What Floor?

Claire Rose Pedulla
What Floor?

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

Claire Rose Pedulla
Candidate for Sculpture BFA Degree and Renée Crown University Honors May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Sculpture

Capstone Project Advisor: Robert Wysocki Professor and Graduate Coordinator

Capstone Project Reader: Gorda Stanisic

Honors Director: ______________________
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: 4/20/14
Abstract

What Floor? was the title of my capstone project, which was a temporary installation located in the Comstock Art Building (Comart) at Syracuse University. Comart, one of the university’s art facilities, is located a mile away from the main campus. What Floor? was built within the elevator of the building. For my installation, I transformed the elevator into a living room. I did this by installing carpet, constructing and painting wooden walls to fit within the space, installing those walls, and then furnishing and decorating the space until I felt it was complete. In its finished state, it looked like a small lounge or living room. The walls were strung with colorful decorations, games were stacked under the coffee table, and bright orange curtains hung across the front “wall”, obscuring the view of the elevator doors.

I chose Comart as the location for my piece very intentionally, not simply to serve as a container for my installation, but as the subject of the work. What Floor? was a site specific installation whose relevance was dependent on its location within Comart. The piece addressed the social state of the facility through the use and alteration of the physical space within the building. The installation was both a critique and an invitation. I am interested in spaces and the ways in which they speak to the nature of their inhabitants. Comart was a space that I inhabited on a regular basis. I am a sculpture major and the sculpture studios, as well as other studios, are located within Comart. As I worked in the facility, I observed an atmosphere of social disinterest and a lack of connection between students and faculty working on different floors and in various studios within the building. I also observed a complete lack of shared space or space intended for anything other than work.

I created What Floor? to provide the possibility for the kind of space that Comart was lacking, a space for connection and interaction. But, since the space was impermanent, What Floor? was less of a solution than it was a symbol that provided an experience and pointed out a need; it asked people to see an absence by creating a presence.

Just as the piece would not be entirely relevant outside of Comart, the installation would not have been as effective if it had not been inside of the elevator. The elevator added to the piece by bringing all of its existing social oddities into the work, directing attention to both the physical and social space.
Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................. 2
Executive Summary............................................................................................... 4
Section I: Intro...................................................................................................... 8
Section II: Construction....................................................................................... 9
Section III: Evaluation......................................................................................... 14
Section IV: Viewing in Context........................................................................... 18
Section V: Conclusion......................................................................................... 22

Works Cited.......................................................................................................... 23
Executive Summary

My capstone project was a short-term installation sculpture, located in the Comstock Art Building (Comart) at Syracuse University. For my installation, I transformed the elevator in Comart into a lounge/living room. I executed this transformation by building, painting, and installing walls to fit into the elevator, installing carpet and furniture, and lastly, decorating the space. The altered room, though small, was pleasant, cozy, and inviting. In it was a fluffy, green couch that sat against the back wall, piled with pillows and blankets. The floor was carpeted and in front of the couch sat a black coffee table. The bottom shelf of the table held several games and magazines. The walls were strung with colorful decorations and across the front of the room, covering the elevator doors, were a set of bright orange curtains. These additions and alterations took a space that was overlooked and uninteresting and made it not only desirable, but inviting.

In order to understand my installation, it is necessary have some background information regarding the building containing this elevator. Comart, owned by Syracuse University, is located a mile away from main campus. The building houses the sculpture, printmaking, jewelry and metals, fibers, and ceramics departments. The large, industrial style facility is the primary work place for all of the students and faculty in each of these majors, many of whom are often in the facility working on a very regular, and for some, a seemingly constant, basis.

As a sculpture major, and therefore a member of the Comart community, I was struck by the attitude and social dynamic that characterized interactions in the
building. Though a sense of community and engagement could be seen between the people within individual majors, within the facility as a whole, there was little evidence of broad interactivity and connectivity. This resulted in a somewhat antisocial, divided dynamic, which was not helped by the fact that the building had next to nothing resembling communal or resting space. I was aware of the fact that a need for spaces conducive to communal or restful activity was far from important in terms the primary purpose of the facility. But, despite this, I continually found myself perturbed by the placement of such a large and heavily trafficked facility on the outskirts of campus without even a single room dedicated to shared or resting space.

The aim of my installation, titled *What Floor?* was, in part, to call attention to and challenge the social condition of the Comart. The facility has only two floors, so the large, industrial elevator was used rarely and almost exclusively out of necessity, when large, heavy materials needed to be transported from one floor to the other.

The use of the elevator as the container for this piece was very intentional. Elevators are peculiar places. The short-lived interactions within them and singular purpose of them result in an unusual and notoriously awkward social dynamic. Elevator etiquette is about existing in a small space with others, without sacrificing the comfort of ones own limited personal space. The following etiquette often depends on those within the elevator ignoring the existence of and proximity of their fellow riders. The social oddities of elevators played an important role in my piece, which allowed the juxtaposition of the warm, inviting
living room, suggesting and encouraging relaxation and engagement, to play off of and contradict the awkward, individualistic, uncomfortable behaviors that are irrevocably linked to elevators.

As I planned this piece, I aimed to do what I began to refer to as “repurposing.” As I considered the creation and alteration of space, I took a particular interest in the fact that spaces made for people always have an intended purpose. Until that point I had never considered the possibility that the function of a space might not be solely defined by the intent of its creator. I began to realize that it is not until people come into a space and act within it that the true functionality of the space is defined.

Designers, architects, and contractors plan and create spaces with the intention of making with purpose and function. Users decide, through their actions, whether or not to adopt the purpose intended for a space. Sometimes intended purposes are adopted as planned; while at other times, these purposes are neglected, overlooked, or adapted and evolved to more accurately fit the needs and desires of those using a space.

As I considered the designation of spatial functionality I began to differentiate between the term repurposing, which is what I, the artist, aimed to do, and “active repurposing”, which I considered to be the role of the users of a space. As I created What Floor?, I thought about how to create a space that would invite a certain dynamic as it was actively repurposed. The social dynamic that I had in mind was dramatically different from the dynamic that typically characterized the facility.
My hope, after completing the construction and alteration of the elevator, was that those who came into contact with the space, who were capable of “actively repurposing” it, would accept the space’s invitation for a dynamic, which drastically opposed the standard attitude exhibited by people within Comart, and adopt behaviors that reflected that invitation to whoever entered the elevator. I hoped also to find that, if this did occur, it might, over time, extend a new standard for engagement and a more shared sense of community beyond the space of the installation itself and into the greater Comart community.

My alteration of the space suggested a certain, somewhat deceptive, degree of privacy in its resemblance to a room fixed within a home. It invited relaxation and interaction. Those sitting in the elevator, who embraced its invitation to relax, in a sense, took short-term ownership of the space and were required to make a decision every time the elevator was called to open or go to another floor. As the elevator doors opened and their private room momentarily reclaimed its original identity as a public elevator, they could either revert to the prevailing social dynamic of Comart or they could extend the invitation and welcome, offered by the space, to whoever was on the other side of the elevator doors.

What Floor? addressed a specific space with a particular intent. But, in doing so, it also invited a broad consideration for spaces. Comart is not unique in its need for reassessment and change. As I move on from the completion of What Floor? I will continue to consider communities and ask; where are the places that need new purpose to invite the possibility of social change?
Reflective Essay

“Part of making work is to [take] those things perhaps that are already there but not visible to us and to try to make them visible in a way that they are experience-able” (Spirituality).

I. Intro

The concept of “experience-able art” has had increasing significance to me over the past two years. I entered into Syracuse University’s sculpture department during my sophomore year. My excitement about the expansive nature of sculpture was tempered with the knowledge of the countless technicalities unknown to me and the reality that I was expected to be making art, the meaning of which, to me, was still quite ambiguous. Much of my energy at the time was invested in learning to work technically and three dimensionally.

I concluded my sophomore year disappointed, despite many projects completed and skills gained, unable to find direction in my work. The following September I left home not for Syracuse, but for Florence Italy, where I spent my fall semester. I spent much of my time there in museums. Though I was still working on art, my months in Florence were characterized much more by the exploration of the art and history of the city. Upon returning to the sculpture department in the spring I found myself at a stand still. During this time I was prompted to write in response to the following: “What do you want your work to do?” I was asked to write about my work not necessarily as it was, but as I wanted it to be. Reflecting and writing in response to this question lead to the artist statement below.
Through repurposing and creating spaces, I call attention to the ways in which humans mark, shape, and define their spaces and conversely, the ways those spaces define them. I often eliminate the division between the spaces that contain my work and the work itself with the hopes of allowing and at times forcing viewers to become an integral part of the work. The results of this are often spaces whose meanings are contingent upon a level of engagement extending beyond the act of viewing alone. My work considers space not simply in its physical sense or as a container but is also for its social, mental, and cultural implications.

II. Construction

The images above show the site of my installation titled What Floor?. The image on the left shows the space prior to my piece and the one on the right
shows the space as it was for the duration of the installation. *What Floor?* was located in the elevator of the Comstock Art Building (Comart), a building belonging to Syracuse University. Comart houses the sculpture, fibers, jewelry and metals, ceramics, art education, and printmaking departments. The building is located a mile away from the main campus and is overlooked by and unknown to many within the university. The building itself contains studios and shops (wood, metal, ceramics, etc.). Quite a few students and faculty members occupy the building on a daily basis. At times this seems almost laughable, considering the minimal level of social engagement within the facility. It often appears that everyone who enters the building goes directly to their respective studios where they work without ceasing and promptly leave.

As a member of the Comart community, this way of existing within the space struck me as odd. There, in one building, were a group of individuals who, despite sharing a facility that many claimed to occupy more frequently than their own homes, appeared to have limited engagement and no communal or resting space.

This baffled me even further as I considered the fact that the inhabitants of this building were all there because of a shared interest in and desire to be making art. Considering this shared interest I would have thought that this building would not only invite but also encourage communication and engagement, and collaboration between artists.

I had planned to address spaces that had no apparent function and/or had the potential to take on new and more interesting functions within the ones they
already had. For What Floor? I thought first not of a space but of a social and communal function that was lacking within a large, existing facility. I chose the elevator as my vehicle to make that absence visible and experience-able.

The elevator, for many reasons, served as an effective container for this installation. It did not solely contain the work but added to it by bringing the already existing social oddities of elevator etiquette into play in the altered space.

The elevator is a strange vehicle, a place created to be occupied for short periods of time, much of which is often spent ignoring and avoiding the possibility of physical, verbal, or visual engagement with fellow riders. The purpose of the elevator is simple. It gets you from point a to point b. It is a place of convenience but generally not luxury. Its typically minimal design reveals even its creator’s understanding that the elevator does not need to be incredibly alluring or enticing; its goal is not to invite but to transport.

As shown in the images above, by building, painting, and installing walls and installing carpet, furniture and décor into the space, I transformed an unadorned, industrial elevator into a small living room. The living room fosters a social dynamic almost completely opposite to that offered by the elevator.

The living room is a shared space; it provides an inviting environment for relaxing, socializing, and engaging with family or friends. Unlike the elevator, which yields very brief and generally impersonal experiences, the living room, with its comfortable, multi-person furniture, invites inhabitants not only to come but also to stay and be relaxed and to physically, verbally, and visually engage with one another and in doing so to share space, time, and experience together.
The altered room, though small, was pleasant, cozy, and inviting. In it was a fluffy, green couch that sat against the back wall, piled with pillows and blankets. The floor was carpeted and in front of the couch sat a black coffee table. Its bottom shelf held several games and magazines. The walls were strung with colorful decorations and across the front of the room, covering the elevator doors, were a set of bright orange curtains. These additions and alterations took what was once neglected and uninteresting and made it not only desirable but also inviting.

In celebration of the completion of *What Floor?*, I planned a small gathering with two of my friends who had been particularly supportive of me in the months preceding the completion of the piece, aiding me in my frequent need for unusual, elevator-related favors. The three of us went to the elevator to celebrate by relaxing, catching up, and eventually deciding to stay and watch a movie in the newly finished space.

The experience that the space offered was surprising, even to me. As we settled onto the couch allowing the elevator doors to close, the reality of the space’s identity and location became increasingly vague and in time almost entirely forgotten. This disassociation from the reality of where we were went unnoticed until we were suddenly, and quite literally, jolted back into reality by a deep buzzing sound followed by a slight quiver that set the elevator into a slow, upward motion. In that instant of realization, there was an almost palpable change in the space.
My friends and I suddenly became increasingly aware of ourselves, of the elevator doors lurking threateningly behind the semi transparent curtain that, just moments ago, seemed as solid as a wall. I felt like someone had rung the doorbell to not just my home but my living room and, within moments, without any conscious decision to get up and welcome them in, the walls to that room would be thrown open, inviting in whoever happened to be on the other side.

In the drawn out moments of our ascension to the second floor, the three of us, still in shock from the disorienting movement of a space that had just moments ago seemed fixed, did what little we could to prepare ourselves for the doors to open and our private space to become public. As much as I had considered this transitional moment in the planning of *What Floor?* I could not have imagined, without experiencing it myself, the physical and mental sensation it incited. These moments of movement spurred a rapid consideration of the elevator and the prospect of sharing it.

This dichotomy that resulted from the installation of a living room into the existing elevator in Comart was essential to the success of the work. I chose to transform the elevator into a living room not only to bring about the possibility of change in the social condition of the space but also to underline issues of public and private space in a way that was specifically personalized to Comart. The installation invited people to inhabit a space that transformed dramatically from clearly public to somewhat ambiguous, blurring the confines of both the form and the function of the space.
III. Evaluation

What Floor? remained installed in its completed state for about two weeks and was formally shown at an art show held in the Comstock Art Building. In view of the fact that both the way of working (installation) and the intent of the work were new to me, I considered the completed installation, in several ways, to be a success. It was particularly effective in its ability to fulfill the broad goals I set for my work in my written reflection, which included repurposing a space, reintroducing the familiar, inviting and depending upon viewers to be participants, and engaging, challenging, and critiquing the social environment around it.

The piece fell short of achieving its full potential logistically, in regards to the timing, duration, and the documentation of the piece. Because What Floor? was an impermanent installation, the period of installation and proper documentation of the space were of utmost importance. Being new to this kind of work, my attention was much more focused on the immediate. As a result, I mistakenly overlooked the importance of strategically planning for the timing and documentation of my installation.

Ideally I would have timed What Floor so that it was completed and functioning by mid semester, when the Comstock Art Building is heavily trafficked. I made the mistake of completing and installing the piece very late in the semester and, as a result, it was installed for a very short period of time, failing to capitalize on the amount of activity typically occurring within the facility over a longer period. This limited the potential for what I refer to in section one as “active repurposing”.
Had the installation remained in the Comstock Art Building for a longer duration I believe that it would have gradually become a new part of the norm within the building. *What Floor?* was vastly different from the rest of the facility. It so clearly invited and proposed an environment that did not conform to the standard look or feel of Comart. I believe that observing the active repurposing of this space, over time, would have been a fascinating and rewarding experience.

I imagine *What Floor?*, after initially confusing, amusing, or surprising those who came across it, would begin to invite. It would invite people to step out of their studios while taking a break. It would invite those who couldn’t afford the time to go home and eat to enjoy their packed or ordered meals on a cozy couch at a coffee table as opposed to a stool pulled up to a plaster covered work surface or concrete floor in an empty hallway. It would invite intermingling between people from different floors and majors. It would invite interactions which would have been private into the elevator, which would eventually become a much more public space, or perhaps more importantly, a shared space.

If the elevator did begin to function, as a communal lounge/living room, I would be curious to see if interactions and social dynamics within this “new” space between people, who otherwise would not cross paths, would eventually lead to new and more varied relationships. And would those new developments eventually incite a new and broader social dynamic and awareness in the surrounding facility?

Part of what is interesting to me about the transformation of the elevator into a living room space is the role of motion. It was so easy, sitting on the soft
comfortable couch in the newly carpeted elevator with painted, decorated walls, and perhaps a friend or a book or a meal, to forget where you were.

The space, like a room in a home, suggested a degree of permanence and stability. But despite being visually different from the original elevator space, it was not a space that was, literally speaking, stable or fixed in the way that a room in a house would be. Because of that, entrance into the space, as a lounge or living room, required a degree of vulnerability.

In entering the empty space you were, in a way, invited to make it your own. Because it was so small and homey, it felt private. But the jolt of movement felt when the elevator was called to another floor immediately changed the experience of the space. Each time this happened the elevator's occupant(s) were left with a brief moment to decide how to conduct themselves in preparation for whoever would be at the open door in a matter of seconds.

Those riding and entering the elevator were required to make this decision over and over again as the doors of the elevator opened. Would they allow the warmth and communal orientation of the elevator space to provoke an attitude of warmth, welcoming, and coownership of and in the elevator? Or would they instead allow the posture of closed indifference that is so prevalent in Comart to dictate their elevator experiences, highlighting not the opportunity that the space offered but instead the awkwardness of sharing an intimate space with a stranger. The short installation period did not allow ample time for me to fully gauge how successfully the piece did or didn't incite that broader sense of connectivity within Comart.
My minimal documentation of the work was another shortcoming of my endeavor. Though I did take quite a few still images of the piece, I did not sufficiently consider the value of finding the best and most effective ways of thoroughly capturing the work. For work like mine, in which the experience of the work is of great significance to the piece(s), preserving a record of the experience should be a high priority, especially in instances such as this wherein the duration of the installation is brief).

Thorough documentation is important because, as an artist, it is necessary to have a record of the work you have made, not only as a tool for applying for shows, residencies, and other positions, but also for cataloguing the work. Having a good, comprehensive record of my work is important to me because, as I create a body of work, I find that each piece somehow connects or leads to the next. Without a clear visual and experiential picture of the piece, the connection between What Floor? And other pieces may not be evident to someone who did not have the opportunity to experience the work in person.

If I had the opportunity to document the What Floor? more efficiently, I would include video and audio recording both inside the elevator and on each of the floors near the elevator doors. The audio from within the elevator, in particular, would effectively aid in capturing the transformative experience that What Floor? provided even after it was no longer present.

The detailed chronicle of the interactions that video and audio recording would provide would also give me answers, to some of my questions regarding how the space did or did not achieve the purpose I intended for it over time.
Hopefully, it would reveal a gradual evolution of the space’s function through a series of individual interactions. This information gathered from more thorough documentation would play into how I consider the evolution and overall success of the piece. I would shape my approach to future work as a result of studying the changing functionality of *What Floor?* and through observation of the encounters that occurred within it.

**IV. Viewing in Context**

My piece, like all contemporary art must be understood in the context of existing artistic traditions, movements, and styles. The two categories or traditions that are most important to consider in relation to my work are interactive installation and relational art/relational aesthetes.

Many people who are not familiar with the contemporary art word think of all sculpture as traditional sculpture. I am using the term traditional sculpture to refer to sculpture that is presented as an object. The experience of traditional sculpture (in terms of the senses) is a visual one in which the understanding and experience of a piece occurs primarily through the act of looking. In this kind of work, looking is what facilitates interaction between the viewer and the art object.

I am introducing the very broad term, traditional sculpture, because many people, who have had little or no exposure to contemporary sculpture, might assume that what I have described as traditional sculpture is a representative of the whole spectrum of sculptural work.

My work is situated outside of the parameters of traditional sculpture because my objective is to make work that addresses and employs space,
incorporating the presence of viewers by requiring or inviting their physical entrance into the work. This sort of participation within the art separates the experience of my creations from the primarily visual interactions experience provided by traditional sculpture.

My work falls into the category of installation sculpture. Installation is not just objects on pedestals but rather objects and images (and often elements such as sound, video, etc.,) in relationship to one another within an environment. Installations can create environments. At times they are made for particular spaces or situations, in which case they are referred to as site-specific installations.

Artists creating site-specific installations put a great deal of consideration into the significance of location. That significance of a chosen location often serves as a foundational or driving element of the work. Installations create, modify, and/or consider particular atmospheres and result in altered experiences within them. The potential to invite interactivity on a number of levels is a component of installation that allows artists to ask viewers not only to look but also to enter, touch, engage with, or experience their work in a variety of ways. The artist can encourage viewers to become participants. Sculptor, Ann Hamilton, describes her experience of working as an installation artist saying,

*To me working in installation is to work in relation to a particular place.*

*You’re coming in you’re, in some senses, animating the space. And you don’t know what that space or situation will do to you and visa versa, what you will do to it…you try to make yourself blank so that you can just pay*
attention to what comes up, what it makes you think of what are the things you feel…all of those ways that your skin is an organ and is a membrane is incredibly smart and immediately you walk through any threshold and …you smell and you feel the temperature and the light and all of those things that have an enormous influence (Spirituality).

Ann Hamilton mentions that installation allows an artist and a spaces to act upon each other. A certain sensibility to space is critical for installation artists. An artist’s openness not simply to look at a space as a container for their work but instead to explore the condition of a space, the story it lends itself to telling, and the content that exists within it prior to their interference is often crucial to the success of installation work.

Relational aesthetics is the other kind of work that must be considered when putting my work in context. Nicolas Bourriaud developed the term relational aesthetics in his 1998 book, Relational Aesthetics. Bourriaud was an art critic, curator, and writer, among other things (Nicolas). He defines relational aesthetics, which he sometimes refers to as relational art, as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context" (Bourriaud 112). In the art world, this has come to mean that the essence of the work is often found in human relations and their social contexts. Relational aesthetics is radically different from traditional art. Where traditional art generally requires something created or assembled and encourages a visual exchange, relational aesthetics is theoretically able to exist simply through initiation and observation of human interactivity.
Even with a definition, the concept of relation art can be difficult to grasp without an example. Rirkrit Tiravanija is an artist who is known for his relational art. He is best known for his works that revolve around eating. His 1992 piece, *Untitled (Free)*, is a good example of relational art. The piece was executed in 303 Gallery in New York City. For the exhibition Tiravanija turned the gallery into a dining/lounge area and invited gallery goers to come eat a bowl of curry and rice in the space. In a short video on the piece, Laura Hoptman, curator for the MoMA’s department of Painting and Sculpture, comments on the work saying, “[viewers] are not participating in a performance that will be documented some time in the future as art but [they] are the art and [they] are making the art in real time as [they] eat the curry and talk to [their] friends” (Rirkritrit).

Tiravanija also discusses his work saying, “A lot of [my work] is about the experiential relationship. So, you are actually not really looking at something but you are within it you are part of it. The distance between the artist and the art and the audience gets a bit blurred” (Rirkritrit). The art that Tiravanija is making and relational art as a whole is contingent upon human relation and the willingness not only to see something that may appear commonplace in a new way but also to see yourself and your actions as a part of the art.

The reframing of the familiar and abolishing the role of the viewer as onlooker are also important in my work. The blurred lines between viewer, artist, and art that Tiravanija mentions are at play particularly in the works, such as *What Floor?*, in which I aim to repurpose spaces. I intend to alter spaces not in ways that simply call attention to the visual change within them but more
importantly in ways that redirect the focus onto the activity and interactions that occur within them.

V. Conclusion

Comart is not alone in its need for change. I plan, as I proceed in my art practice to continually look for spaces that have the ability to challenge, push, improve, and provide for their communities. I chose Ann Hamilton’s statement, “Part of making work is to [take] those things perhaps that are already there but not visible to us and to try to make them visible in a way that they are experience-able” (Spirituality) to begin this paper because it so successfully addresses what I do through my work. I ask viewers, through experiences, to see the invisible. In What Floor? I took what was already present in Comart, a dynamic of disinterest, an absence of communal engagement, and a lack of community and communal space, and, asked, by providing an experience, for it to be seen.
Works Cited


