

DISSERTATION REVIEW BY:

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Doctoral student: Alperen Şahin

Date of birth: 24/07/1994

Title of the doctoral dissertation: *Sites of Psyche: Exploring Raw Spatial Interventions*

University: The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design, Wrocław

Field: Arts

Discipline: Fine arts and art conservation

A note on referencing:

Dates in parenthesis refer to the candidate's author references in his dissertation bibliography.

Passages in quotation marks are direct quotes from the dissertation, with the page number listed afterwards in parenthesis.

OVERVIEW

For this thesis submission, the candidate has conducted five audiovisual, spatial interventions using lighting and sculptural elements. Being time dependent, rather than artefactual, these interventions are presented using photographic and video documentation. They are discussed within the body of the written dissertation that supports the submission. Along with these elements are included a portfolio of other works that give a sense of the development and breadth of application of the artist's practice, and a list of pedagogical achievements in his time at the Academy – an invaluable preparation for life beyond his studies.

In his dissertation abstract Mr Şahin outlines his artistic approach, and this is echoed within the positive opinion submitted by his doctoral supervisor, Prof Maja Wolińska. This approach articulates an aesthetic of the dark sublime. This aesthetic is applied via a philosophy variously described as punk or DIY, but most often as a "Raw Approach" (p1). In this approach, the artist appropriates discarded materials for sculptural purposes, uses improvised lighting systems and computer programming to achieve his purposes in what might superficially appear a non-professional fashion.

As part of this philosophy, the candidate prefers to work outside the established spaces typical of spatial and art other art practices – eschewing the expensive

commercial environments that, as he argues, distort the creative approach through their logistical and financial demands. His choice of spaces are sometimes event spaces, sometimes residency spaces, and are sometimes in a process of flux in terms of their usage. Situating his work on the fringes of the artistic world usually enables the artist to apply his DIY techniques freely without interference. The sometime neglected, sometime cluttered, sometime unkempt environments chime with and permit the dark sublime aesthetic he brings to the interventions.

Finally, the inbetweenness of these spaces enables another central part of Mr Şahin's work: the free-wheeling, exploratory nature of the spectator's experience of the interventions. This is driven by the improvisatory nature of the DIY approach, and is underpinned by reflections on the resonances between video games and spatial art practice.

DISSERTATION

The candidate begins his written submission with a comprehensive and lucid description of his guiding aesthetic. Beginning with a passage from the Jack London short story *To Build a Fire* (1902), and Jacob Geller's video essay *Fear of Cold* (2022), Mr Şahin orients the reader's understanding of Burke's (1757) notion of the sublime to feelings of fear, lack, even, quoting Yi-Fu Tuan (2013), a sense of despair.

This aesthetic is discussed in the light of Gothic and Dark Romanticism. The isolation and anxieties embodied in the melancholic overtones of this movement is echoed in Satre's (1943) existentialism and associated uncertainties bound up with the choices and decisions that are implicit in individual freedom.

As we will see, these freedoms find important resonances later in Mr Şahin's dissertation. In this section, entitled *Atmosphere*, he goes on to explore how these aesthetics have been expressed by artists in the past, including painters and engravers Gustav Doré, Francisco de Goya, Zdzisław Beksiński, and production designer H.R. Giger, leading to the creation of works that "resonate with themes of alienation and existential angst" (p.8).

The candidate considers the work of dark ambient musician Raison d'être, whose "drone sounds and long reverbs can emphasize the stillness and emptiness of the imagined ambience" (p.7), and Polar Inertia (2013) whose "albums evoke the atmosphere of vast, empty landscapes, capturing the harshness and stillness of these remote, icy terrains" (p.7).

All the above, "whether through sound or visual imagery, share a common thread of exploring the profound isolation and the sublime that arises from confronting the unknown." (p.8), and touches on Edgar Allen Poe (1841) and manga artist Hiromu Arakawa articulation of the individual's coming to terms with their limitations through a sublime vision of the infinite.

These references offer a helpful orientation to the reader. The candidate's aesthetic approach is clear and is carried through to the documentation of the five final works. There is less detail, however, about other artists who work or have worked in similar media or fashion as Mr Şahin. The dissertation has a section on interdisciplinarity and the candidate's work appears on the surface to have intermedial qualities. Video, sound, objects, lighting and, importantly architectural space itself (he rightly identifies the space as more significant than a mere canvas onto which the work is imposed) are put to work and manipulated by the artist to "create an experience greater than the sum of their parts"(p.12). There is a substantial literature on intermediality which could have further articulated the candidate's arguments in this section.

The second section of the dissertation explores what the artist terms his *Raw Approach*. His argument is that artists' creativity is constrained and compromised by the mainstream infrastructure in which it is the norm to practice. Mr Şahin cites Howard Saul Becker (1982), and Rick Rubin (2023) to argue that a more authentic expression results when working outside these infrastructures. Statements by musical figures East Bay Ray (Ensminger, 2011) and Iggy Pop (1978) substantiate how this can be realised in practice, while Dubuffet's (1967) notion of *art brut* helps ground the discussion in the fine arts.

The candidate discusses the Polish club scene, particularly with reference to the Instytut and Oramics collectives, and the opinions of multidisciplinary artist, Chino (Cafolla, 2019).

Beyond this, there is little discussion of the state of the art. Who are Mr Şahin's peers? Artists have been working with lighting, video and soundscapes within myriad spaces for many decades. If the assertion is that no artist has created this raw, intermedial kind of work in non-mainstream spaces before, there would normally be references to related work that has been done with the component media or combinations of those media.

This is a question of gauging the significance of this submission as a PhD. As a work of artistic research it should make an original contribution to the field in which the artist is operating, and it is one of the functions of the written component of the submission to make this contribution clear. In a practical work this means looking at what has been done in the field in the past and is currently being done and showing how this project is a development from that work. This would allow the author to demonstrate how this portfolio is establishing new forms of practice. The lack of any argument to this effect is something of an omission.

Central to the author's aesthetic approach is a consideration of atmosphere. As with the aesthetic as a whole, this can be observed within the works as documented: "Essentially, the atmosphere immediately shapes emotions and perceptions, setting the tone for how the space will be experienced and remembered" (18). In expanding his aesthetic explorations, the author chooses a deeper examination of the realm of video games. He discusses the atmospheric rendering in *Hellblade: Senua's Saga; Dark Souls; Elden Ring* (Miyazaki, 2022); *0_abysalSomewhere* and *Limasse Five*;

and the writings of Chris Crawford (1982); Fumito Ueda (2021); and Daniel Pattersen de Lucena and Rosilane Mota (2017).

As well as finding echoes of his own aesthetic preoccupations with the dark sublime in those of games designers, the candidate makes a convincing and, as far as I am aware, innovative comparison between the creative processes involved in their design and the spatial interventions for which he is responsible: “I see a strong parallel between the video games and spatial arts in their methods of expression, especially in their interdisciplinarity and their approach to offering an experience for the viewer or player” (p.19). Game play offers space for exploration. Somewhere that the player is free to make decisions that affects the way they experience the game art in a unique way. Like his spatial interventions, they are meta-worlds that “provide powerful examples of how an environment, or a space can silently communicate complex emotions and questions – beyond traditional linguistic means. They demonstrate how space itself can reflect one’s place in the world and our relationship with it” (p. 25)

This is surely an important insight. In order to make an original contribution to the field, as mentioned above, artistic research sets out to posit a research question: Some unresolved or not yet considered matter that can somehow be addressed through the artistic practice. This dissertation does not do this directly. The reader is left to find the question themselves within the body of the text. This is a pity, as the assertion the candidate makes about the parallels between video games and spatial interventions could easily give rise to such a question. This assertion could be subject to testing through a number of possible methodologies and could give rise to novel conclusions, and a significant contribution to aesthetic inquiry. As there is no question to test, there is no methodology in evidence here either. The Raw Approach is described as a methodology, although it is surely more of a *method*, or philosophy – a set of artistic parameters.

It is worth reflecting on how the parallels between these media have consequences for the candidate’s practical work. The key with the Raw Approach is to create a palette of audio-visual, sculptural and architectural tools that shape the environment in a fluid, time-dependent but non-narrative way. This give both the practitioner and spectator a freedom of aesthetic exploration that is akin to that of the game designer and player, and ties in with the existential questions that arise within the dark sublime aesthetic. “The art is undirected and unguided – it simply exists to be observed and experienced” (p. 57)

The freedom the spectator is intended to experience is enhanced in Mr Şahin’s approach by the withholding of the standard accompanying texts that are frequently the norm in contemporary art. Not only is the venue changed by the intervention, but the absence of any contextual clues or explanation is intended to liberate the spectator as far as possible from any pre-suppositions about the work. The artist even goes under aliases, to rid the works of any personal history around his life or prior output that might distract from the free-flowing exploration of these five interventions.

ARTISTIC OUTPUT

The five interventions are discussed within the dissertation and presented via links to online documentation – photographic and videographic.

The documentation gives a good sense of the atmosphere of the works – a critical element in the candidate’s aesthetic approach – and the works appear to have achieved the artist’s aesthetic goals to a very high standard. The atmosphere is closely aligned to the dark sublime aesthetic Mr Şahin eloquently describes in the dissertation.

Judging work through documentation is challenging. The images and video supplied appear predominantly to have been selected, and edited, in order to communicate this sense of the works’ atmosphere.

There are other, rawer elements, such as floor plans and preparatory installation images, but these are not always included, and there is no systematic documentary overview or breakdown of the events that would enable the viewer to get a more rounded sense of the work. Given the time-based nature of the sound, lighting and projected video within the works, it would have been worthwhile to include lengthier excerpts of these elements in an isolated form, allowing the checking of constituent parts and their collation in the reader’s mind’s eye.

Interventions 1 and 2 are both in black and white. This works well from an atmosphere point of view, but offers an *impression* of what they were like, rather than offering a complete picture of the work. The other interventions use a mix of black and white and colour, which gives the viewer a broader sense of the events. The jarring editing in the first intervention makes it clear that a variety of performances took place, but it is difficult to get much purchase on them. It would have been good to see more of each, clearly broken down as they are in the written submission. The second intervention carries a soundtrack, but there is none listed in the breakdown. It is not clear whose work that is, or if it was heard from elsewhere in the event, if at all.

Beyond the apparent success of the works’ aesthetic approach, it is worth considering other factors in the spectator’s appreciation of them. The author discusses the importance of anonymising himself via aliases and eschewing the use of explanatory texts or “predefined narratives” (p.54). This is an understandable strategy, but is it successfully implemented? How can one construct an alias that anonymises oneself without “direct manipulation” (p.54) of the audience? The aliases chosen may add a layer of confusion to the appreciation of the spectator, distracting them from the work and inviting more rather than less speculation about “personal context” (p.54). So why not “fully go anonymous” (p.54)? The same applies to the naming of these works. Neutral, generic and non-directive names are well established in the arts, and the titles chosen for these five works may end up begging questions about their origin or meaning.

Given the important foregoing discussion regarding the parallels between the video game and spatial intervention experience, what is the spectators’ eventual involvement

in the complete works? The documentation does not contain a great sense of audience presence or response. In the first intervention it was forbidden to photograph the spectators, in the second the audience was not able to explore the space in the work, and in the third there was no audience at all. There is only a cursory discussion of this in the dissertation, and the insights explored in the foregoing video game-related passages do not appear to have been investigated in the presentation of the work.

CONCLUSION

The candidate has documented five works of high artistic quality in the field of spatial intervention. In the accompanying dissertation, he has offered a cogent and well-researched insight into his dark-sublime aesthetic and, while the documentation of his works is limited in scope, this aesthetic is clearly evidenced there.

The dissertation also contains discussion around the author's Raw Approach, both through the lens of personal experience and that of historic practitioners. This approach appears from the documentation to have been successful as the interventions are highly professional and accomplished, despite their DIY nature.

The author's discussion of the parallels between video gaming and spatial intervention is striking and original. The exciting conclusions reached are not really subject to much consideration regarding the completed works, however. This is something of a missed opportunity from an artistic research point of view.

As a piece of artistic research, there remain questions to be addressed: What is the research question? What is the methodology applied to investigate this question? And what is the original contribution made to the field?

It is my view that answers to these questions are there to be found within this project, but are not yet explicitly stated. Given this, the high standard of the artistic work put forward as the central plank of the submission, and the important and novel insights stated above regarding gaming and spatial work, I am content on balance to recommend this candidate for the award of PhD.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'X' followed by a series of loops and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

PH 04/06/2025