Title
Chiaroscuro: A Theoretical Valence

Abstract
When thinking about this thing called theory, one is confronted with a fundamental paradox: it simultaneously encourages and resists investigative analysis given our tendency toward a set focal length – objective distance. Black Contemporary serves as an experiential laboratory for cultivating investigations intended to expand our knowledge specific to the study of atmosphere and place. Each staging is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds pursuant a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of chiaroscuro in the practice of understanding and generating a set of spatial valence within the material culture of a post-industrial site. This paper proposes theory as a material practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with research through the immersive acts of thinking and making supported by a set of inserted material stagings with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the latent dimensions of the inherited landscape.

Keywords
Theory, embodied cognition, perception, chiaroscuro, material practice

Introduction
“...When the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished, our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality without images. This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object for me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me...” ¹

When thinking about theory, I am drawn to the logic of Merleau-Ponty and his central thesis to which he referred as the “primacy of perception” whereby we perceive the world through our bodies; we are embodied subjects. While contemporary theory aligns itself with innovation and critical agency, it seems reliant (almost exclusively) on a means of thinking that privileges distancing oneself from the subject in effort to be objective. I prefer to think of theory as a haptic practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with classical research.

The content of this exploration was generated in response, and as an addition, to David Heymann’s essay “Precise, Anonymous, Enigmatic” published in the 1990 winter issue of Iowa Architect. In that critically perceptive article, Heymann traces the evolution of the Midwestern landscape by examining farm buildings within rural Iowa. Central to the evolution that Heymann cites is the specific
topography due to wind erosion. Heymann uses this dynamic to illustrate a perceived stability given the tectonic nature of farm building construction and associated spatial configurations. If the centerline of Heymann’s thinking is that instability in land morphology (though difficult to optically register) has produced a tectonic perceptual stability, the conceit of this essay is that such stability no longer exists, and that a shift in the scales of economy has yielded an outwardly visible tectonic instability. Thus, to Heymann’s transformation is added the inverse consequence and thereby directly linking the visual evidence of an unstable (derelict) building set to the intellectual evidence of an unstable ground plane. This relationship of figure to ground is the basis for staging a series of intensely modulated spatial reconstructions within an antiquated seed-drying facility that, like Iowa’s farm buildings and land-use practices, is intrinsically grounded in the spatial and cognitive confines of its surround.

The Iowa Landscape
The space of Iowa has been reinvented in the twenty-first century as a reflection of the modern rationality of capital production. Communities in Iowa continuously adapt to changes in agricultural production processes. Since the start of industrialization of farming in the nineteenth century, this production process was lead by family farmers – a form of farming in which labor is supplied primarily by family members on small holdings. The family farm is an important social symbol for Iowans. This symbol represents several ideals the foremost of which are the importance of family and the independence of the family unit. These ideals are greatly influenced by the Homestead Acts. The Homestead Acts defined rectilinear units of private property ownership creating social distance whereby farmsteads are equally spread across the landscape leaving ample space between farming families. This sense of spatial and symbolic independence has largely defined the quality of life in Iowa. However, this spatial and federally advocated form of independence is associated with an economic dependence on market forces, food industries and federal policies.

Higher startup and maintenance costs associated with the mechanization of farming coupled with the falling price of produce requires farmers to expand their holdings to maintain profitability. Resulting in ‘successful’ farmers purchasing production ground from other less successful farmers. Making the family farmer’s space unstable as it is consistently under pressure from market competition and turbulent federal policies. This economic condition produces spatial and communal instability because it causes frequent reconfigurations in the living space. For instance, some farmers rent their production grounds and continue to live on their farmsteads away from the public services and employment opportunities on which they depend. The impact of farming development has been even more apparent whereby vacant farm sites along the various roads are a common scene.²

The Site
Black's Seed Farm is one such dormant site in which a temporary body of work is being developed as part of an ongoing effort to examine the past character and future shape of Iowa's inherited landscape. In this manner, the seed drying facility [Figure 1] serves as a field station focused on the study of spatial phenomena. In using the term here, I refer to a way of knowing that seeks to describe the essential qualities of human experience and the context in which that experience happens. Black Contemporary serves as an experiential laboratory for ongoing investigations intended to provoke a temporal-spatial encounter and reconciliation of the simultaneous and complex nature of cerebral and corporeal experience within the Midwestern realm of labor and its associated landscape. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions, each research assembly is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surrounds pursuant to a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of chiaroscuro. A logic first used in the 1680s by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio that had to do with the disposition of light and dark in a picture, or literally "bright-dark," from Italian chiaro "clear, bright" (from Latin clarus ~ clear) + obscuro (from Latin obscurus ~ obscure). By extension of this etymological dichotomy, I posit the conscious and unconscious, the seen and the unseen, focus and open awareness and the made re-made are factors in the realm of understanding and producing space. It is a full-scale, three-dimensional methodology that is followed by pictorial representation. An inverse sequence from the traditions established in architectural processe in the practice of generating and understanding a set of spatial valence (biology) within the material culture of a post-industrial seed
drying site. This exercise began by reconsidering the nature of a set of internal spaces within the seed dryer formerly referred to as the plenum. The abandonment of this mechanical process and our consequent human association leaves the, often naïve, visitor at a loss with respect to understanding its former utility due to the inherent austerity of its confines.

In the context of spatial assignment and cultural practices, Sigmund Freud explains his theory of the unconscious as follows:

“Let us therefore compare the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower, room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness too, resides. But on the threshold between these two rooms a watchman performs his function." (Freud 1917)

This notion is the conceptual basis for the reoccupation of a dormant configuration within Iowa’s landscape, whereby a set of buildings and associated spaces (rooms) have been left vacant for decades. Freud knew that he only had to name the rooms and his comparison between real space and the space of the mind would be made clear. The subsequent reference to these spaces, the entrance hall and the drawing room, conjure internal mental pictures of associated uses and social activities as a result of their new, albeit archaic, syntax. This intellectual linkage coupled with the instability of the cultural context enables us to more fully enter each room as a space of imagination rather than that which might vanish if made finite. Similarly, the goal of this effort is to examine, on the threshold between the two rooms and the broader agricultural context, the potential of a set of empty spaces whose original purpose is no longer served yet stand as social symbols of labor’s leftover.

**Entrance Hall – Research Assembly One**
The dimensional nature of Iowa’s agricultural landscape is not immediately discernable. This can be attributed to the absence of an outline of objects seen against the line at which the sky and earth appear to meet in the case of its physical dimension. In the case of its cultural dimension, this might likely be attributed to the intrinsic relationship (both symbolically and ethically) between the family farm unit and the expansive ground plane in which it operates. It is an extent, both physically and culturally, that becomes present and knowable (only) through the first-person dimension; an experiential unit of measure commonly referred to as time.

It is this logic with which the first research assembly has been developed. It is situated within the ground floor plenum space of the seed dryer, the actual dimensions of the entrance hall are 2.44 by 18.91 meters in plan. Its height is 3.05 meters. Access is provided through a small vestibule at the south end of the entrance hall. With the door left ajar and ambient light emanating from an existing opening in the floor assembly above, the viewer is confronted with the installment of a series of like wood elements and tilted steel plate. The arrangement and extent of this componentry is undeterminable given gradient light levels due to the hyper extended condition of the plenum geometry. As the ocular effect of having moved almost instantaneously from daylight to dark slowly recalibrates, the remainder of the componentry, and ultimately the dimensional and material boundaries of the host space, become evident.

**Entrance Hall – Research Assembly Two**

For most of us, our comprehension of the inscribed landscape is the aggregate of various momentary engagements with rural America. Awareness is developed through finite experiences as a matter of passing through or attending a farm
event. The rural configuration, thus, is the setting for an experience rather than the experience itself as practiced by the family farm unit as a matter of co-existence. Thus, the contemporary experience, unlike the traditional, is not solitary, is not contemplative, and is less concerned with awareness of the environment. What eventually replaced the ethical perception of this landscape typology was the restricted vision of our global, rather than local, scale of exchange. However, there has recently been a conservationist revival as made most evident through community-supported agriculture whereby the farmer is directly linked once again to the consumer. It is changes such as these – fragmentary and pragmatic – that have informed, and been illuminated by, the production of the second research assembly.

This assembly employs a derelict metal conveyor lid placed on the floor with respect to the tilted steel bent. The conveyor lid, worn and distorted by weather, is host to a series of thorns that have been attached to its leading edge. Incident light, emanating from the entrance door left ajar and the light source overhead, frames the resultant intercourse between each of the elements and their host space.

Under this new configuration, the assembly – or, more broadly, the ambient configuration – is not what occupies the entrance hall, but what is completely enveloped by the consequent pool of light and surrounding shadows. In other words, the restricted view of the associated componentry yields what David Leatherbarrow refers to as “a topographical inscription, a single cultural framework occupied by our collective imagination.” In this way, the perceptual experience of the work forges a return to the solitary, contemplative experience; to a provocation of self-awareness with respect to what is known, consciously and subconsciously, regarding farm culture and the inherited landscape.

**Entrance Hall – Research Assembly Three**

![Figure 4: Research Assembly Two (Drawn by Author)](image-url)
The third research assembly considers the generative role of site adjustment in a post-industrial landscape. Deceptive in its vacuum when addressed only superficially, Iowa consists of a broad range of diverse systems and approaches that have been rigorously modulated over decades and thus seem integral and thereby a space of absence. Developing an understanding of the rural site, or more anecdotally, “the interior,” necessitates the need for a point within from which one is allowed to perceive for an uncertain duration.

Located along the thrust of the entrance hall, the new set of parts serve as a measure by which people may situate themselves. Developed within a recessed mantel of this set of parts is the arrangement of rotary hoe replacement spoons on a building felt runner [Figure 5]. The intrinsic qualities of the existing space are revealed through intercourse with the referent assembly yielding a monadic dimension as referred to in *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque* by Gilles Deleuze:

> “Chiaroscuro fills the monad according to a series which can be followed in both directions: at one end the dark background, at the other sealed light; the latter, when it lights up, produces white in the section set aside for it, but the light grows dimmer and dimmer, yields to darkness and deepening shadow as it spreads out towards the dark background throughout the monad.” ⁵

The occupant, by reciprocal examination, becomes aware of his/her personal presence and its coincidence with relation to the referent-material-and-attendant culture outside. Deleuze says “the monad is the autonomy of the interior, an interior without exterior. I would argue that the culminating assembly results in a field of occupation that discloses (rather than delimits) the ethical relevance of the latent site that is knowable only by the accumulation of routine and diverse experiences of labor and reflection.

**Drawing Room**

![Drawing Room](Image)

**Figure 5: Aerial Viewing Station (Photo by Author)**

Within the logic of landscape studies is an indoctrinated manner of observation. Contemporary culture comprehends and navigates geographical realms via
maps, which tend to set up an aerial relationship between reader and subject. Consequent to this intellectual configuration is the necessity to study its other - the atmosphere and outer space. The upper story of the seed dryer operates as an instrument with which such readings can be performed – placing the viewer between heaven and earth; consciousness and the subconscious; certainty and uncertainty.

Located in the drawing room is an aerial viewing station and a ground-viewing station. The aerial viewing station consists of an offset viewing monitor [Figure 5] made of 10-gauge steel and wood bracketing through which the world below is seen. The ground viewing station is located at the far end of the drawing room just in front of the duct opening. This work consists of a camera obscura and a stacked wood area of repose. The camera obscura consists of a set of three painted metal panels as picture plane and 2mm diameter hole in the top of the existing duct as aperture. Light from the external (celestial) scene passes through the hole and strikes the picture plane inside [Figure 6]. As stated by Janathan Crary in his 1992 publication, Techniques of the Observer:

“The camera obscure performs an operation of individuation; that is, it defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It impels a kind of withdrawal from the world in order to regulate and purify one’s relation to the manifold contents of the now ‘exterior’ world.”

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This world is precisely that thing from which we form our perceptions, not as personal beliefs or imperatives, but in so far as we are all governed by a universal source of light and its consequent shadows. This optic disclosure, the layering of light and shadows, absolves us of our flesh and bone and allows the body to enter time, deep time, and (as pointed out by Mircea Eliade) our collective transcendent reality – the inscribed spatial history of a particular setting developed between human beings and the environments they occupy.

Figure 6: Ground Viewing Station (Photo by Author)
Conclusion

Materiality can be understood in a variety of forms that range from auditory systems to tactile systems to olfactory systems. For instance, the recognition of the material presence of sound as a form tends to be comprehended when in relation to the equally material presence of silence. We need only look at the discipline of anthropology in effort to discern the magnitude of such an attenuated range of medium to appreciate the full weight of material cultures and vast corpus of different material realms to which we routinely occupy. That individual experiences vary with respect to their context is well known among those engaged with the conception and enactment of works based in human occupation. This variation in response to environment derives from our interpretation of the items of experience (phomena) and their material arrangement. Cross-culturally, perceptual readings of context correlate with reflective and anticipatory processes of understanding.

Our experience as occupants of a particular setting begins with the impulse to instantaneously scrutinize everything. This impulse is sustained through an often precisely choreographed threshold. As architect and artist, my goal is to assist the occupant in maintaining his or her initial ontological wakefulness through staging often-temporary assemblies within a host space and thereby extend the passage sequence. In the words of Alberto Pérez-Gómez from his published thoughts titled “Built upon Love”:

“The discovery of architectural order necessitates the same sort of critical de-structuring that is familiar to other arts, engaging dimensions of consciousness usually stifled by technical education. Yet for architecture this is not an intuitive operation or unreflective action, but rather the continuation of a practical philosophy and a meditative practice….Thus a work of architecture may engage the primary geometry of human bodily orientation as the base line of a significant melody aimed at revealing the enigma of depth, the dimension of space.” 7

To this end, the act of reconstructing our engagement with forgotten space assists in cultivating theory as a practice of making and thinking. The resultant stagings yield, what Grant Wood depicts in his mural When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow (painted in 1934), the foundation for subsequent forms of human civilization specific to labor and an intensely modulated means of production. The cumulative effort might indicate the potential use of this facility, and all of Iowa’s derelict agricultural facilities, as laboratory inasmuch as it provides a dormant environment conducive to conducting a series of sustained observations. It is a subconscious engagement whereby we become immersed in the world and do not succeed in distancing ourselves from it in order to achieve a consciousness of the world. It is an immersive act of experiential criticism supported by a set of site adjusted research assemblies with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the latent dimensions of the inherited landscape. It is an embodiment of chiaroscuro: a pictorial practice of arranging light (the conscious) and shadow (the subconscious) to reveal the smooth emptiness of fragmented
time, and thereby, mine its capacity to summon the subconscious and reoccupy the inherited landscape as a dimension of life entwined with the present, a part of our ongoing perceptual experience.


