode.” (Rubin and Devlin 00:09:35) As my trajectory moves forward, the labyrinth of my practice will diverge, bringing with it all that I have learnt before. I have learnt that my process of thought isn’t one that defines a singular “correct” truth, but one that explores a multiplicity of truths. That both things can be true, so I walk both paths.

## Methodology

Coming from my design undergraduate, I was used to a process of research→prototype→make; following the “Double Diamond” structure of diverging, then converging. A similar process is followed for theatre designers. In the second episode of Es Devlin’s MasterClass, she talks of a process of research then sketching. “Every project begins with entering a world you will then transform into another ... to enter a world, often the easiest way is through research ... forget about the re and just search. Because what you really want to do is search for a way in for you” (Devlin “Research, Then Sketch.” 00:01:10). This is a process that looks for the best way to get the end result, but can sometimes form a rigidity in the process; not allowing for the full journey of exploration.

*“I could read a lot of beautiful books that would tell me about the continuity of self with the world, but I could only feel it because I was practicing it.” (Rubin and Devlin 00:50:44)*

This Masters was inviting me into new material enquiries and a heuristic way of researching. A director I’ve worked with in the past, Stella Reid, would say ideas and skills are alive and need to be grown from the ground up; they need to be nurtured and fed. When I was in my undergraduate years, I always felt anxiety around how quickly my ideas could change. I was constantly pushed to “put stakes in the ground” and decide what it is I was to make. Although this was a useful way of meeting deadlines in a project, it often asked for the end result to be identified before it was to be developed. Although the design process allows for

change to happen it is often harder to change course once a trajectory is set. This linear model of start, middle, then end forms works as solitary ideas. This thinking was no longer of use to me. Once I had witnessed the interconnectedness of my practice, it was hard to have an end to an idea.

This adjustment in my thinking didn’t come without struggle. I was used to being held by the architecture of my previous process; but it kept me too safe. If I was to develop works that sit outside of the rigidity of our current perceptions of the world, I had to break open the boundaries of myself and explore the porosity of thinking and making and explore multiple possible ideas simultaneously.

The more I journeyed down this explorative process it opened me up to my own intuition in my making. I stopped believing everything I was doing as problem-solving and started to walk the line of inquiry with trust that the new found architecture of my labyrinth of a practice would take me where I needed to go.

*“I think that the learning provides the architecture in which the intuition can be set loose and fly and be free” (Rubin and Devlin 00:58:15).*

This took me into a space of experimentation throughout the Masters. Jumping into new spaces for myself; the infancy of my emerging practice became more evident. I needed to momentarily strip away the weight of the deeply

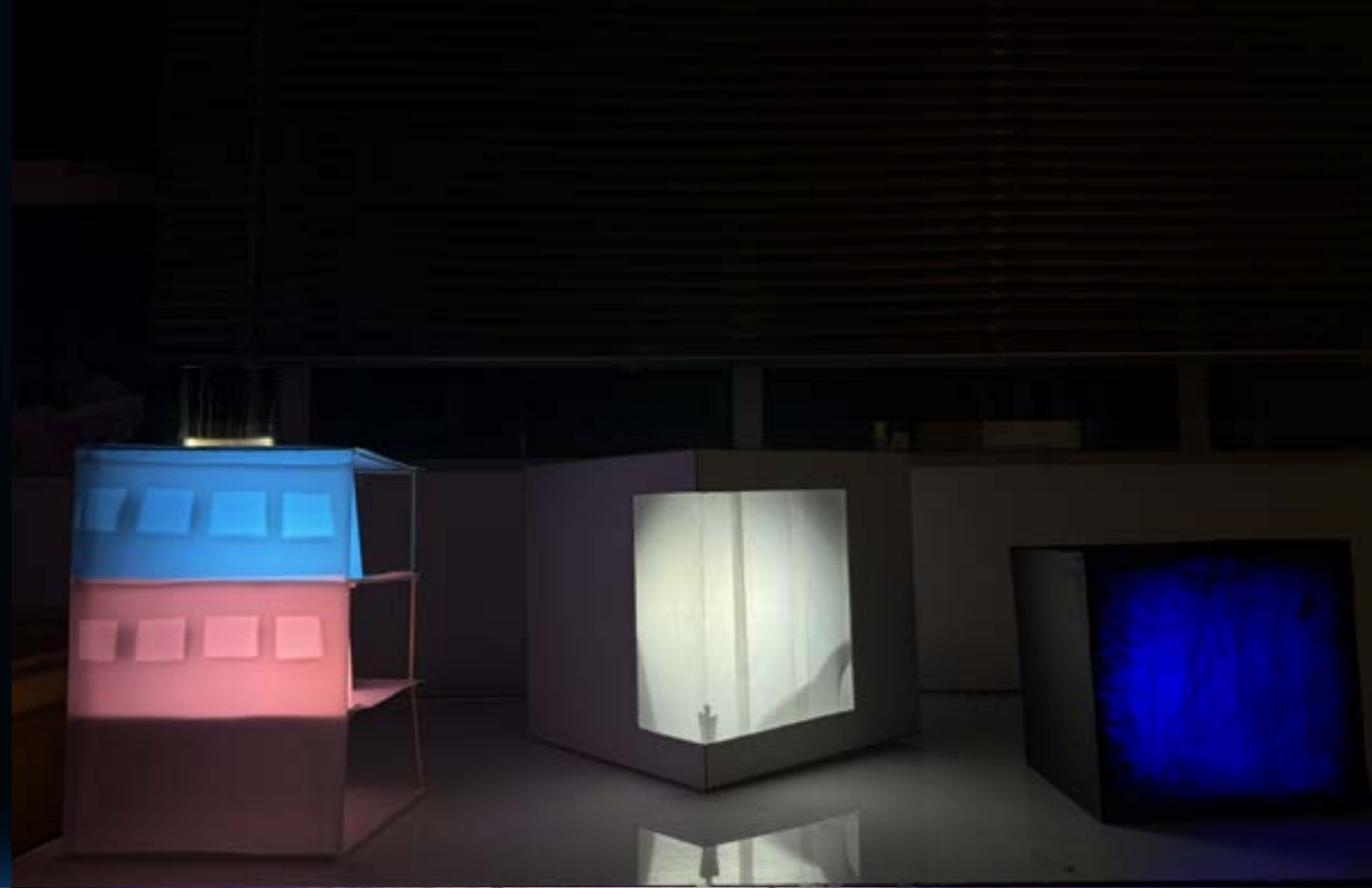


Experiments in light. 2024. Photography: Paul Boyle

conceptual parts of my work to focus on understanding the materiality and explore a more intuitive way of making. There was a focus in my process on understanding the materiality of my work. To, like a magician, form a box of tricks that I can bring with me into new works.

Throughout my process I invited myself to form deeper understandings of the workings of light and space. I wanted to explore their possibilities and boundaries. Spending time to tinker and play different lights. Shining them onto different materials and through different apertures to see what knowledge might illuminate itself. I became interested in how I could fragment and move light in new ways. I was drawn to the way it could diverge and converge at different points; be that in direction or spectrum. The multiplicity

of emotions that it could compel us to feel. And the way it could bring forth an awareness of our surroundings. “Turn the lights out at the end of the day and get a torch out and just play with it. See what it does. See what it brings you” (Devlin “Storytelling with Light.” 00:03:45)



In my second year I sought to learn about space by working with it at different scales. I have always had an affinity towards grandeur in my work. But to better understand the construction and an overarching system in space, I had to take myself out of the work and see it from a perspective that is scaled out. "There is no human being... that doesn't love a miniature model. It starts when we are kids; doll's houses, a model house...and I think it has to do with the ability humans have to operate from a number of perspectives." (Devlin "Scale Models." 00:00:20)

Working in miniature taught me how to not just work inside space, but construct it. It allowed me to fully explore an idea before being met with the parameters of reality. I could imagine how the work would be situated in different contexts: performance, festival, and gallery.

**Materiality**

## Light

*“Light is one of the ways you can most directly and dramatically affect people’s emotions and tell them stories... We concentrate better with our ears when our eyes are focused on a small area of light, rather than too much information.”*  
(Devlin “Storytelling with Light.” 00:00:05)

Humans have been gathering in light to share stories for as long as we can remember. It has been used as a tool of narrative across time. Still to this day we congregate in places where we can find light; cinemas, theatres, concerts. Humans are drawn to the light like moths to a flame. It instils an ancient sense of wonder in us and opens us up to our surroundings. In my work ‘The Presence of Light’ I crafted an experience of light for the audience that harboured a sense of connection in space. The soft glow of mixing frequencies stood as a symbol for the way our stories can meld together into a collective experience.

Light is also a tool for creating illusionary magic. Theatre and magicians have used it to draw audiences’ awareness and make them suspend their disbelief. They also use the interactive qualities of light against matter to create illusion. Light is a tool to destabilise people. We do not see light itself, but light lets us see what it wants to.

In ‘The Presence of Light’, I met my audience with a darkened space that contrasted their previous environment. This collectively reduced the iris in each individual, collectively opening them up to their sensuous perception. The soft tones of the light created a meditative space that

held the audience in engagement with the work. The display of light evoked a sense of wonder that affected people’s emotional state within space; they became reciprocal to the energy of the room.

‘Suspension of Time’ was another time I have utilised how light can evoke a collective shift in physiology. When the audience entered this room, again, their irises were contracted to see a darker black. This allowed me to hide the structures of my exhibition right in front of my audience; meeting them with nothing more than a floating line. This not only focused the eye to the experience I was delivering, but also hid parts of reality from the audience, destabilising their sight. Then as motion became a part of the work, the expectation that I had just set up dissolved before their eyes, making them question further what they were experiencing.

In my work ‘The Aleph’ I use light to create an illusionary interaction with the two-way mirrored mylar frames that suspend in space. The illusionary mechanics of these mirrors is that they are only a mirror whenever light surrounds them. As soon as light passes through them they reveal a hidden world that was once an image of us; we become able to see through the window, past ourselves, and deeper into the realm of the other. To see, at once ourselves, others, and the space that surrounds us breaks our reality of the space around us and allows us to feel connected to that which sits on the other side of experience.

**‘You sometimes have  
to start without light  
in order to find it.’**

(Devlin and Devlin inside-cover)



In my work 'Formation' I explored the crafting of light. This work was born of an experimental process. I wanted to become more intuitive when working with this medium. I started in an empty dark space and grew the work till the light had revealed its ephemerality and ability of transformation. This allowed me to explore how to really control light within a space. Blending different lights and materials together with precision to bring life into the space. A process that opened up the materiality of working with light, rather than it only being symbolically in the work.

## Space

Light and space are synonymous with each other; you cannot experience light if there is no space for it to exist in. Equally, you cannot see space without the interaction of light. I have been on a journey through a discovery of space during my studies. I thought, coming into this masters, I was a novice in my working with space. But mapping out all the works in my life, I realised that I had always been making spatial enquiries that involved a sense of identity, our place in the world, and a relationship to experiences outside solely our own.

Working at different scales became a massive change in the way I think about space. To enter into the world of miniature reconnected me with a child-like play I had long forgotten. It reminded me of the hours I spent as a child in the garden making tiny homes and villages for the magical creatures I believed inhabited my backyard—which in reality mostly turned out to be stray hedgehogs. Not being weighted down by the contractions of time, money, and resources that are needed to accomplish work at a larger scale, I was able to release my creativity and play with spaces that would have been near impossible to make in my masters at their imagined scale.

Whether they be natural or human-made, space forms systems of engagement with the things that are held within them; doors and opening from entries and exits. Windows and clearings allow us to see either space inside, or the world outside. Paths and corridors set how we might move through that space, either giving us decisions or instructing

us on where to go. These engagements form a reciprocity between ourselves and the spaces we inhabit; we gain an agency of decision, safety, and a place of gathering, while space is allowed to feed off the energy of those who inhabit it.



'Black Mirror'. Light, polythene, wooden frame, water, mirror, galvanised wire. 2025. Photography: Paul Boyle

'Black Mirror' was a work that formed a system of reciprocity between space and a synaesthetic sensuous experience. I filled half the narrow space with a black polythene pool filled with a few inches of water. Suspended above the pool was a single mirror with a spot light positioned directly above. Walking barefoot in the water filled the room with the tranquil noise of the water being disturbed. The water was cold on the feet, while the air filled with a warm humidity from evaporation that touched the skin and filled the nose. The drag of the water through the feet made a sensation of pleasure. The disturbances refracted on the ceiling creating caustic patterns to dance in reaction to the movement of the audience. The mirror created a blind spot in the room where people could partially disappear and instead reflect ourselves in their place. Making us orientate ourselves differently from our spatial position and the relation to the other. This was an experience that engaged sight, smell, touch, thermoception, and equilibrioception simultaneously. This made people aware of themselves in relation to where they stood in the room, where they stood from others, how they affect the space, and how the space affects them.

'The Aleph' takes name and inspiration from an imagined space from one of Borges' stories. A point in space that encapsulates, at once, all other points of space, time, and perspectives. Through the active materiality and

arrangement of the hanging two-way mirrors, I form a room where the walls do not exist and the window not only allows us to see through, but reflect ourselves on both sides. Where viewers can not only see multiple perspectives, but also move through them freely. This homogeneous space forms a narrative around the experience of being able to see things inside and out at once. It allows us to hold multiple perspectives at once and open us to the perspectives of those on the other sides of the mirrored windows.

## Body

Body has been a recurring factor in many of the works I make. When bodies exist within work it allows us an entry point into the idea. We can begin to imagine ourselves in the context of what is before us; especially when the body is obstructed in some way, it becomes easier to impose ourselves into the experience of this other entity. For a long time in my work I have been exploring this ambiguous bodily form: segments of the face. Bodies behind screens. Bodies that are reflected back without absolute clarity. They allow us to see parts of ourselves in other perspectives.

Mirrored surfaces kept resurfacing for me as a material that interrelated with light in magical ways. Mirror has been a big influence on Es Devlin's Practice. Using materiality to create symbolic experiences of inward and outward reflection. For example, her 2016 Peckham installation 'Mirror Maze' where audiences were invited into a multi-room faceted-mirror labyrinth, allowing the viewer to see themselves repeated throughout space, questioning their sense of self to the environment and those around them.

Olafur Eliasson also uses mirrors in his work. They become a tool for him to manipulate the light to play on people's perception and the spatial dynamics of space. In his 2003 work for the Tate Modern, Eliasson placed a large mirror on the ceiling of the Turbine hall. The only source of light was a large artificial sun that moved across the space. This created a doubling of the environment and placed the

audience as figures on the ceiling. Allowing them to not only witness the extraordinary phenomenon of a sun rising, but also to see themselves together as tiny figures in collective experience.

The mirrors in 'The Aleph' at points give a clear reflection of ourselves and the space that directly surrounds us. But when the light shines through and the two-way effect is activated, we become a ghostly shadow of ourselves. Our image takes on a fluidity and amalgamates with a multiple of perspectives seen in the frame.

**Conclusion**

These last two years have helped me to see my work as situated within a divergent practice. I will never be someone who is happy exploring one thing. I got into Art and Design because I found them to be the best mechanism by which I could explore a limitless array of ideas. I have now placed my practice in context of the wider connection of artists that form a community in the ideas and interests that pertain to my practice. Though my practice might diverge in what it explores, I have found what anchors me in my work; light, space, body, perception and the need to form connections. What brings me back to the work is an interest in amazement to form a sense of wonder in people; to see their eyes light up like a child exploring the world for the first time. Maybe if I can shift people's minds to see themselves connected with those around them, and show how they are connected through a greater network not always visible from within, we can all go through the collective transformation needed. After exploring the human-to-human and human-to-space interaction through the course of my masters, I feel drawn now to explore the human to more-than-human connection in my work. This is where I see a new path of enquiry within my practice forming.

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