

Interiority and Agency: Exploring Self in Context with Others in the Act of Creation

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Abstract

This investigation seeks to extend the discourse on interiority. I am an interior designer and, therefore, pose questions as they relate to design process, specifically that the concern regarding interiority is not necessarily something to design for, but as designers, it affects how and what we design. The presented cases are artistic explorations that provided an opportunity to interrogate interiority as it relates to my cognitive and creative process. Through an auto-ethnographic account, I present two acts of making. In the creation process, I interrogate meaning-making and perception that constitutes my subjective interiority, which can only be understood in context. Using Maurice Merleau-Ponty to inform perception and Alfred Gell's art nexus theory, derived from Peircean semiotics, I demonstrate how decisions, or judgements, are informed by my subjective interiority that has been formed by contextual experiences. Additionally, I argue that to understand interiority, we must move from perceived dichotomies such as interior and exterior, public and private, or individual and collective to viewing interiority and exteriority as continuous wholes.

Keywords: *interiority, phenomenology, semiotics, agency, creativity, cognition*

Introduction

Interiority has been described as an inward feeling, withdrawal to a world of one's own, freedom, imaginative, individual, subjective, and experiential. The dichotomy of public and private has been used to express how interiority is experienced, and boundaries of interiority and exteriority are considered to be established by the delineation of a skin, haptic sense, or psychological factors (Teston, 2020). Sennett (Harvard GSD, 2016), however, reminds us that the public-private relationship is a European bourgeoisie construct and many find optimal subjective interiority outside of the domestic sphere. I argue that interiority and exteriority are not dichotomous oppositions but a contiguous whole. The transition from interior to exterior is a non-linear fluid exchange; in other words, interior and exterior are not distinct zones defined by a line of separation with varying degrees of porosity.

As Pimlott (2018) points out, if interiority constitutes freedom, then structural, cultural, and designed systems that control behaviour are not interiority but "conditions of an interior" (p. 10) mediated by power and control. Architecture and its interior design are inherently "anthropocentric and political" (Teston, 2020, p. 69); as such, they are conditions of the interior. I question, then, whether form-based inquiry to understand interiority, which is inherently a subjective experience, will move understanding for processes and outcomes of design forward. Obsessing over boundaries, whether porous or ephemeral, misses the nature of interiority that is mediated by, constructed through, and perceived in social relations.

To equate interiority with positive notions of freedom assumes individuality is something that is universally valued. Individuality, and its corresponding interiority, rely on the premise of the existence of a *self* which, placed in the history of philosophy and thought, is up for debate. I do not intend to argue against the existence of self or attribute values to self versus 'non-self' as cultural goals but acknowledge it as a basis in inquiry toward interiority, whether physical, socio-political, or psychological (Bock, 1999). Teston (2020), Pimlott (2018), Sennett (Harvard GSD, 2016), and others have demonstrated how one experiences interiority in urban exteriors, which mirrors the desire to see others and be seen or being alone together. To understand interiority, we must understand the self, which is in relation to others in context (Bock, 1999). I argue that the concern regarding interiority is not only something to design for, but as designers, it affects how and what we design. The reflexive relationship between design decisions and the designer means our interiority can never be separated from our work.

Herein I embark on an autoethnographic journey to explore my interiority and demonstrate the interrelationship between interiority and exteriority. To seek understanding, I use a reflective process of my engagement in art creation (Sullivan, 2005). Using art-making as a reflexive practice allows me to interpret different dimensions of meaning in my own responses to problems (Sullivan, 2005).

Phenomenology can be employed to understand the self in relation to context through embodied perception together with a semiotic inquiry which can assist in understanding how embodied perception in the *umwelt* is transformed into meaning through cognition, the *innenwelt*, within a milieu (Anderson et al., 1984). From Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) and the non-structuralist line of the logic of C. S. Peirce (Atkin, 2013), to artistic agency by Alfred Gell (1998), I will present an autoethnographic account of two art installations as case studies which contemplate the relationship between self, interiority, exteriority, and judgement in the act of creation.

Theoretical Framework and Definitions

Judgement

Judgement is defined by Nelson and Stolterman (2012) as an embodied act of knowing that is situated in the knower, not to be confused with "judgementalism" (p. 142) or a form of "formal, rational, decision-making process[es]" (p. 144) that come from knowledge that is "separable from the knower" (p. 141). Judgement, which in some cases manifests as wisdom, is the "process of taking in the whole, in order to formulate a new whole" (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012, p. 145). We constantly engage in judgement making as part of the perceptual process. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) describes how judgement is integral to the interpretive process in meaning-making. This process is contextual, embodied, and subjective, yielding multiple variants, and is, as such, embedded in interiority. Within the following case studies, I will explore several judgements that led to decision-making processes through semiotic interpretations. These range from judgements about quality to appropriateness or fit.

Phenomenology

This study is approached through a phenomenological lens. I will lean on Maurice Merleau-Ponty to understand the relationships between self and non-self (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) views humans in a holistic relationship with the world, other objects, and other beings. He postulated that we are not in the world but part of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, context is critical to perception, and within this position, he affirms the

ambiguous relationship between interior and exterior (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Meaning-making is a secondary step in perception that hides perception itself. Attention and judgement are interpretations of signs, not to be confused with perception. Perception must conceal itself to be perceived. Generally speaking, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "the body is our general means of having a world" (p. 147). The holistic relationship of the body in the world includes other bodies that form a system through behaviour, arguing the social world is part of our existence; it is not external. He concludes his work on the *Phenomenology of Perception* with a quote from Saint-Exupery: "Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 483).

Semiotics

This contemporary semiotics, drawing from C. S. Peirce, provides a theoretical foundation for understanding meaning-making. In the simplest of terms, Peircean semiotics posits that meaning is derived through a triadic relationship between the object (physical or mental), the symbol (representamen), and the reaction or meaning (interpretant) that, together, make a sign (Atkin, 2013). There are three basic typologies of signs (index, icon, and symbol) which produce variability (Atkin, 2013; Yakin & Totu, 2014). Signs are scaffolded and translated, moving from interpretant to object of another sign to build complex meanings and relationships. Symbols often represent multiple objects that lead to different interpretations as well. Unlike the structuralist binary-linguistic semiology of Saussure, the triadic relationship of Peircean semiotics recognises the creation of meaning by any medium, not just language, and is performed by all biological organisms, plant and animal alike (Anderson et al., 1984; Starr, 2021; Yakin & Totu, 2014). In this way, it could be argued that judgement, defined as interpretive knowledge inseparable from the knower, is also performed by all living organisms.

Art agency

In a critique of Western art criticism that relegated non-western cultural artefacts to colonist notions of primitive art, Alfred Gell formulated an anthropological theory of art that is social rather than formal (Rampley, 2005). Gell (1998) resolved to build a theory that deviated from viewing artefacts through a lens of assigning meaning toward one that centred on the action. He rejected structuralist notions that all meaning is derived through language; as such, Peircean logic which encompassed fundamental departures from Saussure's binary and language-centric theory of semiology helped form an argument about agent-patient relations and their interpretants (Gell, 1998; Yakin & Totu, 2014). The anti-aestheticism

approach provides a framework that does not concern itself with the beauty of an object but the context in which the object was created (Rampley, 2005). Similar to Gell (1998), who aimed to develop a system of viewing art as "action intended to change the world rather than to encode symbolic propositions about it" (p. 6), I position this inquiry from the contextual social relationships of my interiority that inform the process of creation rather than prescribing meaning to the condition of the interior (the resulting artefact) (Gell, 1998). As Sullivan (2005) posits, artists and designers place creation at the centre of inquiry, building new understandings in the act of making.

Gell's art nexus theory follows a similar structure of interpretation as Peircean semiotics for the interrelation of prototypes (referent), recipients, and the artist in the production of art objects or materials as signs of agency (indexes) in social relations (Gell, 1998; Rampley, 2005). The analysis follows the extent to which the object, prototype, recipient, or artist instigates or receives action, defined as an agent-patient relationship. Similar to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), Gell (1998) defines designed objects as technological extensions of humans. Where Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) demonstrates how tools integrate with the body for sensing, as in his example of a cane, Gell (1998) also accepts human tendency toward animism to justify an object's ability to act as an agent. Gell (1998) shows how tools and designed objects allow a person to be present in different times and locations than their bodies, as distributed personhood, when the tool causes something to happen to others, as in his example of a mine left behind in a field.

Subjective interiority and agency

It is in this framework aimed at understanding meaning through agency, informed and defined by social relations situated in context, that I will present a personal narrative of the creation of two installations developed from the impetus of memory and emotional response. I interrogate my subjective interiority through the act of creation. This view from within reveals interpretive insights about place and material that do not move along a spectrum of interiority and exteriority but are, at times, situated in both at once (Gell, 1998; Sullivan, 2005). Through this work, I will ponder our corporeal connections at the core of knowing positioned in the knower and acknowledge that once a design is experienced, it actively becomes part of the surrounding world, part of the larger whole, which alters its intent and meaning. To understand my role as an interior designer is to acknowledge that the process is the product; it is what defines me, my work, and the decisions I make for myself and others.

Tapestry: Interiority Through Exteriority

Tapestry began with a can of dirt. The material was a prompt provided in a graduate seminar. After many years working in the industry and teaching coursework through industry experience, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in my field and ended up studying at the research university, well known for its contributions to science and engineering, located in the town where I was raised. I commuted from my home in a city over one and a half hours away to limit disruption for my young school-age children.

The cans were placed in the middle of the table, and each of us selected a vessel. After we opened them and inspected the contents, we were told what was inside. We were not instructed to do anything specific with the material, but most commenced with a symbolic exploration of the ash and earthen materials from exciting places like graveyards. The dirt in my can was from a highly cultivated horticulture park of which I am familiar only with the knowledge of its existence. Although I had once lived in the area, I did not pay many visits to this location. I do know that the park is meticulously studied, catalogued, labelled, and designed. This 'natural' looking area has been engineered and re-engineered as an educational tool. I never perceived this park to be an inviting place, based solely on my knowledge of its intent and purpose. I quickly realised I held the arboretum in contempt for its meticulous study, its labels, and its designed appearance. My reaction was immediate and visceral. In reflection, we may have been provided with instructions; still, my reaction was so intense I retreated within myself, trying to overcome the disappointment and distaste for the material in front of me.

But why, especially as a designer, should I be perturbed by this? After all, I have dedicated my life to designing the built environment. I came to realise this place represented notions of rational scientisation and control over nature that I associated with a dismissive culture of inquiry. It is past interactions with members of the community that left me feeling this way, not in any particular instance or specific location, but in my divergent thinking I did not belong. This meaning, mediated through the earthen material from a specific park, set in motion a line of action, as an agent.

I set to work cataloguing the material, curating it, and sealing it—protecting it from decay. I sifted it and sorted it, analysing it through a microscope, and carefully separated it for storage and categorisation (Figure 1). I planned a trip to the site so I could gather more information about its experiential qualities. Upon an attempt to visit the park, however, I found it was closed—under construction.

This led to the discovery that the soil in my possession was actually from a completely different park, albeit not far from the arboretum.



Figure 1
Dirt curation
(Photograph
by author)

But, joy! This is a park where I explored as a child. We roved every inch of the trails and forged our own paths in the rough. One of the routes led back to an old cemetery, passing the old car which had been overtaken by vines. There must have been a story there, something mysterious and nefarious, no doubt. And, oh, the picnics. Suddenly I was flooded with memories of scotcheroos and grilled steaks. Coolers full of soda and freedom to explore.... My connection to this earth ran deep. This park is, truly, no more of a natural park than the horticulture park, and in reality, is probably less so. In fact, this is a manmade park left to grow over an old constructed, and quickly abandoned, trolley line. You can still see its history heaved up by the earth underneath. The old asphalt displays the raw history exemplary of the Anthropocene (Figure 2). My initial actions were no longer appropriate; the entire project needed to change.

I visited the park of my memories. Many years had gone by; it had endured erosion and enjoyed some upgrades, but, all in all, was still as I had recalled it. I found local stories from other people with memories of playing in the park, giving praise to recent preservation work. I began collecting bits of material, pleased by its raw existence (Figure 2, 3, and 4).

Figure 2
Moss on asphalt
(Photograph
by author)



But how beautiful is the moss carpeting the dark asphalt, its raw edge broken and exposed.

Figure 3
The typically dried-up
creek bed after rain
(Photograph
by author)



Serene is the water gently flowing around broken bits of brick and concrete.

Figure 4
Fallen tree, supported
by a lumber fence
post (Photograph
by author)



Assuring is the carefully placed lumber supporting the old tree.

Before long, I found myself collecting material from other places, each with its own significance in my life. I began to combine the materials in different ways but landed on weaving together a

tapestry of collected leaves and grasses from four distant locations (Figure 5 and Figure 6).



Figure 5
Experimentation
with materials
(Photograph
by author)

Reeds of grass from my new home, where I was raising a family, became an internal structure woven with leaves stitched in place with my daughter's and my own hair. Once complete, I laid it to rest in my childhood park with the remaining dirt, off the path, nestled in a vine to decay, turn to dust, in communion with this place where I began. In documenting the process, I wrote:

my husband's childhood home
a place that has become home to me and my children
as we have become part of his life, his family.

the place where we were married
where we grew up as students...young adults
where I found employment years later.

woven together with reeds of grass from our yard
this is the place my children know as home.
building the internal structure.

fresh green morphs into red
red fades to black.
carefully placed
draping down to carpet the earth in a park where I used to
play as a child.

how quickly the materials will unify
brown
decay
turn to dust
in the way I have left dust in each of these places
and dust from each place has stayed with me.

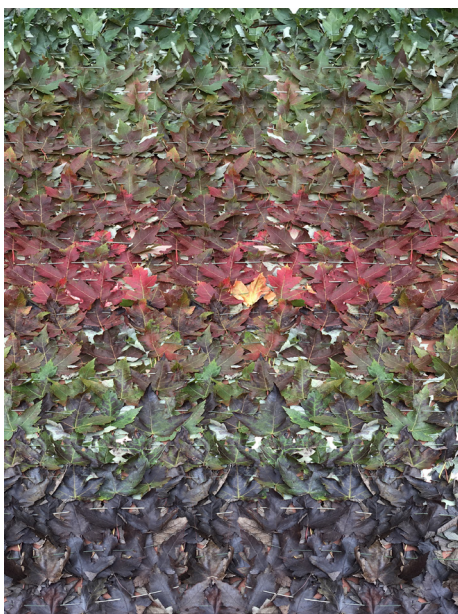


Figure 6
Tapestry (Photograph
by author)

These materials caused me to act, or more accurately, the materials acted on me, as the artist and patient (Gell, 1998). I acted upon the meaning of the places informed by the social environment, not the materials themselves (dirt of leaves). When my understanding of the dirt's origin changed, so did its meaning, along with my actions. The soil stopped acting on me, and, in its place, the experience of a space guided my response through sentimental notions of place and memories. At that point, I abandoned working with the original material altogether, and new materials began to act in its place.

I was more accepting of the park of my memories, and I treated the materials as extensions of me, unlike the detached, curatorial process I started with. The first was insular, and the second receptive, ready to condone rather to condemn. In the act of art making, I let my reactions play out in the fullness of my experience, reflecting on each new reaction and interaction. As a designer, I am trained to follow a logical decision-making process, reflecting the value Western culture places on rationality to act in the best interest of those served by my work. This, however, made me realise judgements always come from within and through an interpretation of context. The intensity of my reactions could not be ignored. The internal subjective reality of external contexts defined what I thought was the most appropriate action, demonstrating the impact that visceral reactions, from any contextual features, can have on judgement with the potential to exaggerate outcomes, for better or worse.

The park of my memories was a place of freedom, escape, and exploration: of interiority. I was in the park, and the park was in me, simultaneously interior and exterior. It was not derived from some specific physical or spatial quality that one place had over the other, but from how I experienced the space with and through others. It afforded the ability to exercise independence from authority figures; the other park represented authority. Unlike the horticulture park, which readily offered prescribed answers, here I could find my own questions. This affinity persisted through space and time.

The resulting temporality of the tapestry affected its inception and resulted in the simultaneous collapsing and expansion of time and space. It consisted of leaves because the happening occurred in the fall. The entire piece purposefully combines material from distant places that have informed my being. It represented, in Gell's words, "biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings" (Gells, 1998, p. 222), that represent me. Whatever creature, human or animal, that may have happened upon it in the park, surely recognised its human hand and undoubtedly met me with curiosity, if just for a moment. For that short time, I was present, conversing with others, though my body was remote. Left to decay, its remnants remain. As dust "commemorates a time when the entities, whose particles have entered it, were still coherent and whole" (Marder, 2016, p. 37), I will always be there.

Veiled Space: Ambiguity of Interiority

I contrast this with the conception of another installation which was naively intended to specifically explore interiority. I do not share this activity because the result of the investigation brought me to my current understanding of interiority but, rather, a reflection of my process and judgement demonstrated how my interiority, formed to negotiate my being in the world in relation to others, was at play.

Looking at how others had explored ways in which the built environment can manifest the idea, I found disparate ideas such as the searching, mystery, and longing described through the analysis of a film by Stoner (2012), the enveloping, yet solitary cocoon-like tunnels of tape ("Tape Paris," n.d.) and the social implication of inclusion by McCarthy (2005). I wanted to bridge ideas of longing and mystery with safety and belonging to form a more holistic understanding.

Putting definitions aside, I immediately began exploring notions of interiority as a personal, emotional response. I began to sketch spaces that embody interiority, like the coasey, motile space under

an overturned laundry basket or the world inside the canopy of a mature weeping willow tree (Figure 7). I remember a group of them near a friend's house, clustered so the canopies created interconnected rooms. Although we suffered the repercussions of our disappearance after spending an entire day there, this was one of my favourite places. It was the same feeling of joyous contentment as slipping through tightly packed garments on a clothing rack, feeling their comforting weight against my body before opening to an escape into an inner realm where I could enjoy the slight relief from an overwhelming mix of perfumes, bright overhead lights, and noise common to department stores. It was also feeling warmth while watching flames dance in the fireplace as they crackled and popped, occasionally shooting hot embers that diffused just before hitting the floor. They were all comforting, warm experiences; they were all of my childhood.

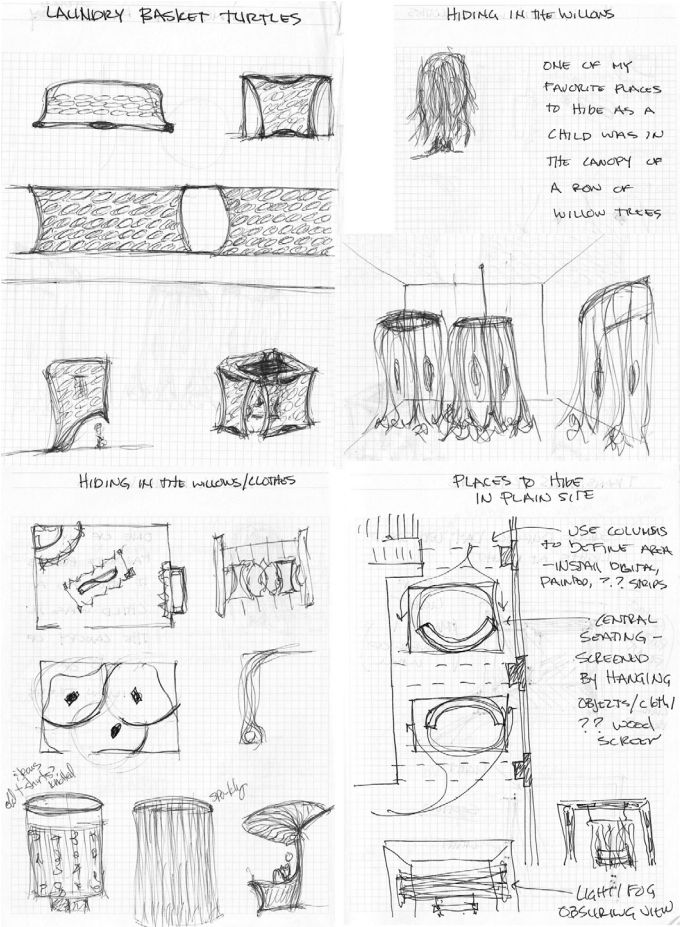


Figure 7
Sketches of access
and obscurity in
interiority
(Image by author)

Each of these emotional settings held certain characteristics in common. One of the most pronounced was the protected space created by a porous screen: my interior is defined by a veil. I quickly began to realise this reflected my comfort in social situations as much as physical space. The multiplicity of meaning through positions of power, culture, gender, and sexuality made the veil a charged symbol worth exploring further (Moorti & Ross, 2002). It balances access and obscurity and provides a sense of comfort through protection and contiguity. It affords opportunities to be alone, with others; it affords interiority.

Once settled on the spatial essence, I began searching for the most appropriate material with which I was going to work. My thinking evolved to an interest in defining space with distorted, intangible boundaries. I experimented with light, fog, and reflectance. I considered mirrors and iridescent materials such as shells, glass, water, and plastics. Water and plastics, particularly the combination of the two, were most readily available at my disposal for experimentation.

I discovered the clear reflective properties of plastic bottles were enchanting. Light danced around the body of the form, and the plastic, although clear, created visual distortion that obscured views beyond the object. Through experimentation, I determined the bottle was most visually interesting without water, which seemed to stifle its reflective qualities rather than enhance them. Its existence as an empty vessel, that could be filled or not, heightened my preoccupation with using the material.

The installation was to be on public display in a university art gallery for no longer than one week. It was designed to be placed in a specific location and would not be reconstructed. It was, therefore, deliberately conceived with its destruction in mind. Each material choice was considered for its ability to be reused or recycled when the piece was taken down. The bottles were tied to metal mesh fencing. The fencing was taken by a colleague whose husband used it to keep rabbits out of their garden. The fencing was made rigid by a metal conduit which could be recycled but has been repurposed many times in our household, along with the 2-inch by 4-inch lumber structure from which the entire piece was suspended. Pulleys, that were used to hoist it in place, store my wheelbarrow conveniently near the ceiling in my garage. The water bottles were easily recycled because they were unused, virgin materials. I acquired them from a local bottling plant that cast them off due to imperfections before being filled. I was regularly supplied with extra-large bags of virgin bottles under the condition that they would be recycled when I was

done with them. If I were not living near a water bottling plant and had not befriended its operations manager, the story of this piece (with over 2,873 water bottles individually tied with two knots of over 2,200 yards of fishing line) would undoubtedly have been different, further demonstrating the agency of the material.

I received constructive criticism from peers early in the process for using a water bottle because it is fraught with environmental and social issues. However, the problem with plastics is their ubiquitous nature that afforded me the opportunity for exploration. The story of the proliferation of plastics and our cultural dependence on them was the agent that dictated its use. This external reality, which exposes the values of our consumeristic culture (individuality, vanity, independence, and convenience), is embedded in my lifeworld (Fishman, 2007). I do not purchase bottled water for everyday use, yet it is still easy to find bottles at hand. I had no problem with a message of mass consumption folding into my initial purpose as part of the reality of context.

The entangled relationship between material properties, life cycles, economics, and justice across distributed populations involved in commerce is a reality for all designers. My use of the water bottle mimics the kind of judgement based on access, affordability, and end-of-life assumptions that drive many design decisions. Choosing what is best for a particular situation is not straightforward, and there is always haste in judgment due to the politics of design. However, a vessel that distorted and reflected, giving rise to visual ambiguity, within a complex social, cultural and economic narrative, indeed, embodied interiority.



Figure 8
Veiled Space
(Photograph
by author)

When in place, the installation acted differently upon those who encountered it (Figure 8). I heard stories of professors who decided to deliver lectures from its interior to the whole class dispersed around its perimeter. During the closing reception, it was transformed by the inclusion of a smoke machine and a solo drummer who performed adjacent to it. The experience changed with the time of day (and the amount of natural light that was allowed to seep in), the number of people who visited it or, as in the case of two small children who ran through the strands of bottles with their hands raised, interacted with it.

Conclusion

Understanding signs as a fundamental form of perception and agency helps clarify visceral responses, associations, and decisions made in each example. Through these examples, meaning, social context, and materials acted on me in powerful ways that shaped my response. This interlocution between context, material, and designer operates just below consciousness and is, in most cases, obscured by an assumed need to present rational decisions.

I built an argument of subjective interiority shaped by social relations from my own experience engaging in art and design. Rather than assigning meaning or attempting to interpret another's subjective interiority, I chose to speak authentically from my own. I have shown how interiority is not singularly defined by the space my body inhabits or delineations that exist around me, which only provide temporary bounds, but by a complex coalescing of contextual, cultural, sensory, and social experiences across time that are mediated through a perceptual field (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). I am inseparable from my interiority; I cannot be separated from my frame of reference and, in turn, judgements made by agency and interpretation.

This recognition has allowed me to be more cognisant of abductions and explicit in my approach to interpreting and building meaning in design. As a designer, I strive to bring other perspectives in the process and respect different values. Taking a moment to understand my own frame of interpretation helps me to be more honest in attempting to understand other perspectives as they are filtered through my own. I can replicate spaces that afford experiences of interiority for myself and, through deep understanding, can create spaces with meaning for others. However, I am not presumptuous enough to posit that any experience I create will ever be invariably received, now or in the future. Creating someone else's subjective interiority by design can never be in my purview.

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