

Textile Installation Art



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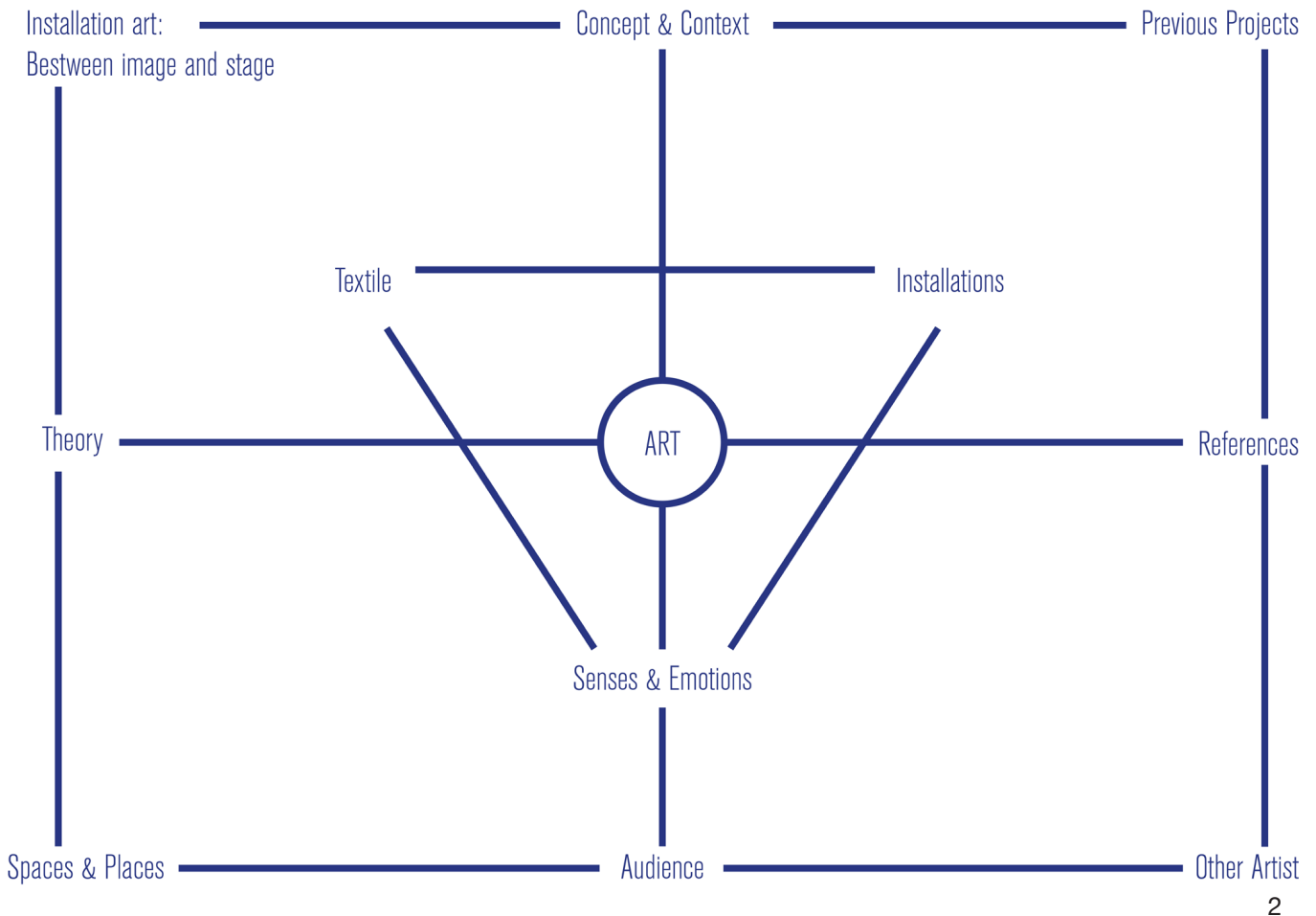
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Introduction

We take a really long time to get to the important point of a story, which is quite like how I feel my life as an artist is coming to be. I started out being certain that I wanted to be a fashion designer. I've always expressed myself through the way I look; my clothes and my hair, but after finishing my bachelor I was struck by the classic fashion depression: why make more clothes when the industry is absolutely awful? I knew it was because I felt like I had something important to express and I didn't know how else to do it. It was the thing in my life that gave me joy and purpose, but the industry was also more commercial than I expected. Making collection after collection was very repetitive and we would basically just send off the designs to a factory, which meant we did everything on the computer. There was no focus on handcraft or techniques, only aesthetics, trends and how likely it was to sell. I turned more and more to costumes and textile where I could experiment with both artistic concepts and still be able to hands-on make things. I realized making things with my brain, heart and hands were the essence of who I am as a creative person. Then slowly projects and thoughts became more abstract and I realized I didn't actually need a human in focus or center for a project to be important. I think this is when I dived into making what I called "costumes for the room", which is textile art installations. But how did I end up here and why is it that I find this specific art form to be so important?

How do we experience textile installation art through our senses and emotions? how do they affect what and how we perceive the artwork. Is it the tactile textile surfaces, which relates to the clothes we wear, what draws us in. Is it the embodiment of art through installations that we can relate to or is the combination of surface and space that wakes our curiosity? is it because it's a space that express meaning and stories through sensory experiences of three dimensional imagery. Instead of just viewing the artwork, we enter it and become a part of the work, we are consumed and our body become one with the piece. We enter a world of a curated aesthetic universe that focuses on our senses and trickers our emotional experiences. We try to find meaning and understand the work by associating it to things we know to be tangible. But exactly is it that makes art installations so different from other art forms? and what does it require in order to affect us on such a sensorial and emotional level? That is what I wish to dive into and explore in this essay.

What is installation art?

So first I want to look into what is the basics of installation art. The book *Installation art: between image and stage* by Anne Ring Petersen tries to give us an explanation, but unlike many other genres it doesn't have a set check list you can cross off to put it in a certain box. This means that defining installation art is quite tricky since it is a product of genre-developing process and we still consider it to be a relatively new genre, we can however try to define the principles and "tools" used help us understand the context that installation art comes from and how it's different since it combines several elements in the art. Installations awakens the viewer, forces their body and brain to take in and react in the transition between subject and object, structure and movement, space and ritual. The feeling that the space guides, even manipulates, comes from the movement of the body. "As opposed to terms such as painting, sculpture and photography, which divide works into groups that have some formal characteristics in common and are based in interrelated methods of depiction, the term installation does not encompass special formal and technical characteristics immanent to this particular type of artwork" (Petersen, 2015, p. 34).

Sculpture is clearly separated from painting, which is based on color and opticality, while sculpture's essential features are tactility and form. This is where installation art comes in as an unusual works of art, since it often focuses on both opticality and form at the same time. Not all sculptures have these elements, but it is the kind of installations that affect us the most that have all these features as a part of the artwork. Robert Morris argues that artworks which are organized as spatial environments require a particular manner of reception from the viewer: an absolute and immediate physical presence in the space of the artwork here and now, prior to any intellectual, interpretive processes. This type of experience, of sensory proximity and presence, can no more be saved in the memory than the work's spatial organization could be reproduced in a photograph, argues Morris. The experience of being in a space and of existing in time, which according to Morris forms the essence of the authentic experience of art, is in fact entirely based on an experience of presence. It simply cannot be represented in the same way though pictures or text (Petersen, 2015, p. 93).

Installation art uses all sorts of mediums and materials, such creating a terminology of composite terms: video installation, sculpture installation, performance installation and site-specific installation. Because of this it makes it difficult to define what exactly makes a piece installation art. Juliana Rebentisch claims installation art defy any genre definition because it is "anti-objectivist", in the sense that they are defined on the basis of the empiric appearance of the artwork. Anne Ring Petersen have narrowed the definition down to the three following constitution parameters:

1. installations activate space and context
2. installations stretch the work in time, whereby its character becomes that of situation and process
3. installations have a phenomenological focus on the viewers bodily and subjective experience, and on the temporal aspects of reception

Another part of installation art that is quite interesting to look into is its performative element. Art and theater have the same goal in common: telling a story through creative expression. "Theatre, from which performance art and performance theatre evolved, has traditionally been seen as an art form that primarily unfolds in time. sculpture, from which installation art evolved, has traditionally been seen as an art form that unfolds in space." (Petersen, 2015, p. 22) It's about creating audience curiosity through how the illusion is created. They both focus on the relation between viewer, work and world. It's not possible to draw a clear line between what we can and cannot call installation art, but we know that fx. theater has certain parameters and elements. The performance has a set timeframe, it has a stage with lights, sounds, costumes and actors that together express a story. Installations have some similarities when it comes to the set, but here the viewer is both an actor and an audience.

The American curator Jennifer Licht expressed it in this way in 1969: "the human presence and perception of the spatial context have become materials of art". While a few years later historian of performance RoseLee Goldberg asserted that the gallery space was being utilized in a new way, not as a neutral container for the display of objects, but as "a place to experience experience". The viewer is a crucial part of the definition, not the object or technique. "Structure for behaviour" and Rosalind Krauss's "sculpture in the expanded field" means that installation was born from sculptures that created an "environment", since installation used to mean placing artworks within an exhibition space. Now installations are more a structure for behavior, guiding the viewer to move and experience and interact with the space. Installation is fundamentally a non-object art where it's redefining art from object to space through Contextualism, theatricality, reintroduction of narrative elements.



Here we see an example of the artist Pipilotti Rist's work: *4th Floor to Mildness*, where the installation invites you in to lie down on the beds and view the video art in the ceiling. First of all because you are in a bed it's a very intimate feeling of lying on something soft and comfortable while you look up. It's also a space that guides the audience to actively become a part of the art by lying down. It tells you what to do and invites you to stay for longer than just a quick glance at a video.

How does it affect us?

Experience is directed to the external world, seeing and thinking clearly reach beyond the “self”. Feeling is more ambiguous, in feeling an intention and an affection coincide in the same experience. Experience is compounded of feeling and thought. To see something and to think something is closely related, which perhaps is why we say “I see” when we’ve understood something. We use our senses to comprehend the world around us. Touch is interesting because it articulates another complete world where we explore the physical environment we are in and categorize them through shapes and textures. Like the rock you are holding is heavy, smooth and cold, the flower is light and fragile. The human hand is peerless in it’s strength, agility and sensitivity. “what sensory organs and experiences enable human beings to have their strong feeling for space and for spacial qualities? Answer: Kinesthesia, sight and touch”³. Taste, smell, skin sensitivity, and hearing cannot individually(nor perhaps even together) make us aware of a spacious external work inhabited by objects. The skin registers sensations it reports on it’s own state and at the same time that of the object pressing against it. “The organization of human space is uniquely dependent on sight, our other senses expand and enriches visual space”(Tuan, 1977, p. 16). Constructed space depends on the power of the mind to extrapolate far beyond the sense data. Some spaces lie at the conceptual end of the experimental continuum.

Place is a type of object, places and object define space, giving it a geometrical personality. The word “body” immediately calls to mind an object rather than an animated and animating being. The body is an “it” and it is in space or takes up space. In contrast to the “world” where man is inhabiting the world and commanding and creating it. Body is “lived body” and space is humanly constructed space.

This is what i mean with installation art being different that other art forms; its like walking through a portal and into the art itself instead of just standing on the outside looking in. It’s the *here and now* experience that really makes the difference. Often when people see a very famous piece of art in real life for the first time, they are very disappointed because its been recreated in so many formats, such as posters and digitally, it doesn’t live up our expectation. Installation art on the other hand is often incredible hard to recreative in a photos or digitally, since it doesn’t include all the elements. Video often is what is the best type of documentation since it can have sounds and can move around in the room like the viewer would in the piece. But you won’t feel the emotions of the space or the tangible senses like touch. Perhaps this is also why installation art has become more widespread art style since the 1960. This type of art is something we experience rather than merely observe, Papastergiadis’s concept of ambient perspective refers to the phenomenon that we rarely look at the world from a single position in space but tend to perceive things “as we are passing through them”. (Tuan, 1977, p. 42) Its the questions posed by the objects, concept and context we explore and try to find meaning in.

Our bodily awareness of installations are different because we see and relate subconsciously compare it more to “real” spaces rather than an artwork. Perhaps this is the reason why many installation artists focus on either making it very similar to real things, like as Rose Eken’s who made a ceramic version of all the items she had in her studio. Or Do Ho Suh that makes textile works based on real houses he has lived in and visited. But there are also many artist that goes in the complete opposite direction and create whole new universes. In these installations, once you enter the space, you are transported into a fantasy or sci-fi universe, like the universes which Shoplifters creates using colorful fake hair to make her installations. Or perhaps someone that more people know like Yayoi Kusama’s infinity rooms where you loose track of the borders of the room. There are of course many other types of installations, but I’ve chosen to focus on these two since they are the ones that affect our senses and emotions the most.



Fashion, Costumes and Textile as art

Immersive textile installation art is a more specific and unusual art genre because it's a very craftsmanship heavy category. Almost all types of art have some level of craftsmanship, but textile is somehow different. Maybe it's because it used to be a "household" craft. If we go a bit back in time, women weren't allowed to make art, but many managed to get around this by developing different textile techniques, because it wasn't seen as art but something practical and aesthetic, such as embroidery or lacemaking. Textile is something that yearn to be touched and experienced by the human body. It often has a practical purpose of being something useful and then we made it aesthetically pleasing as well, just to add to the enjoyment of the item. If it's a shirt, a tablecloth, a rug, curtains: it all has a function. Textile art to me also has a function because we connect to these surfaces in a different way than a picture or a painting. This is why textile installation art is so interesting because it combines so many different elements and themes in the art piece.

Perhaps this is why textile art isn't seen as "fine art" in the same way many other crafts such as for example printmaking are. Fashion is also an interesting field in-between something practical and artistic, because ironically a lot of the fashion we would call art is so extreme it isn't comfortable or wearable. It's much like installation art: very hard to define and put in boxes. I'm realizing I quite enjoy these difficult to explain and hard to put in a specific box creative categories. But this is what makes them interesting. Coming from a background in fashion I have always been very interested in how we express ourselves through clothing. I believe clothing to be an art form of shapes, pattern, colors and symbols that is immensely underrated. It's an aesthetic nonverbal communication that we do everyday, whether we are aware of it or not. Perhaps this is why I slowly started to work more with conceptual textile art installations, going away from dressing the body. However I realized I can't escape it because now I dress the room the viewer enter with textile, so in the room the body is still relating to the textile's tactility, colors and techniques.

I also believe that one of the reason textile art and textile installations affect us so differently is because it relates to the thing we keep closest to our body. We already have this bodily connection with the material, we are used to have it touching our skin, so when we see textile art there's always a desire to touch and experience it with our body, back that is what we do every day already. It's something that brings us comfort and warmth and makes us feel safe. My experience when working on the project Axiom was that as soon as people entered the room it was a little scary because it was something weird and unknown, but the textile, especially the wool, had a warmth that invited people and almost subconsciously told people "it safe, I'll take care of you".



Memories of the neighbors house

Installation art has developed and become more popular since the 1960s and till now. There are quite a few artist we that are now very famous for working mostly with installation art, such as Yayoi Kusama, Pipilotti Rist and Olafur Eliasson.

One of my favorite installation is *Dawn hours at the neighbors's house* by Pipilotti Rist which is in the basement of Aros Art Museum in Aarhus. When you enter the art piece and take a quick glance around the room, it almost looks like a regular living room. But when you sit down in the sofa you are sitting directly across from a video projection, which is Pipilotti's main art form: video art, shown in a installation. I have seen other installations by her, which are all incredible, but this one is different. The audience in the room become quite confused about what they are allowed to do in the space. Are you allowed to sit in the sofa? can you touch the books on the bookshelf? There is laundry on the balcony, and you soon realize that there is a bit of wind swaying it back and forth. Then as time passes you notice the sun is setting and the opposite wall starts to have small flickering lights. The whole wall is fake fluffy fur, that you instantly reach out and touch. Now the titles on the books starts to light up together with more lights on the floor, all while a classic Pipilotti rist video piece is playing on the wall. It's a course of a day summed up in a 8 minute installation.





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This piece has always fascinated me and when I was younger I couldn't explain what it was that made it so special. When I think about it now I know it's because the room immediately made me curious, and still do. Whenever I'm visiting this museum I always go down in the basement and sit for at least one 8 minute day cycle. When I think of the room now, while also writing this essay, I realize all the components that make this an art installation, is what I'm drawn to. The movement of the laundry, the lights changing from day to night to day again, the books lighting up, the projected video as well as a small tv: both accompanied by sound. The soft wall and sofa you sit down in. The room invites the viewer in and fills them with wonder and curiosity while they slowly explore and discover new things in the room. I saw it for the first time in 2005 and now 17 years later I often think about this art piece and constantly go back to rediscover: what was it that I found so interesting about this particular piece of art? To be honest I still can't pinpoint exactly why I like it so much, but while researching this topic of installation art, I think I'm realizing that this room keeps making me curious and that is why I keep returning. There's always something new, even though the room hasn't changed, but because I have. When I return I reflect on who I am now and I learn new things from this installation. Learning this, I want to be more aware of how I can channel this through my art in the future.

Previous work

Looking at my recent work and relating it to installation art, and the theory I've read for this essay, I've become quite reflective of the elements I have used without knowing exactly why. I've been drawn to immersive installations ever since I worked with Wunderland on the project called *Horse Inside Out*. To describe it in the words of Wunderland: *Horse Inside Out* is a sensory, immersive installation and performance experience consisting of a sculpture / installation large enough for one audience member to move through a crevice and travel through several rooms. The work is a hybrid of sound, spoken poetry, installation art, performance / dance and kinesthetic interaction.¹¹ This was a big project where we were a group of writers, costumes and set designers, dancers, artist and performers working together on developing and making the project. The idea and project was started by Wunderland's founder and creative leader Mette Aakjær. I was working as a textile artist and set design assistant under Mona Møller Schmidt. This was the first time I worked with a big textile installation that had such a focus on the somatic elements, it wasn't something you focused on when making clothes even though we wear it straight on our body. After working on this project I was interested in exploring textile art and installations more, which is what I've been looking into ever since I started my master at KHiO. Last spring I made my first version of an immersive textile installation called *Axiom*.



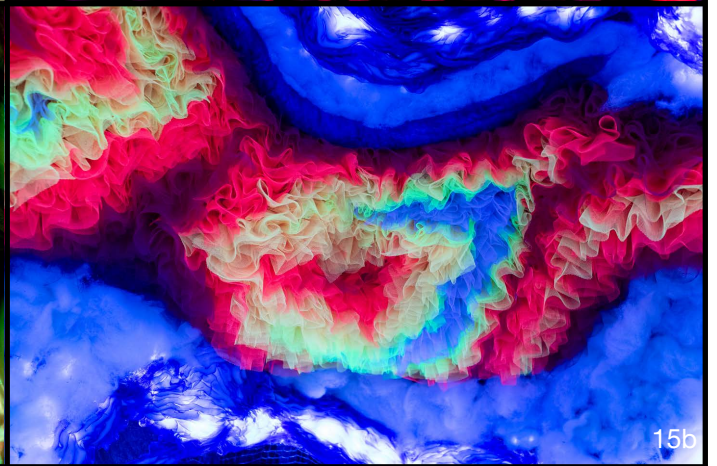
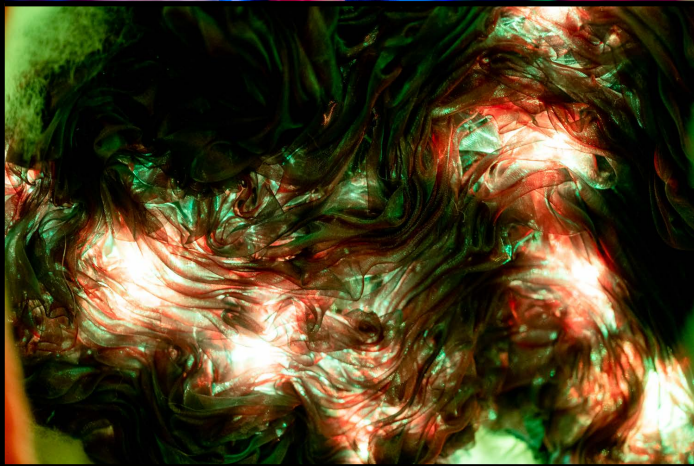
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When you enter Axiom¹³ you go through a portal to another universe. It's the bottom of the ocean and far away in space at the same time. The ambient music welcomes you to calmly enter and explore the space. The soft textiles all around you and on the floor invites you to lie down and let your thoughts wander as the colors slowly shift and change. The wool in the installation gives it a warmth and pressure, like a weighted blanket gives you a sense of comfortable claustrophobia. Time goes fast and slow at the same time and you keep losing track of your thoughts and sense of self. The experience of this installation is incredibly hard to describe in words because it is first and foremost experiences with your senses. Which is exactly why I have become interested in how to explain how and why these type of installations have this effect on us.

Pictures will help imagining being inside and getting a sense of the space of the installation, a video will help you feel the atmosphere though seeing the space in motion with the ambient music. But you will never really feel, smell or touch the tactility of the room and textiles. Is it soft, is it prickly? Is it warm inside? Does it smell like wool and dirty socks or like essential oils and perfume? It was through the experience of making and exploring these topic I realized just how different installation art is, especially immersive textile installation art that focuses on being explored though our senses and emotions.





Conclusion

While researching and writing this essay I feel like I have answered a important question I didn't actually realize I've been asking myself for a while. It's all about connecting, finding meaning and joy in life, and to me this is exactly what textile installation art can do for me. I want to touch peoples senses and emotion through my art and I hope to do that through my textile art installations. I also realized, thinking i was going far away from fashion, my core values are still the same, I have just found a new way to express myself.

What I wanted to explore in this essay is how we as humans are affected by this art form that plays with an immersiveness and puzzles our senses and emotions, which then trickers the viewers to try and find meaning, stories or answers in the art piece. It plays not only on a intellectual understanding of art, but more on our basic primal instincts, which makes it something that can be experienced by everyone since It doesn't require a specific level of knowledge. Especially textile installation art is experienced very differently than paintings, photography, film or sculptures because it has a tactile surface which we relate to the things we keep the closest to our bodies - our clothes. These installations are like a performance without actors, its a set with costumes that comes to life when the viewer enter the space. It's a three dimensional theatrical experience in a aesthetically curated space. Installations often play on the senses not only through the art pieces, but on the different levels of immersiveness you get when you combine light, sound, textures, smell or video - things that are provoking your senses. It's art you have to experience with your whole essence, not just through seeing it with your eyes. It forces your body to react, even if you aren't conscious of it, which makes your brain try to find explanations and associations of the art.

It can be hard to explain why art is so important to the human race but it's all about expressing and connecting with other people. It can be with friends and family or complete strangers. We all connect though different stories. Actually this is one of the basic need of humans, as the writer Philip Pullman so perfectly puts it: "After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we need the most in the world". Stories are a huge part of our identities as humans, it is an essential relation that exist in our relationships with the world, it's communities and the people we surround ourselves with." This is what art does, it creates a narrative. This is where my fascination with installation art comes in because you might think: how can a room and objects tell stories that will have a lasting effect on us? The performative space tells us our stories or at least invites us into a universe full of narratives where you can interpret and creative your own stories.

Installation art doesn't just want to show or tell you a story, it wants to feel the story. Especially immersive installations where effects are used to make you feel the art with your whole body. Making it seem realistic and fantasy-like at the same time by using lights, sounds and touch in the installations makes them memorable. So it doesn't matter if the installation is a living room or a room filled with colorful hair, if it tricks all your senses or makes you feel any emotions, it's different from person to person what makes you react and feel something. But the fact we try to connect with other people through these things is what's important. I know in the future I will be more aware of how I want my art to tell a narrative and how I want it to affect people. Axiom was a great starting point to explore different elements and I'm looking forward to seeing how much I can express myself through textile, installations and art in general.



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Notes

- 1- Amanda Vesthardt inside the installation Axiom, Photo by Yaniv Cohen
- 2 - Structure of essay going from one side which focus on theory within my two main books, and then connects it with both previous projects and projects by other artist. In the middle we are looking into installation, textile and our senses and emotions connection to art. Above and below that we have the audience and the concepts.
- 3 - Bernard G. Campbell, *Human evolution: an introduction to man's adaptations*(chicago: adaine, 1966) pp, 78, 161-162
- 4 - Do Ho Suh work *348 West 22nd Street* (2011–15) replicates the artist's ground-floor residence from a single New York building. Photo courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, by Pablo Mason
- 5 - Rose Eken's ceramic work *Artefakt* (2016)
- 6 - Yayoi Kusama's *Infinite Mirrored Room - The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (2013), The Broad in Los Angeles. Photo courtesy by David Zwirner
- 7 - Shoplifter(Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir) work *Chromo Sapiens*, Pavilion of Iceland at the Biennale Arte 2019
- 8 - Olek's *I do not expect to be a mother, but I do expect to die alone* (2012) at Tony's gallery, London, UK. Photo courtesy by Tony's Gallery
- 9 - Pipilotti Rist's work *Dawn hours at the neighbors's house* (2005), Photo by Aros
- 10 - Pipilotti Rist's work *Dawn hours at the neighbors's house* (2005), Photo courtesy of Korrespondance
- 11 - <https://wunderland.dk/horse-inside-out/>
- 12 - a, b & c: Photos by Jesper Buch
- 13 - Axiom means a statement or principle that is generally accepted to be true, but need not be so. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/axiom>
- 14 - Photo by Mikeal Jacobsen
- 15 - a & b Photos by Yaniv Cohen
- 16 - Photo by Amanda Vesthardt

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