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Communicating the dialectic between subjective 'creativity' and objective 'rigor' in design research; A case study of a multi-vocal mode of architectural criticism

Abstract

The objectivists' distant view from the subject of study has long been prioritized over creative subjective perspective in academia. This is while due to a certain level of personal interpretation of any experiment, the pure 'rigor' of scientist approaches could be also challenged. However, acknowledging the advantage of multi-dimensional exploration, this paper follows the notion of 'oscillating subjectivity', with a constant shift between projection of the object and the subject in representation of a phenomenon. This position will be explored through a new mode of architectural criticism with a multi-vocal interpretation, which switches between the inhabitation experience of the design outcome and a distant objective criticism of the design product. The critique will be represented textually and visually on a well-acclaimed public space, Olympic sculpture Park, through creating links between the design process, existing critical reviews as well as sensorial inhabitation of the space. Keywords: Design research, Architectural criticism, (Re)presentation, Creative Subjectivity, Scientific Objectivity

Introduction

Design research has been long criticized from two different dimensions; being questioned with regards to its validity from a scientific perspective and the same time challenged for its contribution to design practice. While the subjective interpretation and intervention of the researcher in this area appears 'alien' to objective scientific perspective, the application of design research outcome also sounds ambiguous for practitioners. In order to verify academic validity of the outcome of a creative design research, there seems to be a traditional urge to create links with either of these dimensions, particularly to scientific perspective. The ever-existing challenge between the fields of science and design, more generally creative works, is an intriguing multi-faceted topic, particularly from a research-related perspective. Having different aims and relationships, the scientist finds a 'true' piece of research in remaining 'distant' or remote from the subject and searching for a pattern or a behaviour that could be generalized, expanded or repeated in other instances. The designer represents the process and the product through self-representation and an active involvement in the process, leading to a unique outcome. This distinction is also reflected in the type of knowledge these perspectives use or produce, As Glanville (2012) calls, 'knowledge of' and 'knowledge for', the latter as a static domain of descriptions of a presumed reality and the former is a dynamic process of questioning and analysis. The interesting theme in this discussion is the matter of 'using' knowledge or 'creating' knowledge. The scientists are known to 'use' the existing knowledge to explain other phenomena and prove an existing fact, while the designers create knowledge based on 'personal novelty' believing in individual's unique self-representation. Acknowledging Glanville's position on the notion of 'design of' and 'design in the discussion of knowledge 'use' and 'creation', it could be argued that even in scientific experimentation, knowledge is an outcome of a creative process. This argumentation stems from the view to the notion of 'reality' as a creative understanding of a phenomenon, suggesting the idea that 'things do not exist out there' independently. But it is the interpretation of the scientist, in that specific time and space that *creates* the 'reality'. In that sense even the scientific-driven knowledge possess a spatio-temporal and tentative nature and urges different phenomenological interpretations.

In this work, we will explore the dialectic of subjective *creativity* and objective *rigor* through a case study of architectural criticism of a contemporary public space, Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle, US. In this study, the notion of objectivity will be considered as the conventional conception of architectural criticism in evaluating the

design outcome according to specific conventional architectural aesthetics and often-distant design representations. The notion of subjectivity will follow a more creative architectural writing mode, where the inhabitation and multi-sensory embodiment of the designed space play a crucial role in critiquing the design outcome. Acknowledging the value of subjective creativity in unveiling the nuance of situated and embodied interaction and inhabitation of space, this work explores the notion of 'oscillating subjectivity' (Ahmed, 2006), as a multi-faceted mode of criticism. The proposed mode of criticism with a constant shift between the voice of the user, the critic and the designer will be (re)presented both in a written and visual format. In that sense the proposed creative (re)presentation could be considered as an instance of design research, which while taking a creative subjective approach, tends to juxtapose the objective with the subjective.

The following sections first discuss the notion of objectivity and subjectivity with regards to architectural criticism and investigate the perspectives in critiquing a designed space. The focus will be mainly on their approach as well as the nature of the visual representation that they use as a tool in their interpretations. This responds to the gap between subjective creative interpretation of a design project, focusing on the inhabitation experience, and the objective distant criticism largely highlighting specific architectural angles of the design outcome. The notion of 'oscillating subjectivity' will be then proposed for communicating these two perspectives and to present a multi-vocal interpretation of the design project. This position will be then reflected in critical representation of the selected case study, with a focus on different modes of visual representation used in various objective and subjective criticism. Finally, a new mode of visual (re)presentation will be presented to integrate and communicate the subjective and objective voices.

Subjectivity, Objectivity and architectural criticism

The scientific researchers tend to remain distant from the subject to find the 'true' piece of research and search for patterns to generalize the same rule over similar instances. The history of objectivity, particularly in science, goes back to mid 19th century, not only as a scientific norm but also for representation purposes, such as making of images for scientific atlases. The long tradition of scientific atlases, as collections of visual material in identifying the most significant objects of inquiry is an evidence of how visual representation has been at the centre of scientific practices. These images attempted to capture 'nature' with as little human intervention as possible to conceive the 'real' as opposed to imaginary (Daston and

Galison 2007). Similar to other types of visual representation, a certain level of self-representation and subjective interpretation for identifying the 'real', cannot be ignored in scientific atlases. Conventional view toward design research and its 'rigor' follows scientific objectivity and aims to keep a distant position toward the subject. Unlike objectivity, subjective creative approaches engage with the process and the product through self-representation and an active involvement in the process, leading to a unique outcome. Perhaps this is largely the reason why many designers find it difficult to communicate and implement the outcomes of design research in their practice. Hence, the role of design research could be to challenge sheer objective as well as subjective perspective through a multifaceted investigation of the design intention, process and the outcome and in relation to socio-cultural and political practices. This will inform the designers about the relationship between their design intention and implemented strategy with the lived experience of the outcome. Moreover, it pushes the boundaries of pre-conceived notion of design and opens up new design opportunities in the contemporary context. In this section, the objective-subjective dialectic of design research is investigated through a case study of a design criticism as an example of how design research can develop creative multifaceted strategies to be able to communicate the outcome both with the designer as well as the academia.

Currently, there is a growing interest in different and at times contradicting modes of architecture commentary, looking at different angles of architecture criticism. For instance from the perspectives of community, architecture journalists as well as designers and more recently from a more experimental and performative position. The variety of the insights stems from different critics' understandings of 'design', and criticism criteria, such as concept, aesthetics (as an art work or more pragmatic and functional), construction, culture or the lived-experience aspects, which may result in opposite judgments and evaluation. Light and Smith (2005) raise the notion of aesthetics of everyday life, and suggest investigating the everyday aesthetic experience inherent in the fusion of sense and imagination. They also argue that it is the experience of space and the relation between subject and object that makes a particular experience of that object beautiful and not necessarily the object and its formal properties. Despite different and at times contradictory views, each mode of architectural criticism reveals a different facet of the design work and hence contributes to a richer understanding of design and its lived implications.

The current rise of subjectivity focusing largely on an exploratory narration of individual perception, embodiment, eroticism and subjective experience, is perhaps a reaction against mid-20th century New Criticism style. The sheer analytical objective

approach separated from the social context, which tend to judge the value of the design work based on sophisticated elegance, the latest trend or pure pragmatism, has been particularly criticized by feminists scholars, such as Rendell (2010), Grillner (2007) and Walker (2012). Stead (2012) raises the notion of 'semi-detached' commentary to architecture, which criticizes the conventional prioritization of utter detachment and objectivity in architecture criticism and values a particular space for relativity and attachment in the appreciation of architecture. This is in contrast to the more traditional mode of architecture criticism culture, which largely concerns the formal and spatial arrangement of the object through its own self-enclosed vocabulary and preoccupation, regardless of the way that space is being inhabited in relation to the wider socio-cultural condition. The impacts of time and temporality on the designed space as well as the critic's certain level of personal interpretation, even out of a defined list of criteria, provokes uncertainty in pure critical objectivity. The significance of the subjective role of the critic in architectural spaces is reflected in the variety of impressions of the geometry of the space under different physical or social or emotional circumstances. In that sense the rational or 'true' geometry of an architectural space is never experienced because characteristics such as light, sound, texture or even smell as well as occupation of space with various objects and furniture, can create a different impressions of the geometry.

Clark and Walker (2012) criticize the radical approach of over-interpretation, where the sheer experiential critique has little role beyond the confines of academia, and acknowledging the value of the architect's intention. Such position shifts away from utter cliché of criticism as 'the pursuit of authorial intent' or the cliché of 'criticism as autonomous invention', also open up new alternative for architectural criticism practices. The design work itself is a product of designer's intentional and unintentional plans, due to her/his bounded authority in further stages of reading design drawings and construction. Therefore the created work itself is a reliable source of reference for the reader to contemplate the conditions of design and production and the actual experience and everyday re-construction of the work in a specific spatial, sociocultural context. In this regard, Clark and Walker (2012) point out to "the role of the critic in construction of the intention of the work"; it is negotiation and interaction between socio-cultural imperatives and form, between multiple authors and multiple readers. Similarly, Ahmed (2006) introduces a new format of subjectivity as 'oscillating subjectivity' and challenges the purely directional and unconditional subject-position toward the world and points out to the notion of disorientation, a relational place between subject and object. A range of conventional as well as more recent implemented methods for projecting and representing

interpretations of the design work includes mediums such as writing, photography, drawing, installation as well as digital works. Although writing and photography are the most commonly and traditionally used approaches, there are more creative forms to document the nuance of experience and engagement with architectural space. There exists more contemporary instances of design criticism, which represent an interpretation of an architectural space through recreation of another work, particularly in art practice, using mediums such as video projection, installation, photography and drawing (reference). Grillner (2007) suggests exploration of questions of critical representation and phenomenological challenges to architecture as a material and poetic practice, which calls for alternative forms of writing as well as visualizing architecture.

A multi-vocal mode of architectural criticism

This paper follows the notion of 'oscillating subjectivity' (Ahmed 2006), as a multi-vocal mode of architectural criticism in order to communicate the subjective and objective interpretation of a contemporary designed public space. The case study is a well-acclaimed contemporary public space, Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle, US, designed by Weiss/Manfredi (2007). Implementing a creative experiential method, the case study will be (re)presented through projecting out its formal and material, projected onto the sociocultural context and a tendency to the moments of disorientation. Creative textual and visual format will be implemented to project the relationship between the design intent, objective evaluations, as well as the subjective lived experience of it. While the proposed critique does not have a fixed position, this (re)presentation (Kazerani and Rahmann 2014) ultimately has a subjective nature, as it is resulted from a intimate sensual inhabitation of the space (Hartley 2003). Lefebvre (1974) denotes the role of *lived experience* in production of space denoting the world as experienced by human beings in the practice of everyday life, not solely through seeing, but hearing, smelling, touching and tasting. Moreover, human perception of space and its geometry is largely affected by bodily presence and sensual interaction with the space (Böhme 2013). For this task, multi-medium methods, such as embodied photography, in-situ drawing and creative architecture writing (Rendell 2010), are applied to capture a sensual interaction and inhabitation experience of the case study. Visual (re)presentation will accompany and enrich the written critique, which integrates and juxtaposes the collected visual multi-medium material gained through visits to the case study with some of the original design drawings. Interviews with the designers and the public as well as investigating design

documentation and critic's reviews are also conducted to feed the articulation of the designer and the critic voice. Ultimately, the often distant critics' reviews and the representations used for their reference, as the objective voice will be integrated and challenged in juxtaposition with the intimate sensual and embodied user interaction with the space, as the subjective interpretation. This multi-vocal (re)presentation will be also informed by the design intention and the designer's voice and through constant references to design process and the nature of the produced design representations.

(Re)presenting Olympic Sculpture Park

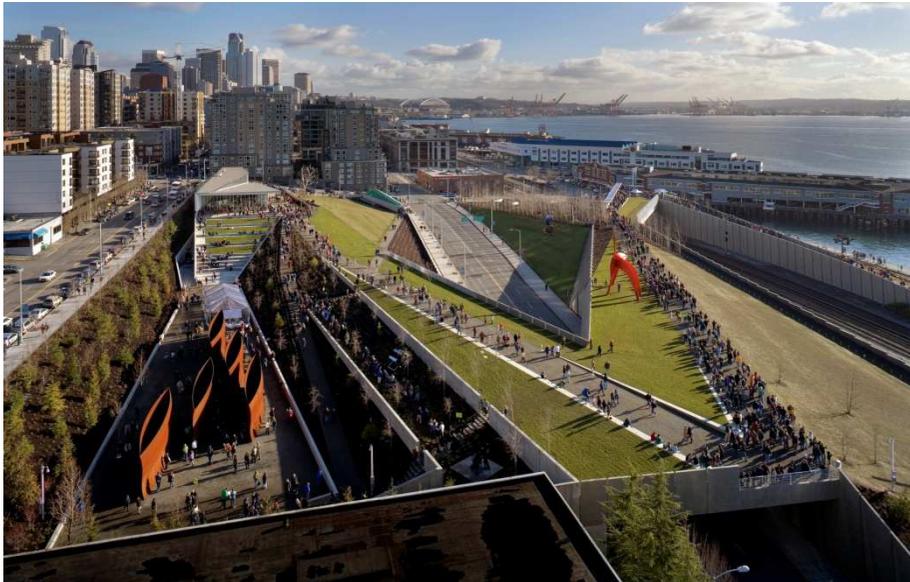


FIG1. Olympic Sculpture Park, Weissman/Fredi, 2007. Credit: Weissman/Fredi

Formerly an industrial brownfield site divided by train tracks and an arterial road, Olympic sculpture Park, now owned by the Seattle Art Museum connects the urban core to the waterfront exhibiting artworks across the landscape. The Sculpture Park designed by Weiss/Manfredi (2007), (Fig.1), the winner of an international design competition and best known for its Z-shaped form connects three separate sites rising over existing infrastructure and descending from the city to the water. The main footpath connects the pavilion, containing café and exhibition spaces, down to

the revitalized pocket beach framing different views of the Olympic Mountains, Mount Rainier, Seattle's port and downtown. Variety of landscapes with distinct ecologies could be also recognized along this path including, the valley, the greensward, the grove, the meadows, the shore, and the tides. The design aims to connect the landscape to the urban, the infrastructure and artworks, created by well-known artists such as Alexander Calder, Richard Serra and Claes Oldenburg.

This paper investigates specific aspects of the design outcome highlighted in the existing critics' reviews in conjunction with the nuance of my own inhabitation experience during the site visits as well as hearing public's narratives and memories of the site. One of the significant aspects of the project, as Huber (2008) notes, is creating conceptual, formal and professional 'linkages where separations now exist'. Approaching from the urban side, the site leads you from the adjacent urban street to the green space, opening up views to the sculptures and the port and the mountains in the background. It then takes you past the pavilion with glass walls and visible interior and over the highway and the train track down to the port. It engages the user with rich variety of sensual and bodily experiences evoked by various sounds, smells, textures and also smells, over a relatively short walk compared to the variety of spatial experiences. This *link* does not solely occur formally and conceptually and in the surprising transportation of the user from urban to landscape, through land-art, but originates from a tight multidisciplinary design practice philosophy. As Michael Manfredi¹ notes, the firm avoids traditional definition of a strong design territory and their interest in hybrid projects have created a dynamic inter-disciplinary approach with collaboration among architects, landscape architects, planners and artists.

Another strong aspect of the project is the response to the site geology and its impact on shaping spaces and surfaces as well as the construction of the topography. With the aim to connect three distinct sites separated by strong arterial highway, train track and the water, the 'Z-shaped' concept (Fig.2), originally inspired by a torn business card, enhanced landform and re-established the original topography of the site. The topographical experimentation and the well-known 'Z-shape' concept can be mainly perceived through looking at large scale representations of the design process and the outcome. The focus on large-scale representation could be due to the large scale of the project and the designers' approach in shaping the original design concept, the torn business card, with a distant perspective toward the site. The initial distant eye-bird view to the site has noticeably affected the majority of the following representations produced during the design process or of the outcome. The designers'

¹ Author's interview with Michael Manfredi, July 2013

smaller scale charcoal and collage perspectives leave a more creative understanding of human perception of space, particularly, in relation to the context of the site. However, following the perspectival principals, they remain distant from the observer and the represented geometry does not fully project the user's eye-level vision and bodily positioning (Fig.2). Despite the creative exploratory aspect of the design concept, this distance has at times reduced the complexity of the site in terms of the designers' engagement with smaller scale spatial interaction, critics' evaluation and public's perception of the connectivity and geometry.



FIG2. Left: Design concept Diagrammatic model, Right: Olympic Sculpture Park before and after construction, Credit: Weissman/Fredi

Majority of the critics evaluate the outcome according to the distant bird's-eye view representation of the Park, which is a valid and essential perspective. Lawrence Cheek (2007) in *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote²: "The architects play intriguing games with perspective here, sighting down a row of panels, you're never sure whether they're marching into the ground and tilting into increasing angles, or if it's just a trick of the distance". The nuance of the user's embodied experience, however, should be also explored within a smaller scale view at human eye-level vision. Although the design carves out the significance of landscape topography in a large scale, the landform variations does not stand out in bodily experience of movement through space.

² Lawrence W. Cheek, "Welcome To The Best Public Space In Seattle," *Ibid.* January 18, 2007;

Walking on the footpath leave a more flat bodily engagement with the ground, largely because the level change is distributed along a relatively long linear path distance (Fig.4.4). The pathway, which connects the site to the shore and the pocket-beach leaves a stronger bodily impression, as there is a sharper level change over a specific distance. The linear pathways seem complex and ambiguous from the distance, and as Cheek (2007)³ notes, "ambiguity is one of the qualities that lifts working architecture onto the plane of art" (Fig.4.1). The pathways encourage dynamic and movement along the site and create a composition of seating areas and shade trees with various distinct ecologies. However, literal definition of the pathways and turf leaves a 'controlled' impression of the use of space and discourage further sense of exploration and discovery. The allocation of sculptures on specific paths accentuates the predefined functionality of the divided space and brings up the question whether the flat landscape is considered as a canvas for sculptures. The rough natural texture of the meadow creates a more exploratory sense, however, its literal separation from the pathways does not encourage bodily engagement with this section.



FIG3. Olympic Sculpture Park. Collage and charcoal sketches. Credit: Weissman/Fredi

Representation style (e.g. medium, scale, distance) of the design process as well as

³ Lawrence W. Cheek, "Welcome To The Best Public Space In Seattle," *Ibid.*, January 18, 2007;

the outcome has a crucial impact on user's perception of space. For instance, while connectivity is highlighted as one of the main aspect of the design for legible reasons, but mainly conceived through looking at the bigger picture of the site. While the diversity of the urban, landscape, and foreshore experience becomes evident by walking through the site (Fig.4.3), semi-structured interviews with the public revealed that many users perceived the park disconnected from the shore-side, until they came across the large-scale images (Fig.4.2). Furthermore, during the in-situ drawings, I noticed that majority of my own drawings are looking at the space from the bird's-eye view, despite having a 3-d view of the site before my eyes.

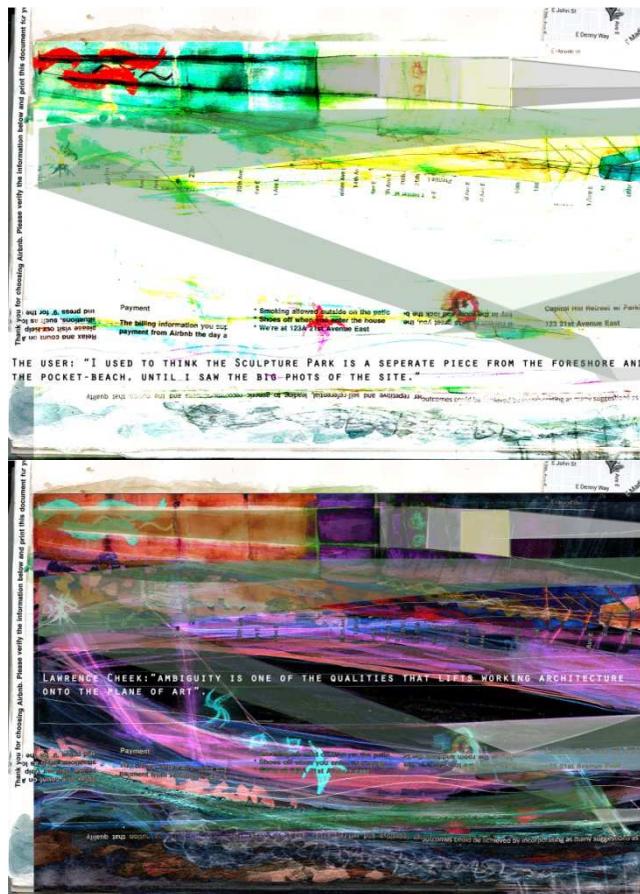


FIG 4a. Four series of (Re)presentation; 1.Ambiguity, 2.Disconnectivity,

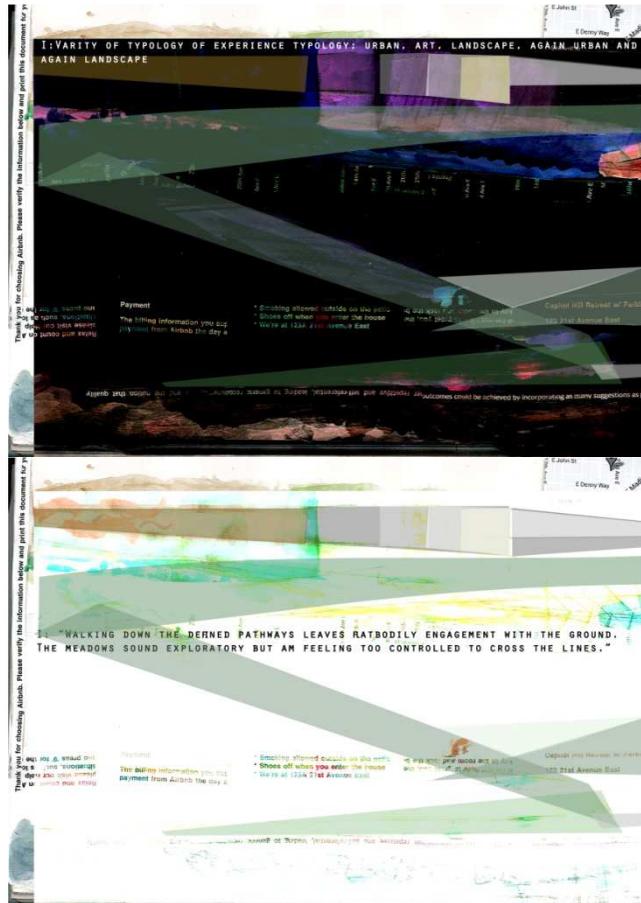


FIG 4b. Four series of (Re)presentation; 3.Variety, 4. Flat embodiment

This was mainly the result of previously being exposed to too many large-scale representations of the park in the media and architectural magazines. My main eye-level drawings were inspired on the pocket beach, the multi-level lawn adjacent to the pavilion or in encounters with some of the sculptures, mainly because the rest of the site seemed flat at the eye-level. The 3-D sensual interaction with the space is more deeply reflected in the animation video created by the designers.

Although the human motion through the space and the eye-level vision is not taken into account, but the sonic experience is sensitively explored at different sections of

the site. As architectural critic, Trevor Boddy (2007)⁴ notes, "The serrated edges of those transportation passages shape acoustic and visual boundaries around the park".

The idea of integrating art with the landscape is a prominent aspect of the project, highlighted in various reviews, particularly in contrast to the convention of exhibiting art in museums and galleries. Sheila Farr (2007)⁵, art critic, called the park "a brilliantly crafted place that functions as a vehicle for art as well as offering an exhilarating experience in and of itself". The selection of a numbers of large-scale sculptures could be another consequence of a the designers' distant engagement with the site. The large size of the sculptures at times sounds like a dissimilar bodily experience in juxtaposition with the art-work, but at the same time distant and unapproachable due to their overwhelming scale and positioning. Site-specificity and temporality of the sculptures also become significant in relation to the dynamics of the landscape over different seasons as well as aging and potential of the sculptures in communicating with the user and maintenance issues.

Adding and changing sculptures, due to inability to engage the users after a certain amount of time as well as ongoing maintenance costs are perhaps issues that object-focused and additive design strategies (Kazerani and Rahmann 2013) may encounter through the passage of time. This issue is addressed in more site-specific and integrated art pieces, such as the 'Seattle Cloud Cover', by Teresita Fernandez, which both functions as a shade and engages the visitors physically by overcasting abstract patterns and colours on the ground. Apart from the environmental advantageous, the idea of pocket beach restoration becomes a more liberating concept for landscape-art integration.

The dynamic engagement with the natural materials on the beach, particularly in form of sculptures from the beach stones or the tree logs creates intriguing temporal community artworks, usually washed away at the end of the day by tidal fluctuation (Fig.5).

⁴ Trevor Boddy, "Architectural Review: From Sculpture To Structure," *Ibid.*, January 18, 2007;

⁵ Sheila Farr, "Art Review: A Critic's-Eye View Of The New Olympic Sculpture Park," *Ibid.*, January 18, 2007;

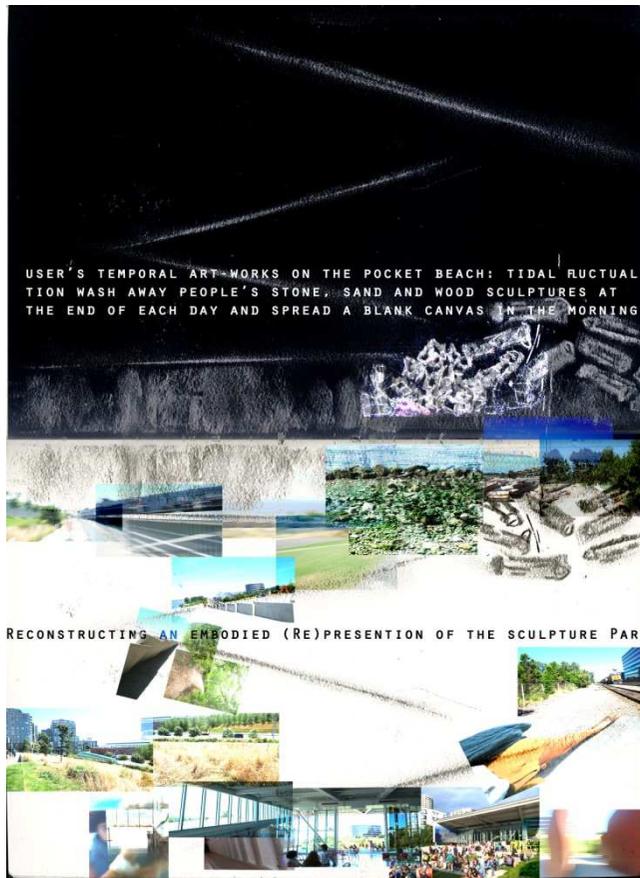


FIG 5. (Re)presenting embodiment

Conclusion

The core concept of this paper refers to the existing challenge on academic validity and practical applicability of the design research outcome. This challenge results from the subjective design-oriented perspective against the more objective academic position in relation to design research. Through questioning the conventional notion of scientific 'rigor' and pure objectivity, the value of subjective creative intervention is acknowledged in this work. However, in order to develop a multi-faceted understanding of design research the notion of 'oscillating subjectivity' is adopted, to communicate the pure subjective and objective perspectives. This concept is then discussed within an architectural criticism case study, where the focus is to present a

multi-vocal (re)presentation of a design project. For this task the subjective lived experience of the users (including the public and the author) and the designer (design intention) is integrated with the existing objective distant critique of the design outcome. This critical (re)presentation is presented both textually and visually, as an outcome of design research, shifting between different voices of the user, designer and the critic, but still keeping a subjective position due to a certain level of personal interpretation. The visual (re)presentation aims to communicate a creative inhabitation of embodied spatial experience with the original design intention and the existing objective interpretations. The implementation of this critical positional in the selected case study reveal hidden aspects of user's spatial experience, which at times contradicts the existing evaluation and criticism of the project. In fact it is the dialogue between the intimate and the distant, the subjective and the objective that shape the nuance of the proposed (re)presentation, without taking a fixed positional preference. Overall, the outcome signifies the role of multifaceted perspective towards design research as well as communication between academia and practice. Moreover, it revealed how a communicative design research can link the design strategy and commonly used representations in design practice, to more academically studied sociocultural consequences of design inhabitation and the lived experience and encourage expanding design possibilities and representational practices.

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