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Troels Steenholdt Heiredal

Autistic Architectural Perception

Troels Steenholdt Heiredal works through images, poems, and text to reflect on the experience of Autistic architectural perception. Composed as a study of an Autistic viewpoint, they also combine into a unique insight for the neurotypical eye.

'We assume the equipment and format are part of the art form itself [...] Embedded in each medium, there are sets of norms that restrain our work before we've even begun'
Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* (London: Canongate, 2023), p. 100.

'By the term "perception" we mean the concerted activity of all the body's senses as they function and flourish together.'
David Abram, *The Spell of The Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1996), p. 59.

And it's a direct senatorial experience
not literally how I see
keep in mind we don't just perceive with our eyes-mind

And it's also an Autistic[1] perception to see the space inside the camera that enables these photos to be made; to see the interiority of the camera and in that moment inhabit the spatial nature of the image creation.[2] I can see where the light comes through and how it will transfer its information to the film – and here, in the inhabitation of the space I can't be in, I see the possibility of engaging within the image production. I can insert myself in the sliver of space – a leftover created from ensuring a light tight fit between the (camera) house and (film) holder – exploring new possibilities towards Autistic architectural perception.

And I made a series of small cardboard squares to fill this exact space; each with different geometrical cutouts in them, limiting/shaping the exposure of the film behind them. They are masks, covering the film and allowing only certain details to get transferred to the film. The tricky part is that they sit behind the viewfinder, thus invisible to me, I solely *see* them in my mind-eye: the sky will be at the bottom, the left side will be on the right. It's an approximation, an inhabitation, and then I push the shutter release.

And I don't know where the cardboard cutouts came from; other than they came through me – before my mind knew I am Autistic, my body knew this. When I take in the city I see it in a series of details. In small relations built between the various elements. In how an opening between buildings allows for a shift in scale between neighbours, how at the right angle one building's roof line continues into the transom of another. It's a relational field of small vignettes, all contributing to the larger space of the public. The city is not a stable entity of neatly placed objects but a constant conversation vibrating thru the streets any new building or square or street re-architects the city, changes the relational field, and weighs in on the city itself.

And what else might the Autistic perception perceive undisclosed to the neurotypical eye?

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1. Six discrete exposures, in distinct geometrical shapes create a dense competition filling the center of a black space. The facades are often semi hidden behind stretches of green that stand out on the otherwise neutral color palette, primarily whites interspersed with grays and terra cotta. The buildings are a mixture of modern and traditional vocabulary, mixing soft round shapes and hard angular lines. The composition balances between light and dark, creating a play across the photo for the eye to play with.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | CDMX, Mexico | 2024

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I feel the changes on my skin
as the city changes I change with it
echolalia
thru the streets
when the neighbor shifts I move too
when the neighborhood moves I become another bldg
when another bldg is added across the city the ripples also arrive at my shores

it's not just by me
it's a being
becoming in on its own
between us
removing authorship
to allow co-creation
strung out and weaving
between me
and an other
our bodies know this place
listen deeply
they will show us
aspects of ourselves
we didn't know
we could ever
arrive at

our bodies know things we can't language
as language is outside of knowledge
only a representation of one fraction
of it a fracture within us causing separation
space is not language it's older
it's within us
an unspoken truth
we all know it as we are feel it
we build our selves around it
it's not instantaneous
it's always becoming
an emergent flexibility built out in being

Image description
Five discrete exposures, in distinct geometrical shapes overlap in the centre of a black field. The photos are of narrow streets, with buildings in a multitude of materials, there are small signs of informal building practices that lend the space a personal character. The colours are moot and the feel of the space is residential. At the top of the composition, two right trapezoids are mirrored across from each other, with a black space between them echoing that of the streetscape in the square photo below.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | Tainan, Taiwan | 2023

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listen with the constellation
openly as
an opening
on to a world
that exists outside
of yours
translucent
transfix
transfer to build more matter
matters when we cross
the image
like a touch tour of the eyes
feeling the space in your hands
on your body architexturing
echopraxia
echoplasia
exploring the difference
between seeing and perceiving
a thickening within the detail
sounds arise syncopation
it starts in the overlap
when walking the city
we carry all of our city
reflection with us
it informs our perception
in each look
we rebuild the whole
leave the city
for ever changed
as we learn to see
more
and more
we need the re
creation of the multitude in the
constellation

Image description
Four discrete exposures, in distinct geometrical shapes overlapping the centre of a black field. Each photo is of a typical New Orleansian wood house, with a covered veranda out front. The houses are colourfully painted in pink and yellows. Each photographic exposure is attempting to align the top pitch of the houses so as to 'perfectly' superimpose them onto each other.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | New Orleans, USA | 2021

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the city is absorbed
thru the surfaces
the membrane
allowing it to soak thru
thru our engagement
thru our movement

as the city moves
it moves
us to move
moving the city on to itself
builds new constellations
reflecting our inner geographies
this is us
this is our city
we might just not see it
yet the details blurred into the whole
hiding your beautiful city from you
try stopping and notice how a door way turns to the wall
as a gap between steel allows for views thru the wall
and the reflection enables you to see that wall
which is inside
of you

there's a repetition
a way of looking
alignments within the architecturing of the image
to image the city in
along internal lines
to being
offset a dancing field
falling
builds in the simple movements
pulls me into the image
two crossing facades suspend a space
existing within your city
as an invitation
more than a fact
accessed thru trust

Image description
Five discrete exposures form an elongated composite figure in the centre of a black field. At the bottom two exposures overlap shot down through the middle of Park Avenue with the Met Life building at the end. Above them floats three exposures each in the shape of a point expanding to a circle, all showing repetitive glass tower curtain walls. All exposures are from Midtown East, Manhattan, New York City.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | Midtown East, NYC, USA | 2021

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I walk back in
to me
picking up the fragments of the city
as they are revealed to me
instigating a re-construction
the moment we think
we know
it's over

wander
the city
opening me to
wonder showing me aspects of self
I did not know
I needed to know
leaning in to the city
trusting its guidance
we can build cities for us all
if we let go of the perfect rendering
accepting the beauty in the overlap
coincident
chaos
I'm not sure our current language
can fully hold this
so I photograph
to see
to build
with uncertainty
the city opens
at an angle
the city is not linear
it re-returns in time
in cyclic motions
motioning toward diversity
bringing it together
we can't build complexity
it only arises in lived life
in the overlap of two simples
of difference
folded at an angle
on to each other[3]
where does our familiarity with the fragmented city come from
what does it feel like to be alice in this city
to so seamlessly move
towers
folds
as
stairs
to build a web
of care between us
when we stop thinking we know
and open toward the space around us
fold the city on to it
self as I fold my
self in to the city
trusting it to bring me
to where I
need to go
to attempt
to draw
to align
to lift
to unfold new constellations
for a new world

Image description
Three discrete exposures form a central stretched composition in a black field. A four-sided figure opens towards the top where a circle sits and a large triangular shape caps the top of the composition. The lower two exposures show the base of glass skyscrapers, that rise into the triangular exposure of the Loop train line in Chicago.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | Chicago, USA | 2022

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this is also part of nature
not apart from it

material taken from the earth
manipulated
the brick
the steel
the glass
the camera
the film
the me
it's all part of me
as I am of the earth

architecture too often focuses on separating us
from the natural world when it ought to make us
a home within it
overlapping us
layering us in to one
understand whatever is holding these words for you
it's from the earth
feel in to it
let it wash over you
this was created
and it will go back
as time it is cyclical
always returning
we believe ourselves to be a very potent race[4]
able to step outside of time
straighten it out
for in a linear progression we don't have to care about where the earth came from
only where we are trying to push it
we can eclipse it
but we can never stop running away from ourselves
the city is not a linear project
it's architected in to return
distinct places connected
a quantum physical collection
relational space we each hold the key to

Image description
Three discrete exposures form a central composition in a black field. The composition is made from a large circular form, overlapping two triangular shapes. At the top of the composition, some light bleeds from the process are visible and add an aura-like feel to the top. The images are of typical Brooklyn streetscapes, an elevated subway line is moving horizontally across the image, and gets dissolved by the typical Brooklyn walk-up building toward the left. The ground floor visible below is occupied by shops.
120mm Color Film Multiple Exposure Through Cardboard Masks Directly onto The Film | Digital Print | Brooklyn, NYC, USA | 2024

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Notes

1. As Devon Price states, I will throughout this essay and poems 'capitalise "Autistic" for the same reason members of the Deaf community capitalise "Deaf" – to indicate it is part of my identity I am proud of.' Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2022).
2. Thank you to Erin Manning for helping me see this; and thank you to JJJJJerome Ellis for showing me how to use footnotes to extend gratitude to those that have helped us.
3. Thank you to Chris Rose for illuminating this fact of complexity to me many years ago.
4. Paraphrased from Michael Madsen's opening monologue in: *Into Eternity*, dir. By Michael Madsen (Films Transit International, 2010).

Competing interests

The author declares none.

Author's biography

Troels Steenholdt Heiredal is an Autistic artist and architect, currently living and working in Taipei, Taiwan, examining the differences between explaining and exploring disability, focused on developing an Autistic Architectural Approach.

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