

# Place, boundaries and the essentials

A Mexican spice boiled into the Scandinavian Space

Enrique Roura, 2016

## **Abstract:**

The following text, along with an art installation in the Master exhibition (2016), at TKM Gråmølna (Trondheim, Norway), are the result of an artistic research, in order to obtain the Master degree in Fine Arts (MFA). It is an experimental approach towards an investigation around the notions of human needs, in which the analysis is developed by the presentation of the scopes of art, architecture, philosophy and anthropology. The terms place, excess, and boundary are developed and applied to examine thinkers and artists, including Zygmunt Bauman, Italo Calvino, Rori Knudtson, among others. The transdisciplinary nature of their work pushes the borders of their specific genres, but as a group, they are joined by practices that are embodied and connected. The goal pursued is to establish a recognition and awareness of the implications that human needs have in ‘modern society’ concluding that is crucial to redefine this notion, to separate it from the notions of desire and excess in which they are now embedded.

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FONT description:  
*Italics 10 pt. Avenir font: Subjective voice impression.*  
Regular 12 pt. Avenir font: objective description of project development  
*Italics 12 pt. Avenir font: Literal citation.*  
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## Introduction:

In regard to the surrounding, the ideas and concepts underlying my artistic research and the final realisation of it –the following paragraph is a brainstorming session for naming the investigation– together with the final artwork. I will name them both simultaneously, to give relevance to the investigation and to the artwork itself. I posit that the paragraph as a whole gives an image of the entire work, the research project and its final artwork.

*The other inside; the outside perspective; blur visions of place; metaphoric spaces of a culture; warming the interior; a Mexican view of Scandinavia; impression of place; placing space; the right amount of excess; needs, desires, excess and happiness; excenciall<sup>1</sup>; the need of art; dichotomies of a place; duality and reality; what do you need?; is it cozy enough?; feeding the space; 200gm of spice boiled into the space; materializing space; the fine line between material and space; nurturing space...*

*I want to devise a boundary in order to make a distinction, build a border between an inside space and another. The enclosure of the space is a signifying gesture, it is a way of making place out of space. Inside this space, I want to bring my outsider perspective, dislocate it from its far reality; far away and different. By the act of being here I became the other, and by speaking a different language from my mother tongue, I perform as another person, another self. My research is situated inside the realms of the common knowledge yet at the same time it questions these realms. It is about social constructs, and it is a mirror of what I see as a world of differences, a world of boundaries.*

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<sup>1</sup> Excencial, is a combination of the words excess and essential.

## The installation

The material component of the project is a site-specific installation placed inside a gallery space in Norway, composed by a physical boundary (wooden ceiling and walls, as well as plastic film), and boiling water mixed with annatto (spice from Mexico) (see fig., 1), in order to create a perceivable difference in terms of temperature, texture and aroma, along with the performative act of providing more water to maintain the action of boiling. The significance of the work relies on this difference, or the artwork is, in fact, the difference itself.

## Creative Statement

The main core of my work relies on the spaces of the in between, it is a way of questioning the concept of boundary, an attempt to resignify it. I am a trained architect and a self-educated artist. My creative practice is located somewhere in between the disciplines of art, architecture and design, on a common ground where material and methodological experimentation are the foundations. A less mechanized, less sterile critical reflection shapes my projects, based on a trans-disciplinary approach that is nurtured by psychology, anthropology, history and geography. I am looking for a shared language that integrates more aspects of everyday life to better understand what makes us humans and how place defines culture.



Figure 1. Annatto (spice from Mexico) often referred to as the poor man's saffron.

## **Context of the work:** Notions of place

The founder and director of a platform called ‘The school of critical engagement’, Rori Knudtson, is an “artist, architect and writer working with installation, sound, film and performance questioning constructs of space”. I refer to her as she operates

*“with/within the processes, participants, protagonists, systems, and stakeholders that make/construct place. Place develops through interaction between human and non-human systems, nature and culture, people and space, individuals and collectives, and hegemonic and marginalized cultures and identities”.*<sup>2</sup>

My research has been inspired by a similar concept of place or emplacement and the site-specificity of the work responds to this notion, in the sense that it is within the context where I have found the meaning of my artwork. Dislocation, displacement, and merging are common concepts explored in my artwork. From objects to myself, the idea of dislocating the self and merging with a new place, with a different reality, is the starting point of the research project.

The propositions I have laid out during the research involving the concepts mentioned above are: Where am I? And where do I come from? I am making an effort to reveal how place is a major agent in the construction of culture and behaviour. The enquiry follows the present tendencies in social sciences. Like in the anthropological studies of Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga; the social psychology studies of Pablo Fernandez Christlieb; or the philosophical works of Ed Casey. All of them agree that place is not only a background or scenario but is an active agent in behaviour and therefore in culture.

My research is partly based on an empirical understanding of a place: Norway, Trondheim, its inhabitants, and its culture, using the city and houses as objects of analysis from which it was possible to understand certain characteristics of this society, by identifying local needs. The outside and the inside space, the common and the private, the closed and the open. Octavio Paz (Nobel Literature Prize in 1990) is one of the most important thinkers and writers of the Spanish-speaking sphere, he stated that "architecture is the unbribable witness of history because we cannot speak of a large building without recognizing in it the witness of an era, its culture, its society, its intentions". It is a question of reading, like reading a book. A place is

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<sup>2</sup> <http://schoolofcriticalengagement.org/about.html> (Visited 10.04.2016)

capable of communicating. Architecture, the inhabitants and the landscape are a sort of language that can be read.

*By reading the place I've been nurturing my investigation. Based upon purely subjective interpretations and observations of the phenomena is how I have come to certain conclusions, complemented with colloquial knowledge acquired by conversing with local people. All this reading is just a source of inspiration, for me it is a way of giving meaning to my artwork. Since the beginning of the research all the sculptures, drawings, paintings, sketches, collages, installations, sound pieces, are based on this experience; sometimes very intuitively, but sometimes very analysed. A collection of objects taken from the street is my intuitive approach towards art making, by walking, observing and finding things that later will be used who knows how. It is a literal action of using the place as the raw material for my artwork.*

### Architecture as a boundary

Walls, windows<sup>3</sup>, ceilings and doors are some of the primordial elements of architecture. Rem Koolhaas, curator of the last Architecture Biennale in Venice, named these components as 'fundamentals', referring to the basic rudiments of architecture in an effort to bring back the focus to the importance of such basic constituents, to the essential things. The artwork reflects how I am also interested in this notion of going 'back to the basics' but in a broader sense. What is essential? What is the minimum? What is enough?

*Laget om* is an old Viking concept that describes a very peculiar sense of community: "having enough but leaving enough for others". This is a concept about sharing and understanding how much is enough of something you need, often referred to as the middle point. Today *lagom* is the Swedish word for it, and *passe* is the Norwegian. In this concept, we can

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<sup>3</sup> According to the on-line Oxford dictionary, the word *window* has its origins in the Old Norse *vinduaga* (from *vindr* 'wind' + *auga* 'eye'). It is defined as an opening in the wall or roof of a building or vehicle, fitted with glass in a frame to admit light or air and allow people to see out, and I would add to see in. In countries with a Protestant history, such as The Netherlands or Norway, windows acquire different functions: in order to show your neighbors your frugal lifestyle you shouldn't block the view with curtains. A window became a gesture of having nothing to hide, even though now Norway is one of the most atheist countries in the world, you can still see some open windows on the streets of Trondheim. My fascination with windows is related to the idea of reading architecture and places. "Everything that exists in the space is communicative because it has a memory" (Authors translation (Christlieb, 2004 p. 16)), like objects, or furniture, a whole street or a simple window. In Mexico City, for example, the windows at the street level will have extra metallic bars, houses are built more to the inside, due to security and protection. I am referring to this example to expose how a window can tell facts of the society, the economy and the social realities. The lack of extra metallic protections on the windows of Trondheim describes perfectly the economic situation of Norway, a well-fare state almost without crime.

understand the essence of the Scandinavian psyche: fair, balanced and logical (Wieland, 2007 p.191-195). Scandinavian countries are ranked as the most equal countries in the world, based on wealth distribution.

In its very core, Architecture is a response to human needs; it is inspired and originated by human necessity itself. Just as boundaries act like definitions; they are distinctions, often referred to as lines that determine the end of something and the beginning of something else.

Architecture –and more specifically ‘cities’ in the western world from the beginning of civilization– are boundaries, material distinctions from the natural world, the ‘cities’ were built to protect us from the ‘nature’ and its dangers<sup>4</sup>. From this separation a dichotomy was born: human vs. nature, today the “endemic humanitarian crisis”<sup>5</sup> has made us re-think about our relationship towards ‘nature’. Climate change is one definition of this crisis, along with the complex and multiple discussions around the anthropocene.

*It seems to me that it is as if the earth and its inhabitants were in a war against the ecosystems that support them. Recently there have been numerous efforts by activists, politicians, artists, scientists, the civil society, among others, to transform this dichotomy into a more balanced relationship. But despite the numerous efforts, we are still meditating this dichotomy.*

According to the opinions expressed by Rori Knudtson, dichotomies are completely connected to culture; they are a way that we use to explain “who we are and who we aren’t, what is and what isn’t”. Knudtson explains “since the dawn of industrial age, culture has been placed in juxtaposition with nature... the genders were assigned, with nature christened as Mother Earth.” It is the subjugation of nature. The boundary that I am building mirrors this relationship but it is also a response to restrictions existing in the gallery space, it is a practical solution to what is going to happen inside.

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<sup>4</sup> In his book *Rebellion de las masas* (1937), Spanish liberal philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset, on page 133, talks about this separation between human and nature, referring to the ‘public square’ as the starting point of the Greek and Roman Civilizations, the invention of the polis, which in the words of Pablo Fernández Christlieb is relevant to any consideration of western culture. “The Greek and Roman decided to separate from nature, from the geobotanic cosmos. Differently from the great Asian and African civilizations, that kept integrated to nature and its consequences”. (Authors translation (Christlieb, 2004 p. 13))

<sup>5</sup> In an essay titled “Unmooring Perceptions”, Rori Knudtson refers to the climate change as an endemic- humanitarian crisis. (Knudtson, 2015 p. 11)



## **THE ARTWORK** Performativity of matter -

The artwork presented as an outcome of the research is an action performed by a non-living element, a pure demonstration of energy. Inside the built boundary, an electric stove will provide the energy enough to turn water into steam. Water mixed with annatto will perform the continuous act of boiling; the shift of state in the matter will be the spectacle inside the gallery space. This is an ode to banality, to one of the most common acts of everyday life, it is an ode to the basic needs. Necessities are divided into two main branches, physiological and psychological. The basic needs refer mainly to the physiological, like breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping, and fucking, they are associated to instincts, to mere acts of survival, reminders of our animal condition. But the complexity of the concept of human needs is directly related to human physique and culture. Abraham Maslow published in the paper “A Theory of Human Motivation” in *Psychological Review* (1943) a diagram where the hierarchy of needs was organized as a pyramid where the physiological aspects are in the bottom and self-actualization is at the top, going from safety to the social and the esteem. But what is the difference between needs and desires? Where is this boundary?

To answer these propositions about needs and desires, Zygmunt Bauman wrote in his essay “Excess- An Obituary” (2001), that in the early state of “production-obsessed capitalism” human needs

*“were seen after the image of norms: the right-and-proper state, any departure of which, whether upwards or downwards, should be promptly and at all costs repaired and best of all prevented; in a civilisation of norms, want is resented no less, but no more either than over-indulgence and luxury.”*

At this point, the boundaries between ‘right amount’ and excess was easy to determine. In this same essay Jacques Ellul is cited with the purpose of defining that capitalism “was also (perhaps first and foremost) a bourgeois civilization”, with the idea that the bourgeois is

characterized by the idea of happiness as a human right. 'Happiness' goes beyond the idea of survival; paraphrasing Bauman, the idea of survival is related to sticking to the norms, and happiness has an anti-normative power. He described the process of losing the boundaries between needs and desires as "a gradual emancipation of happiness".

It is in this dichotomy of survival vs. happiness where I see a perfect example of the condition of modern society. The pursuit of happiness as the "trademark of modernity", an exponential growth of consumption in which excess is the norm, in which excess became the need, the only freedom that the inhabitant of our time knows. (Bauman, 2001 p. 85-91)

The best example that I can think of to describe the establishment of excess as a norm, is related to one of the basic needs, that is alimentation, from the evolution of gastronomy to the methods of food production and their consequences. We've been through quite a journey: from eating only what we found, to implementing industries to transform and process our food.

*The invention of agriculture is a milestone in the history of humankind, and it is because of the excess in food production, that culture itself has evolved.*

Italo Calvino describes in his book *Invisible Cities* (1972), a city called Leonidas, a place where the 'genuine opulence' was measured not by the production and the consumption of goods, but by the act of disposal of these goods, which I found as a very literal metaphor of today's reality. Food nowadays is a disposable good, the wealth of a country can be measured by the amount and quality of the food that is discarded. On the other hand there are places that are still suffering hunger, in the phenomena of alimentation the problem of excessive consumption is also materialised, for example, through obesity (see fig., 2) and diabetes: both diseases that have been growing at an increasing pace over the past years. Food is the best example to observe how the world is polarized in the social, the economic, the intellectual and the political. As I mentioned at the beginning of this text: like a world of differences.

By the use of everyday objects (an electric stove and a metallic pot) I want to create a difference inside the gallery space, it is an action of dislocating an object, a ready-made object as it is named in the art world. The originality of the work relies on the new use of these objects, which will be a continuous action of boiling, that after a certain period of time and some maintenance (adding more water when it is needed), it will change the characteristics of the enclosed space.

## Differences and perception

Perceiving a difference is the action of becoming aware, it is a way of using the senses to understand distinctions. Temperature, texture and aroma will be affected inside the gallery space, phenomenology<sup>6</sup> at its basic state. I am interested in how perception helps understand matter and the surroundings. Interested in understanding the difference between matter and space? If there is one, matter and space, talking strictly inside the atmosphere of the earth, share some qualities: like texture that is related to the senses of touch, sight and taste; the temperature that is sensed by touch and sight: aroma felt by the smell and taste; sound and shape. To understand all the features of our surrounding we perceive the world in terms of boundaries, that can be linear contours or not.



Figure 2. XXXXL T-shirt (ready-made object, artwork in process, Enrique Roura, 2016)

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<sup>6</sup> Phenomenology comes from the Greek *phainómenon* “that which appears” and *logos* “study”. It is a philosophical study of the structures that construct the consciousness and the perception. Founded as a philosophical movement in the early years of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, and deeply explored later by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

## Methodologies

First of all, I found very relevant to situate my work and the whole master exhibition within the time and history of art. Maybe it's just a coincidence, maybe it isn't, but we are celebrating the 100 year anniversary of DADA 1916- 2016 and as the artists proximate in their manifesto, the death of art.

I see my whole experience in Norway as part of my investigation, from going to a class at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art to be drunk at a bar, talking or just observing the behaviours, every single moment is an opportunity to discover something, and since I am interested in the everyday life and the common knowledge, the experience of it makes sense for the purpose of the research.

What are the local needs? What are the needs of the inhabitants of Norway, one of the richest countries in the world, with the highest standards of living? What are the problems and life aspirations of this people? With these questions in mind, I began my research.

It was in what you call a moment of inspiration, when I decided my first step: a performance, acting like an interviewer and approaching random people on the streets, bars and all sorts of scenarios. After a short introduction of my intentions and myself, I asked them: What do you need in life?

I was interested in knowing what was the first thing that came to their mind. But it was also an excuse to start a conversation with someone unknown. Love, family, friends, food, sun, nothing, freedom, sex, alcohol, heroin, money, drugs, silence, and time, where common answers, in different times of the day.

After some interviews I discovered that the reaction of people was more interesting and communicative than the answer itself, nervous laughter, staring looks, smiles, doubts, certainties and uncertainties, some of the interviews were recorded and with the consent of the interviewed, the audio was used to make a sound piece, where you can listen to the reactions alone and not the answers.

I thought that by asking this question, I was going to find some peculiarities of Norwegian society, but the answers were as broad and open as the question itself. I decided instead to focus more on the material aspects of the place, the ‘built environment’ as it is described by the social sciences.

Through an empirical analysis of the spaces I discovered the peculiarities that I was looking for, the local needs. Going from the city to the house, from the public to the private. The ‘built environment’<sup>7</sup> speaks in terms of dimensions, scales, and materials. I focused my analysis on the most common of places: the house, the domestic space, and the interior space.

These dimensions, scales and materials, communicate a very peculiar understanding of comfort, there is a strong sense of proximity and intimacy that is embedded in all these spaces, I believe that there is a material aspect in space, for example, temperature, texture and aroma are qualities of the space that can be felt, that can be touched.

In Norway the interior space has the need to oppose to the harsh conditions of the weather, this inside is a place to stay for long periods of time, as long as winter lasts. *Koselig* is a Norwegian word that describes this peculiar sense of comfort but is also one of the most characteristic concepts of Norwegian culture, warm and subtle. *Koselig* is a very specific quality in space, a poor translation to English will be ‘cozy’, and I say poor because *koselig* involves more elements than just coziness. A conversation, a dinner party, work environment, time with yourself and even sex life can be described as *koselig*. I found really interesting how Norwegians describe their social or personal interactions in terms of space.

The first year of the master program was characterized by a free, intuitive and experimental approach. Not stopping much on the idea of thinking what I was doing, I let my intuition rule and dictate the actions. It was a year of collecting: data, materials, ideas, experiences, and artworks.

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<sup>7</sup> “The built environment and the spatial form” is a concept used in the in the field of the social sciences, especially in anthropology, to describe the scenario of human life. (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003)

Collages, sketches, notes, ideas, and thoughts represent the process of the work that is somehow documented-archived in a series of notebooks, some kind of graphic diary. This is a practice that I've been developing since the year 2010. (see fig., 3)

The second year was characterized by the analysis of the collected data. It was a year of reading and finding references for my thoughts, a journey from the unconsciousness to the articulation of my ideas and reflections.

After the process of understanding and recognising my previous artworks and myself I proceeded to define and conceive the last work, with intuition as the starting point for the decision-making and this text as a background and theoretical foundation. The idea was to integrate all the concepts into a single installation, to produce an artwork for the sole purpose of the master exhibition, something ephemeral, intangible but perceivable. The aesthetics, materials, and actions are a summary of the entire research, the place and the subject (myself). It is a material expression of the acquired knowledge.



Figure 3. Notebook process (Enrique Roura, 2016)

## Conclusions

As a result of the overview expressed in this text, I believe that there is an urgency to redefine the notions of desires and needs, to re-establish the norms, to not lose our ‘consumerist’ society in excess. There is a power embedded in the notions of excess, this power has helped us evolve: culturally and scientifically. But there is a need of recognition and awareness of this power. This is a call for looking back to the essential things in life, what are the ‘real needs’? What is the midpoint between happiness and excess?

Do we need art?

Art is an evidence of humanity, anthropologists associate the presence of artistic remains as an unequivocal sign of the existence of ‘modern humans’, on the other hand, the lack of this artistic remains suggests the possibility of a more primitive species. Paul Johnson is a historian and he stated that “art came before everything. It certainly came before writing... all forms of writing originally evolved from pictograms. It almost certainly came before speech, at least, forms of speech expressing notions which were at all complex.” It is explained with the relationship of the “acquisition of knowledge and the ability to create” which according to Johnson are inseparably connected.

*“By learning to record visible objects, and express ideas, by engraving or painting on relatively flat two-dimensional surfaces, humans produced visual aids to such speech noises as they were originally able to make; these aids in time were reflected in refinements in speech noises, expansion of vocabulary and the evolution”.* (Johnson, 2003 p. 7-8)

The history of art is a history of representations, a history of boundaries and significances, for example, in the history painting the boundaries are the lines that describe, represent and signify an object, going from the simple two-dimensional representations to more complex ones, the representation of the three-dimensional objects, these are all kinds of perspective drawings, from lines to concepts and their representation.

Art is a human universal according to Michael Gazzaniga, who states that it has been present in all the cultures around the world, in the forms of painting, dance, story-telling, objects and other forms. So we can state that art is a norm for the human kind, art is a need.

I see my artwork as a mirror of society, culture, identity. And what is the function of a mirror? Is it only to reflect an image? Or is it through the recognition of this image that we become aware of ourselves, we understand that we have a shape, that we are standing somewhere, that there is a place and we belong to it, that we exist. It is a matter of recognition, but the act of recognition depends strictly on the viewer, and in his or her very personal perspective.



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No title (From the series “Depicting Norway”)

*(Sculpture)*

*Wood and wool*

*22cm x 22cm 40cm*

*Norway 2014*



## What do you need?

*(Mixed media installation)*

*Overhead projection 125cm x 125cm*

*Sound piece 13:51 min.*

*Norway 2014*



The need of “Koselig” (From the series “Depicting Norway”)

*(Installation)*

*Wool and cotton tapestry in the  
entrance of a semipublic building*

*150cm x 133cm*

*Norway 2015*



The need of light (From the series “Depicting Norway”)

*(Installation)*

*Sun light, steam and wood*

*355cm x 355cm x 355cm*

*Norway 2015*



No title 2 (From the series “Depicting Norway”)

*(Installation)*

*Candles and wood*

*180cm x 310cm x 130 cm*

*Norway 2015*