

# HOMESICK

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Chris Ireland find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Chair

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# HOME SICK

## Abstract

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*Homesick* is the result of my attempt to engage the perception of the viewer through light, sound, and space. The combination of these elements is intended to serve as a catalyst for evoking memories of home. They also create a perceptual space that engages all the senses as well as the inspection of the mind. I built a light and sound installation to create a cognitive place within the gallery. From each position or vantage point within the room the viewer may be able to gain a different perception of the space as a whole. When the participant takes their first step in the space, their motion activates a sensor, which plays an audio piece. Multiple speakers are arranged through inconspicuous means within the walls of the room. I selected sounds most listeners would associate with home. Such sounds include nondescript TV noise, refrigerator humming, and a running vacuum cleaner, among others. I seek to define the physical structure of the space as a smaller stage set within the larger theater of the gallery. I have made a conscious decision to copy the basic gallery architecture on the inside. The only light source is from the window I have constructed on one of the walls. It splashes colored light that is based off my memories of the colors of my childhood home. The outside of the room is left in its natural unfinished construction to call attention to the illusion inside.

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# HOMESICK



Fig. 1 Ireland, Chris. *Homesick (detail)*. Photograph taken by artist. 19 April 2007.

## INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for *Homesick* arises from personal memories of my childhood home and the sense of sanctuary and comfort I associate with it. I am interested in the ways these memories of home are enhanced by specific elements of our surroundings through the use of light and sound within a definite physical space. To bring my audience closer to the concept of “perceptual space”, I built a light and sound installation to create a cognitive place within the gallery. The viewer may hear different sounds or experience a different color from the “window” of fluorescent light as they move throughout the space. From each position or vantage point within the room the viewer may be able to gain a different perception of the space as a whole. By addressing this type of space in a gallery of art, I am exploring how we deal with the experience of *déjà vu* in our everyday life.

## SOUND

When the participant takes their first step in the space, their motion activates a sensor, which plays an audio piece. Multiple speakers are arranged through inconspicuous means within the walls of the room. I selected sounds most listeners would associate with home. Such sounds include nondescript TV noise, refrigerator humming, and a running vacuum cleaner, among others. The looping sounds allude to the memory of home as a constant. In the piece, the sounds of my recordings play over the ambient sounds of the museum. The museum is already full of ambient sound, such as footsteps, air vents, and talking. The ambiance of the gallery outside becomes a second surrounding layer of sound that synchronizes and interacts with the soundtrack of *Homesick*. I desire to create an environment that blurs the distinction between the viewer's memories of domestic space and the real physical nature of the gallery interior.

The inspiration for the encompassing nature of the audio comes from my use of personal audio players throughout the day. I recognize a large part of my daily routine is spent isolated within my headphones. As I use them in my daily activities, a synchronization of the content of my audio player and the ambient noise of the environment change how I perceive my surroundings. When listening to music or any

kind of recording, one is hearing the audio recorded as well as the sounds in the space in which it plays.<sup>1</sup> John Cage, in referring to his experiments with ambient sound (most



notably 4'33'') exclaims, "The very existence of silence depends upon noise and permits noise to exist."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it would follow, that a blurring of these sounds can occur, making it difficult to distinguish each sound's origin.

## LIGHT

As sound travels through the room, colored light from the "window" fills the space. The window is a reference to a photograph I took of my bedroom window in my childhood home (Fig.2). . . . Fig. 2 Ireland, Chris. *Bedroom Window*.2006. . . . irectly sent in through the window. At night I felt the color was taken away, leaving only darkness. In a sense I was right; the color we see is a reflection of the light of the sun. However our ability to see color does not go away with the sun, as I began to realize when I was old enough to

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<sup>1</sup>Altman, Rick. The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound. In *Sound Theory/Practice*, ed. Rick Altman. New York: Routledge. 1992. . . .

<sup>2</sup>Cage, John. 4'33''Sound and Points of Origin. In *Background Noise*, ed. Brandon LaBelle. New York: Continuum. 2006. pp. 15.



play Nintendo in the dark without waking up my parents. One of my memories of staying up late as a child was the surreal effect of having my house light up by only the cold blue haze of the television screen. When one looks at an intense concentrated source of light such as a television, or the “window” in my piece, afterimages are created when one looks away from the light. Danish Artist Olafur Eliasson calls this



Fig. 2 Eliasson, Olafur. *The Weather Project*. Tate Modern, London, 2004. © Olafur Eliasson, Photo: © Tate Photography  
Museum, Faith/Adapt, Dusk/low

“color memory”.<sup>3</sup> In his large-scale light installations, Olafur also directs the viewer to a centralized light source. By doing so he reveals the effects of the mental preservation of that color when encountered with different stimuli, such as a darkened room. In my room the nature of the vibrancy of the color projected on the white walls can increase in intensity the longer in the room.

Our minds have the capability to remember and recreate the color we perceive. These afterimages may roam freely in space or manifest themselves along the viewer's shadows projecting along the blank wall. Our perception of color is affected by the tiredness of our eyes, the fatigue of the related retinal cones acting as the cause for such

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<sup>3</sup> Crary, Jonathan. *Your Color Memory: Illuminations of the Unforeseen*. In *Color Memory: Olafur Eliasson*. Glenside, Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery Press. 2006. (2).

afterimages. An earlier moment is then preserved and the resulting color flashes influence future perception. In “Homesick” I have tried to recreate the color scheme I remember from my childhood home. By comparing it to a photograph of that same space, I can see the example of my distorted perception in that the color is never the same as I remember it. Artist Byron Kim often bases his paintings on memory, such as *Miss Mushinski (First Big Crush)*, 1996, and *1984 Dodge Wagon*, 1994. By only using memory and not resorting to photographic documentation, the color’s usefulness as fact is now only relevant as an ideal.<sup>4</sup> The photograph of the “window” served as documentation of a place that I enjoyed recalling. *Homesick* references a mental picture of that same window, yet from the perspective of the memory of the child who would analyze his world underneath it.

## SPACE

I seek to define the physical structure of the space as a smaller stage set within the larger theater of the gallery. I have made a conscious decision to copy the basic gallery architecture on the inside. The outside of the room is left in its natural unfinished construction to call attention to the illusion inside. The boards, studs and wires are nothing more than an elaborate set for which the play amongst viewer and artist will resume. On the outside of the space, the gallery lights, bringing attention to

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<sup>4</sup> Farooqee, Anoka. Byron Kim: Color as the Anti-Essence, In *Byron Kim: Threshold*, Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley Art Museum. 2004. (35).

the construction of the illusion, illuminate the unfinished wood. On the inside, the glow of red and cyan outlines the viewers who approach the walls. This is not only a reference to the color field of my home but also works to reveal a reference to anaglyph stereoscopic imagery and the effect of simulating 3-dimensional depth to the image by fixing two color filters to the visual field. Every detail from the color of the walls to the amount of plugs and light fixtures serves to better illustrate this model of the museum space. By merely highlighting the qualities of the space, along with sound and light, I am framing the gallery experience for my own devices.

Enclosing the viewer in a container of light suggests many similarities to the camera. Small rooms in public places such as courts and libraries were referred to as cameras in England, Italy, and Spain throughout the Eighteenth century. The word was used in English only in reference to the Latin term for chamber, until it was popularized in connection with photography. A precursor to the modern camera, the camera obscura, is an instrument consisting of dark chamber or box with a single source of light. In its earlier form as a room; it works as a container not only of light, but also of the observer. According to Jonathan Crary, its confined nature representing a sort of “quasi-domestic space,” which is in contrast to the user’s autonomous role as a viewer.<sup>5</sup> *Homesick* relates to the camera obscura, since both are contained spaces that are designed to project an “image” in the presence of the observer.

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<sup>5</sup> Crary, Jonathan. Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1990. (39).



Fig.4 (left). Unknown artist. *Diagram of a Camera Obscura*. No Date. Online Image. Massimo Stefanutti. 24 April 2007. < <http://www.massimostefanutti.it>>. Fig. 5 (right) Ireland, Chris. *Homesick (detail)*. Photograph taken by artist. 19 April 2007.

Inside the space, the viewer can reflect their position on the wall through blocking the projection from the main light source. Depending on their position, certain colors may show more vibrantly than others, as the lights bounce off their shadows. Different elements of the audio recording may also become more amplified depending on the location of the viewer inside the space. The audio will not even play unless a viewer opens the door and approaches the space, and it will turn itself off upon their exit. The presence of the viewer in the space is just as important as in finding meaning within the work as how they perceive the sounds and light. I have only taken away the projected image of the camera obscura to further emphasize the spectator as a mediator between a temporal simultaneity of human subjectivity and the lights and sounds of the objective device that contains them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Crary. pp. 41.

## PERCEPTION AND MEMORY and some after-thoughts

*Homesick* is the result of my attempt to engage the perception of the viewer through light, sound, and space. The combination of these elements is intended to serve as a catalyst for evoking memories of home. They also create a perceptual space that engages all the senses as well as the inspection of the mind. In his novel *Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colors*) of 1810, Johann Wolfgang Van Goethe directs his readers to look fixedly at the circle of light admitted into a room-sized camera and then to close it off with their fingers. He then instructed his readers to examine the blotches of color the mind would create as afterimages due to the remnants of the strong light source, and he would have them to describe their experiences.<sup>7</sup> In his book *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary sees Goethe's description of vision as not vested in the disembodied mechanical eye alone but in the physiology and the corporeality of the human body.<sup>8</sup> More recently, cognitive psychologists James Lawley and Penny Tompkins have defined perceptual space as a "mind-space" which, like the gallery, acts as a "theater" where we can hear, visualize, and act out our perceptions. This embodied experience of recognizing space is essentially how we understand our place in the world.<sup>9</sup> The mere presence of the viewer inside the contained space combines a subjective human reaction

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<sup>7</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von. *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Eastlake. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1970. pp. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Crary. pp. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Lawley, James and Tompkins, Penny. "Clean Language without Words"  
<http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/withoutwords.html>Rapport 43

to the elements. The viewer and the elements act as variables that create personal meaning in every viewing of the piece.



Fig. 6. Ireland, Chris. *Homesick (detail)*. Photograph taken by artist. 19 April 2007.

I intend *Homesick* to serve as a surrogate for my memories of home, and for the public a space to reflect on their own process of recollection. The pursuit of memory through art is invariably a futile and melancholic activity, in that we can never fully recreate the experiences that we cherish in our minds. Nor can we contain these experiences like catching fireflies in a jar. The light from my fluorescent bulbs spill out into the gallery, and the sounds of vacuum cleaners can be heard in the moments the viewer walks away from the space. By exhibiting my attempt to contain them, I recognize the ways the past continues to illuminate the present.

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