

An Introduction to *Threshold*

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For some, *Threshold* may evoke a fin-de-siècle mood, anticipating a passage into another era. Although the exhibition may be perceived as such, that was not the way it was originally intended. In fact, the idea for *Threshold* evolved over a long period, before millennial considerations became so preoccupying.

As an architectural element, a threshold marks a passage from one space into another. In the context of this exhibition, a threshold promises both a physical movement forward and a figurative transition into an incorporeal world. Consisting of a series of ten rooms or spaces, this exhibition attempts to draw the viewer beyond the immediate environment of the gallery and away from those matters that condition the human subject's place solely in society. The exhibition conflates physical, mental, and emotional space as a site for introspection. Disorienting architecture, ambiguous sounds, indistinct forms, and displaced objects imply alternatives to an entirely secular state of being.

Threshold features artists representing several generations and from various countries who rely on allusive means and techniques to move beyond the exclusively physical. To effect a transition into a more speculative dimension, the works engage the senses and the mind with imaginative use of space, form, colour, texture, sound, and light. At the same time, *Threshold* also seeks a certain willingness on the part of the viewer to respond to the conditions provided by the artists and to accept that the responses will be unique and pleasurable.

In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on the secular aspect of contemporary art practice and on the relationship of the human subject to the social/cultural/political milieu. These themes, however, have left little room for the analysis of formal values in the context of installations by contemporary artists.

Threshold focuses on the relationship of the human subject to a new interpretation of space. At first, this different emphasis may appear to be merely formal, but gradually form takes on added meaning.

A key question, but perhaps not one that can be fully answered at this stage, is why the issue of space, of enduring interest to those involved with the practice, study and enjoyment of the visual arts, should attract special attention now. That it should come to the fore at this moment in time should not, perhaps, surprise, but there are particular reasons for present interest.

Since the sixties, developments in science and technology have appreciably altered our perceptions of space. In the continuum from the initial human exploration of the moon to, more recently, cyberspace, the concept of space as a speculative realm has been reasserted, maybe for the first time in the history of art since the Renaissance. If walking on the moon stirred a sense of adventure in most people, discovering cyberspace has added to the possibility of limitless exploration. Cyberspace would seem to have removed, for now at least, any barrier between here and there. This, I believe, is the context for *Threshold*. In this exhibition, the clearly delimited physical entity of The Power Plant acts as a site for transformation, placing the human subject in direct relationship to architecture. At the same time, the artists' inventive use of architectural space effects a transition from the strictly tactile and sensory to the immaterial and mysterious. This is the place where most of the works function and where emotion is given free play.

Of more significance, perhaps, is that the discovery of cyberspace has led us to question the concepts we rely on to understand the world we live in. Artists, like theorists, are in the vanguard of investigations into the contentious issues raised in a mutating world – one poised between an apparently reassuring yesterday and a radically different

tomorrow.¹ To my mind, by opening space beyond the physical and material, artists join the growing ranks of individuals in many fields who are pondering the true impact of cyberspace on human activity and thought.

It ought to be said, however, that this exhibition's exploration of another dimension is undertaken, for the most part, without reliance on new media. In fact, most of the works in *Threshold* draw on fairly traditional means to transcend material reality.

Ideally, a viewer might experience these environments slowly, perhaps over a number of days, rather than absorbing them in one walk through the show. But the exhibition was conceived as a cumulative experience and as a series of sites, each opening into the next, each adding to or contrasting with the work that preceded it.

Teresita Fernández's installation combines the actual space of the gallery with a sense of space that extends beyond the physical parameters of the environment, generating a kind of third space that suggests both "here" and "elsewhere." Ann Lislegaard similarly expands her space beyond the room itself, and her work makes use of a mesmerizing sound element to induce the viewer to slip deeply into the process of experiencing art. Ian Carr-Harris is also interested in bringing together two different conceptions of space. In his work, time past and present are blended: he uses simulation to reenact a portion of the gallery's history. By contrast, Lyla Rye exposes the normally invisible real components of architectural articulation to create a maze that leads the viewer to reflect on the often unacknowledged yet significant impact of the structures we develop to apprehend the world. In a related yet contrasting vein, Masato Nakamura draws our attention to the corporate model and how it too determines the world we live in. In his work, common yet striking corporate signs become iconic, transcending their original meaning. Like Nakamura's, Judith Schwarz's work is infused with a spiritual quality. However, the space she opens up becomes the chapel of art itself. Both Peter Kogler and Mischa Kuball shift attention from the image to the process to which the image is subjected. In both cases, the viewer's own conceptual as well as emotional energy becomes the content of the work. Finally, Claude Lévêque, whose work occupies the clerestory and divides the gallery and the exhibition in two, also seeks an emotional response from the viewer. The energy inherent in its physical form metaphorically reenacts the obsessions of the subconscious mind.

Threshold is not only about transcending the physical reality of the spaces but also about architecture and the particular means each artist uses to transform a space. This is the primary perspective provided by the following comments on the artists' works.

It should be noted that as this text is being written, most of the works are still in progress and will remain in development until the exhibition opens. The text, then, can be no more than a threshold to a much deeper and longer process of understanding.

Carr-Harris's images of windows cast by beams of light are projected on the east wall of the space as they would appear if sunlight were coming through two covered west windows. The images suggest the light rays of a late-afternoon sun that inch across the floor and up towards the ceiling at a slight angle. Abstract compositions that metamorphose as they move along the wall, the fluid geometric forms are completely captivating. The projection mechanism is regulated so that the light's passage through the room takes twenty minutes, and the cycle is repeated endlessly, which underscores the synthetic nature of the event.

Carr-Harris has staged or "inserted" images of an absent phenomenon in a known environment, having constructed an apparatus to simulate the images of the covered, now invisible, industrial windows of the gallery and the effect of sunlight passing through. The projected images are composed of the spaces between the grid of the windows — rectangles of light — not of the grid themselves. This sense of absence is emphasized by the artificiality of the sunlight.

Carr-Harris's project transports a building's history into its present, creating a space that is a new construct blending memory and simulation, a place where here is then and now simultaneously. "My work," Carr-Harris says, "situates itself in that space we reserve for our recognition that the histories and structures which we use to give definition to identity are themselves contingent and fluid, no less elusive than the identities we seek to secure. Through shifts of emphasis, rather than through manipulation of image, the works seek to disturb our field of knowledge while leaving it also apparently intact. Nothing has factually changed, nothing has been invented or promoted; it is simply that some insertion, perhaps a footnote or a repetition, maybe an archaism, or just an object in a room, has complicated the linear flow of anticipated narrative — and we realize, with an atavistic pleasure, that we never are where we thought we were."³

Lyla Rye

In contrast to Carr-Harris, who introduces simulation into real space, Lyla Rye's installation peels off wall surfaces, leaving interior structure exposed and raw. By making the invisible visible, Rye uses architectural elements to foster direct sensory experience — here by challenging us to enter a maze of gigantic proportions.

Her maze, constructed of unclad metal studs set at a slight angle and close enough to each other to preclude walking between them, stands along one side of Carr-Harris's work. Adjoining stud walls are arranged to form the maze at the south end of the Royal LePage Gallery. On the south wall, dramatic lighting seems to extend the structure as a series of intricate shadows that stretch like spiderwebs onto the wall.

"Unlike a traditional maze, where the centre is equated with paradise," Rye says, "my labyrinth will have no goal in its centre and no apparent order. Rather, it will feel like a chaotic jumble of walls or a building in the process of being built or dismantled. I am interested in the metaphorical significance of the maze as a formal structure which provides a series of choices, each of which affects one's final destination."⁴

Paradise is not our destination here but the other installations in the show, some of which can be seen through Rye's construction. But the complexity of Rye's maze impedes the viewer's progress through the exhibition, adding a slight level of irritation at having to negotiate the obstacles that prevent us from reaching the works ahead.

However, anxiety to find a way out of the maze gradually gives way to the experience of the space itself. The process of walking through the labyrinth brings us to consider the means the artist has relied on to entrap us. Rye reasserts the articulation of space by reference to basic structure. In her work, the architectural body of the building is seen as the determining element of experience, both literally and as a representation of itself as shadows on the wall. As subject, we are asked to consider how this skeleton, normally invisible, is here turned into visible challenges and obstacles. No matter which route we opt for, we are constantly returned to metal studs that partially obscure our view. Like prison bars, the structure is at once restrictive and yet open to the outside. But while prison thresholds are barred, Rye's only threshold is conceptual, opening up beyond the materiality of the space.

Rooted in an experience of the actual, extended as a representation on the wall and acting as a metaphor, Rye's maze reverberates with meaning that extends into the emotional and intellectual.

Masato Nakamura

A small room bathed in yellow light draws our attention as we emerge from Lyla Rye's installation. In its centre, four giant yellow "gothic" arches, two reconstructions of the McDonald's famous M, are placed next to each other, allowing us to cross their thresholds. The forms stand on a floor of a slightly different yellow and are surrounded by walls of the same colour. Chapel-like, the room's appearance immediately dispels any association with the ubiquitous eateries. It is not only the context of their presentation that differs, but the M's have become architectural elements that articulate the space and define our relationship to it.

In contrast to most of the artists in this exhibition, Masato Nakamura relies on familiar symbols from the socio-cultural environment to transcend material reality. Barber poles, well-known comic characters or, as in this instance, signs of corporate identity are some of the elements Nakamura has used effectively in his work to show how meaning is culturally transmitted.

Taken from their usual situation and enlarged, the big M's acquire an iconic dimension that displaces their primary meaning as signage. This shift in meaning is achieved as well by the colour yellow with its religious overtones. Free-standing and oversized yet essentially unaltered, the signs are commanding presences in the space.

For the Japanese, the big M represents the acceptance of foreign cultural values into their society, as it does for Canadians. In this instance, though, we are being asked to consider not the immediate way that corporate trademarks affect the environment in which we live but the more covert ways that corporations shape thought and behaviour. In this work, the sign is the very centre of the space we inhabit. It shapes our understanding of and response to the space. Though we assume a position of power as independent agents, we become subsumed by the signs and, to a certain degree, physically transformed by them as their vibrant colour reflects onto our bodies. As Nakamura has noted, "With the installation of world-popular M sign, I would like visitors to consider how human activity is determined."⁵