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Coexistent Perspectives ADCD7001

Essay Question 2: Explore the work of two contemporary artists, makers or designers and analyse the relationship they have developed between their art or design practice and environment, place and space.

Artists Provide New Insights into Environment, Place and Space

This investigation will critically evaluate the artwork of Rachel Whiteread and 蔡国强 *Cài Guó Qiáng* to demonstrate that through the unique viewpoint of an artist the very complex notions of place and space are accessible for everyone.

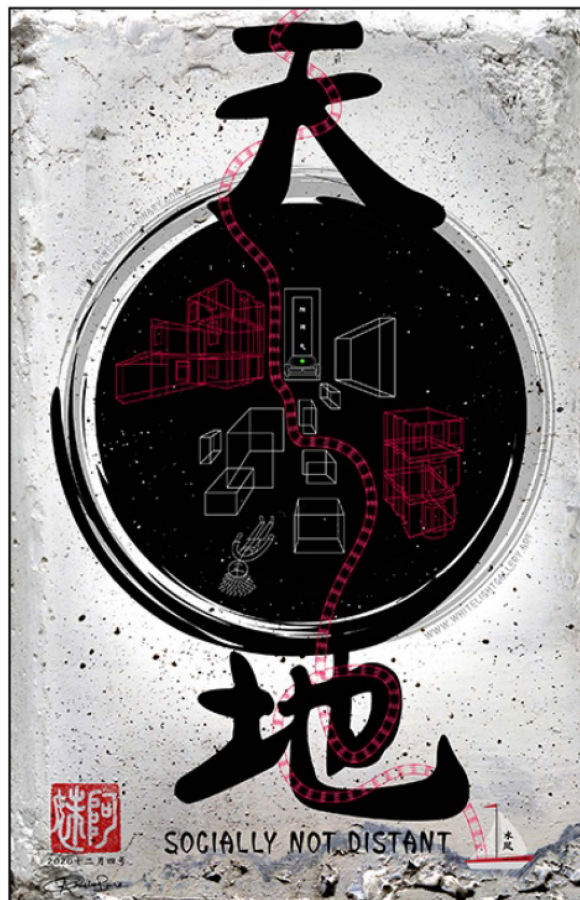


Figure 1. *Coexistent Perspectives* Poster.

Place, space and the environment are complex subjects that encompass everything from science, philosophy, politics and geography to technology, society, culture, language, and beyond. "Place exists at different scales. At one extreme a favourite chair, the other the whole world" (1977, p.149) says Yi-Fú Tuàn, who describes a polarity in concepts.

These ideas are far apart so how does one investigate what is place? and what is space? A logic place to start to is by semantic analysis. The dictionary states that place, the noun, means "an area, town, building, etc". Place, the verb, means "to position in relation to other things". Space, the noun, means "empty place". Space the verb means "to arrange things or people so there is distance between them" (Cambridge, 2019).

These definitions are interrelated yet different. Tuàn states "The meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place.'" (1997, p.6). The definitions also indicate that the meanings given to these words are open to interpretation, therefore a multitude of theories and philosophies surrounding place and space have developed. Renowned thinkers are moving from scientific evaluations of space and time towards focus on social place and space, questioning the political and philosophical factors that is shaping the future of society. As Doreen Massey explains in her book *For space* "In the content of a world which is increasingly interconnected the notion of place has come to have totemic resonance" (2015, p.5).

Doreen Massey features in *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* which lists 66 renowned writers whom are "influencing the contemporary development of spatial theory" (Hubbard, P. and Kitchin, R, 2011, p.1). This discourse will be selective and focus on the works of renowned key thinkers including Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault and Yi-Fú Tuàn, however it is not without acknowledgment that there is a wider field to investigate for future discussions.

The epic book *The Production of Space* by French Marxist Philosopher Henri Lefebvre written in 1974 in French, translated into English in 2009, argues that all space is subject to human production through social relations. He analyses 'social space' arguing it is produced by activities such as relationships, politics, and governed labour. "Every society - and hence every mode of production .. produces its own space" (Lefebvre. 2009, p.31). He argues social space is abstract, not visible, but affects social conduct as the concepts humans project onto any space are conditioned by society and loaded with power

relations. *The Production of Space* had a profound effect on the debate around place and space.

The Chinese Geographer 段義孚 Yi-Fú Tuàn presents a more human approach to the debate, in his book *Space and place, The Perspective of Experience* he argues that the biological human experience of space and how we move through it is fundamental. This shared experience interconnects perceptions that are more important than cultural differences in beliefs (1977, p.5). Although Tuàn does recognise that culture is vital to shaping ideas he believes experience is more overriding which is well visualised in his diagram shown in Figure 2.

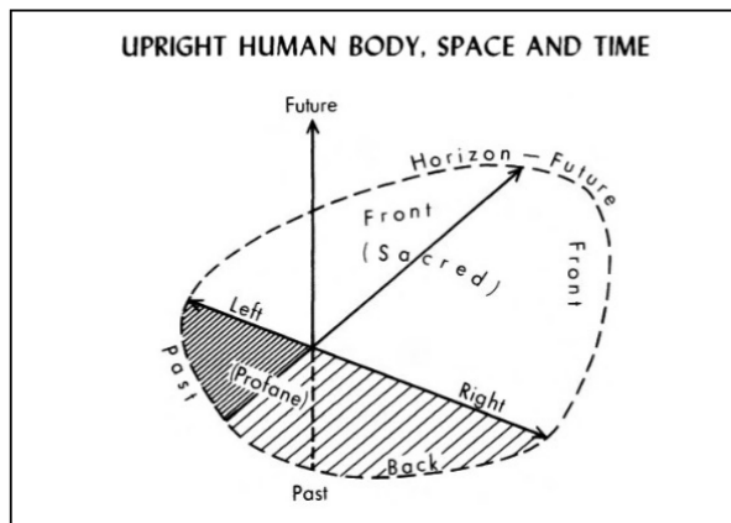


Figure 2. *Upright human body, space and time*. Illustration. Yi-Fú Tuàn (1977, p35).

Despite the obvious biological connection of human beings, perceptions of space and place are subjective which Tuàn frequently adheres to “culture and experience strongly influence the interpretation of environment” (1977, p.55) and “Space and spaciousness carry different sets of meaning in different cultures” (1977, p.58). An individual's viewpoint is subject to a number of factors from their position on the globe to the culture constructions around them.

Taking language as an example having established the meaning of place and space in English, there are many other language systems that will offer another point of view. Consider the translation for space in Chinese is 空, a combination character of 工 (work)

inside 穴 (cave), the idea is something within something, and not, like in English, where 'space' is the idea of absence. The translation for place is 地, a combination of 土 (soil) and 也 (snake) which is rich in visual meaning (Sears, n.d.). The etymology of Chinese begins with oracle bone inscriptions, all Chinese characters are the evolution of images which brings meaning to language not found in other systems.

Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* includes a debate between a Japanese philosopher and Western thinker (neither are credited), the Japanese philosopher describes the character for field 田 (漢字 kanji Japanese script has adopted traditional Chinese characters), as a birds eye view of a field prepared for agriculture. The Japanese philosopher argues the different ways of understanding language effects ways of seeing which has impacted on the methods of organising cities adopted in the East versus the West. (2009, p.153).

Language is just one of many aspects that plays a role in shaping ideas. The world is a maze of different cultures that can be unravelled though the study of language and visual arts. Art is insightful, can show unknown environments, different places, spaces and philosophical ideas and bring knowledge to everyone.

Paul Klee's painting *Uncomposed Objects in Space* (Figure 3) features on the front cover of the English translation of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. It pictures floating cubes and the body of a man suspended in space which captures the complex ideas then discussed within the book and examples how art has a place in society to visualise difficult things to understand.

With regards to understanding notions of place and space the two artists this investigation will discuss, Rachel Whiteread and Cài Guó Qiáng, make innovative artworks deeply connected to their environments allowing the viewer new perceptions of our world by making the ordinary extraordinary.

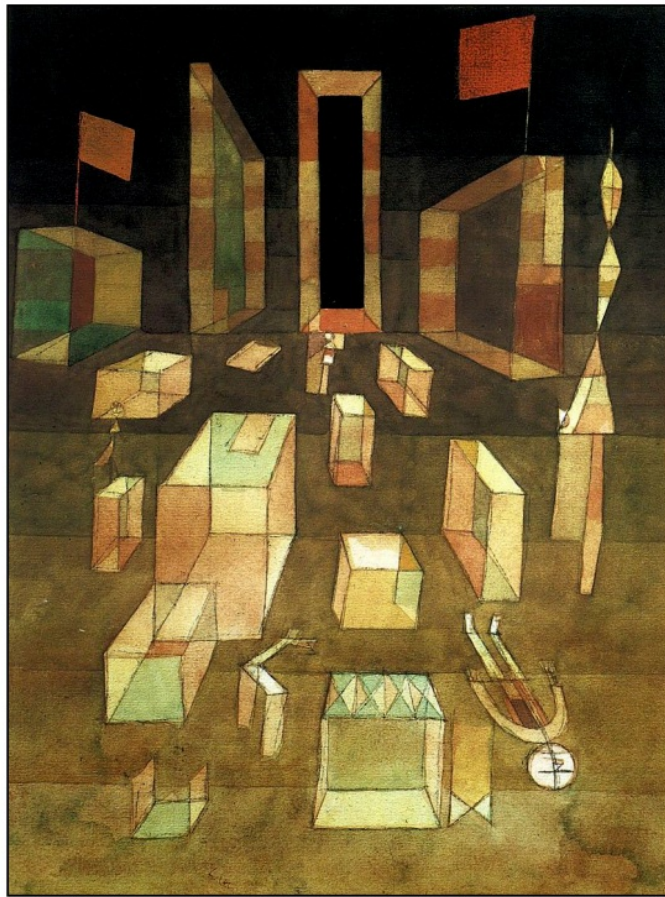


Figure 3. *Uncomposed Objects in Space*. Paul Klee.

Rachel Whiteread

Rachel Whiteread is a British artist well known for casting objects and interior spaces with concrete. Whiteread developed her style whilst studying sculpture at the Slade College of Arts in London. Whiteread recalls her very early work of the impression of a spoon in clay, she noticed the result had all the qualities of a spoon but the wrong way around. This inspired her first casts of the interior of objects using hot water bottles. Gradually the casts became more ambitious, Whiteread said her aim was to “mummify the air” (Artheadful, 2011) so she created *Ghost* casting the interior of an entire room in concrete. (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *Ghost*. Rachel Whiteread.

The room, situated in a house set for demolition in London, was cast bit by bit in block pieces then taken to Whiteread's studio and assembled back together. The result was the impression of the room inverted in concrete blocks. Whiteread talks of a moment of epiphany when she entered her studio to see sunlight streaming onto *Ghost* which emphasised the light switch the wrong way round and door handle inverted when realised her viewpoint "I am the wall!" (Tate Talks, 2018).

Ghost was nominated for the Turner prize in 1992, she did not win but it caught the attention of the London production company *Artangle* with whom she worked with to produce her most notorious artwork *House* in 1993 (Figure 5). *House* was a concrete cast of an entire house in Bow, London. *House* took six months of work to create from within, adding foundations at the base for support, then spraying the interior with concrete before removing the walls to reveal the finished work. The air, now solidified in concrete, made a negative imprint of the house with all the interior details inverted.

House explored many concepts of space and place and challenged the viewer to see a positive versus negative view of the world, consider time and memory, the past in the future. The notions of place and space themselves were brought together as the details in

the concrete of the inverted fireplace and the wall papers revealed the sense of place within this space. This work has been described as “a paradox made concrete since it is a monument made out of void space, a thing constructed out of the absence of things” (Belsey, 2005).



Figure 5. *House*. Rachel Whiteread

Lefebvre's *Production of Space* has many descriptions of alternative views of space, one especially relevant to Whiteread's work where he presents the idea of a house:

Now, a critical analysis would doubtless destroy the appearance of solidity of this house, tripping it, as it were, of its concrete slabs and its thin non-load-bearing walls, which are really glorified screens, and uncovering a very different picture. In the light of this imaginary analysis, our house would emerge permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run out of it by every imaginable route. (Lefebvre, 2009, p.93).

Lefebvre continues to describe this view as a more accurate picture of a house, normally seen as the “epitome of immovability” now exposed as “a two-faceted machine analogous to an active body” (2009, p.93).

Whiteread's *House* echos these words as instead of imagined absent walls, they really are absent. The removed walls uncovered the concrete blocks which replaced the air and solidified the space where there was once activity, the visualisation of Lefebvre's words is right there.

The reaction to *House* by the general public and art critics alike was polarised between love and hate and won Whiteread the Turner prize in 1993. *House* attracted an enormous amount of international media attention that enabled the concepts of this work to reach many people, whether they liked the sculpture or not, the food for thought had been dropped on the table. This opened a conversation about conceptual art and its role in British society unlike one before as this work was truly groundbreaking. *House* attracted over 3000 visitors a day, it was graffitied with the words ‘why? why not?’ and criticised, as well as marvelled at, celebrated and called “the most extraordinary and imaginative public sculpture created by an English artist this century” (Graham-Dixon, 1993).

House was eventually demolished after a struggle to keep the sculpture, one of its most fierce critics was a local councillor who wanted it removed, so it had a short life but the legacy of the artwork lives on. There was the option to move the sculpture but Whiteread was insistent that the surroundings of *House* brought the meaning to the work and removing it from its original environment would destroy it. Richard Lingwood explains “It was impossible not to view the whole sculpture without also seeing a part of its immediate environment” (Artangel, 2019). He describes around the house the visible signs of multicultural London life and the marks of history, all contributing to the essence of the house that once was and the lives of the people inside it. Away from its original place this sculpture would be stripped of its real meaning.

House was made almost thirty years ago and its legacy is standing the test of time, it has been the source of much debate since and numerous articles analysing the influence of this work. “Effectively, true artworks are those that remain, that will speak to the future, speak beyond their own time and place. This is why Whiteread's *House* continues to exist

even though it has been torn down like the houses around it” (Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008, p.94).

蔡国强 Cài Guó Qiáng

A year after *House* in 1994 Cài Guó Qiáng made his first attempt to create *Sky Ladder* in Bath, UK. The attempt was unsuccessful, it would take three more tries before the 500 meter firework ladder was realised in his hometown of Quán Zhōu, China in 2015 (Figure 6). A giant balloon elevated the massive ladder into the air, made with specially selected fireworks that burned together creating the lines of the ladder in fire. Ignited as the dawn light arrived, this monumental artwork existed for two and a half minutes and has become one of Cài’s most celebrated works.



Figure 6. *Sky Ladder*. Cài Guó Qiáng.

Cài is a Chinese artist best known for his gunpowder, explosion and firework art. Cài grew up in China where he trained in traditional calligraphy. He began experimenting with igniting gunpowder scattered onto stencils on paper. The explosion scolded the shape of the stencil, creating artworks with the ascetics of traditional Chinese ink fused with an abstract explosive feel. These early works evolved into artwork made on a massive scale using enormous paper (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Visitors at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai. China Foto Press Photo.

Cài continued to experiment with explosions in the sky using the air as his canvas which became his signature daytime explosion events and night time extravaganzas. Meticulously timed explosions leave trails of multicoloured smoke that appear like ink brush marks delighting big crowds who gather to see the space above them filled with art. He has worked on many impressive explosion shows, exemplified in *Remembrance* (Figure 8) at his exhibition in Shànghǎi at the Ninth Wave power station.



Figure 8. *Remembrance*. Cài Guó Qiáng.

His artworks are born from visions and ideas. Cài had the inspiration for *Sky Ladder* as a boy when America launched Apollo 11. The image of the rocket heading into space captured the imagination of Cài who wanted to be able to travel from earth to heaven. He felt travel in a rocket was impossible but visualised another way to reach the sky, with a ladder, Cài explains “through my art my dreams come true” (Macdonald, 2016).

Cài's *Sky Ladder* connects two spaces together, creating a visual artwork linking earth to the heavens above. This connection is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, the word ‘heaven’ translates to ‘天地’ which is a combination of ‘天’ sky, and ‘地’ earth. Again we see the way in which the Chinese language is rich in meanings, further more ‘天’ and ‘地’ are complementary gods, developed in the Cháo Dynasty in 1027-256 B.C, explained by Yì-Fú Tuàn as “sophisticated concepts” (1997, p.152). This connection is poignant in Chinese culture however the idea of heaven and earth is one perceived in all cultures, as Tuàn explains “almost everywhere people distinguish two types of space, the land and the sky” (1997 p.119). The idea to reach the sky using a giant ladder is something that all man can relate to.

Sky Ladder existed in the spaces between things. Michel Foucault created the term ‘heterotopia’ to describe worlds within worlds in his essay *Of Other Spaces*. (Foucault, 1994). Foucault introduces the idea of ‘heterotopia’ as a connection between utopia and physical space. He examples in-between worlds like fairgrounds, museums, galleries, prisons, brothels and mad houses. The connection is that these are temporary places that you need to enter, with either a ticket or a reason, where things that are not usually connected are juxtaposed together and disturb things. The experience of Cài's explosions artworks can be considered as heterotopian. Crowds gather, taking a slice of time from their lives, to watch his spectacles exploding from a boat (which Foucault calls “a heterotopia par excellence” (1994, p.27) due to its floating nature). By filling the air with smoke, colours and fire Cài connects the space of the real, the earth, to a utopian idea like heaven, disturbing the viewer temporarily. Like the fairground or museum, this experience is somewhere in-between what is real and unreal.



Figure 9. *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard*. Cài Guó Qiáng.

Cài is highly thought of in China however his reputation in China has not been without difficulties. In 1999 Cài created *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* (Figure 9), at the Venice biennale. This sculpture was an appropriation of *The Rent Collection Courtyard* a socialist realism sculpture situated in Sì Chuān, China (Figure 10). Cài commissioned Chinese artists to remake the sculpture on site in Venice. The spectacle of the artwork creation was the concept, as the artists worked the sculptures dried and cracked leaving them broken in appearance. The meaning of this work was considered to be a critique of the Chinese Cultural revolution and seen as a political statement which was met with considerable criticism in China. Although Cài won the Venice biennale Golden Lion prize to date there is still a scathing review of this artwork on the NAMOC 中国美术馆 website (National Art Museum of China, n.d.), questioning the artworks originality and motives. Cài called this a “misunderstanding” (Sculpture 2008) and he has made no other artworks which remark on Chinese politics therefore his lasting reputation in China is overall positive. He has been commissioned by the government to work on the big events like the Běijīng Olympics and the 70th National China day celebrations. His work for the government is met with scepticism in the art world but indicates his decision to stay on

the right side of the authorities. Cài like any other citizen is bound to the laws of their country, which in China include laws forbidding any critique of the state. Orville Schell, Director, centre of US-China relations remarks “what all artists need to do in Chinese society is to do art with integrity and not run off the tracks and end up in a state of tension with the authorities.” (Macdonald, 2016).



Figure 10. *Three sculptures that form part of Rent Collection Courtyard.* Ye Yushan.

The need to comply with authority and the systems within which one is born impacts the way in which an artist works, what they can and cannot do. Despite the overriding connection all humans have with each other there are many cultural differences that influence outlooks. Another key thinker of place and space is Benedict Anderson who

wrote the book *Imagined Communities*. He argues nationalism “is an imagined political community” (2006, p.7), this imagined nationalism is so strong that:

the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (Anderson, 2006, p.7).

The fact that war exists between nations confirms the immense power that feelings of nationalism embody, even if imagined, it plays big role in shaping society.

Literature and education also forms ideas, it is notable that the people discussed in the book *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* of the authors admission is “that white, Anglo-American academics are most numerous” (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011, p.2). Other writers have commented on this including Edward Soja who states “There has been a tendency to universalise western concepts and perceptions of spatial political organisation to assume that they are shared by all the world people without regard to important patterns of cross cultural variation” (Soja, 1971, p.11). Doreen Massey also critiques the idea that capitalism dominates the global platform “The governments in the UK and the USA tell us a story of the inevitability of globalisation and if you point to differences around the globe, to Mozambique, Mali or Nicaragua, they will tell you such countries are just behind that eventually they will follow the path along which the capitalistic West has led” (2015, p.4).

These authors theories form part of the literature read in a Western University so it is worth making a comparison to Western education with that of one from the East, taking China as the example. There are some very different approaches. Every Chinese undergraduate student must complete a month of army training and national service on arrival at university. ‘Marxism Theory Studies’ is compulsory with the mandatory text book 宪法学讲义 *Constitutional Law* (Lín, 2015) replacing a previous book Chairmen 习近平 Xí Jìn Píng deemed to be too geared towards Western thought (Wang, 2019). Xí’s policies are impacting the materials and media available to the Chinese which shapes their ideas of the world, what actions they take and inevitably what art can be made.

Whiteread's *House* could never have existed in China. The original house in Bow, London, was chosen as the site for her artwork because it had not been demolished due to the owner, Mr Gale, resisting this. There is no way to resist demolition in China as the state's power is not questionable, people who resist are simply moved, arrested or disappear.

Whiteread's *House* was a product of London, the gritty sculpture reflects the eccentric nature of British culture. Whiteread described how London has influenced her artwork in a talk for Tate Britain (Tate Talks, 2018). She describes finding her passion for using objects like old mattresses in her artworks from the days of renting cheap digs and trawling second hand shops for cheap furnitures "these objects where my sketchbook". Whiteread describes London during the Thatcher years, passing people sleeping on the streets as "lost human beings in presence of destitution and sorrow". Using plaster as a material "to take on the essence of humanity" Whiteread found a way to express her surroundings. This led to the development of her artistic style and shaped her experience of place and space.

Equally Cài Guó Qiáng's artwork is influenced by Chinese culture and his opportunity to live in Japan and the USA. In an interview for his retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Cài describes "my methodology also encompasses an understanding of time and space, in both Western literature and Eastern thought, in which there are gods, spirits and ghosts". He continues to explain he can move freely and use contradicting materials from cars, stuffed wolves, and shipwrecks in lavish installations to the loose, dynamic, abstract explosion events due to his affiliation with Chinese 风水 fēng shuǐ. Professor Ian Buruma describes the influence of Chinese and Japanese culture in Cài's artworks as he notes that the explosion artworks are instantaneous, like ink calligraphy, you get one chance to get it right in "the act of spontaneity" (Macdonald, 2016).

The influence of culture is a great attribute to an artists work, especially when applied in innovative ways as in the case of Whiteread and Cài, who have made unusual materials their signature and created art of great magnitude which has been celebrated internationally by both art critics and the everyday man alike. Whiteread offers an introverted notion of space, where the world is turned inwards and asked to look back, Cài offers an outward explosion into space, where the viewer is asked to look up to

infinity and beyond. By succeeding to be known by so many people they not only influence the ideas of the everyday man, they exist in the world of intellectual thought, which highlights the role of the artist in society, as a mediator for ideas that bridge the gap between critical thinking and the public.

The artworks this investigation has discussed have shown that the notions of place, space and the environments are all encompassing, yet relational to the thinker and their own environment which also shift according to experience. Let us consider again the idea at the beginning of this investigation from Yì-Fú Tuàn that space can be your sofa or the entire world (1977, p.149). The idea of the entire world is changing as we evolve. The rise of internet communication and digital space makes everything and everywhere immediately accessible. The global picture is shifting rapidly and many critics share a common outlook; we urgently need to pay more attention to notions of space for the our future society, Edward Soja remarks:

spatiality and its social consequences have become a vital part of making both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary life-worlds at all scales, from the most intimate to the most global (2008, p1).

The idea of the world itself is also subjective, when perceived from a distance the words of Yì-Fú Tuàn are most relevant, as he explains:

People of different cultures differ in how they divide up their world, assign values to its parts and measure them. Nonetheless certain cross-cultural similarities exist, and they rest ultimately on the fact that man is the measure of all things (1977, p.34).

We are unified, as Cài Guó Qiáng asks “Can we look beyond the earth and contemplate art and humanity from a greater scale?” (Asia Art Archive in America, 2012). A question he has aimed to answer throughout his career with works like *Sky Ladder* and *Projects for Extraterrestrials*.

What lies beyond is a question asked by everyman and challenged by artists, recently evoked in the artwork *Spectra* by Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda who installed a huge light beam in the centre of London, unannounced to the public, that pointed upwards disappearing into space (Figure 11). This artwork was produced by *Artangel*, the company

that produced Whitehead's *House*. The beam was visible for miles, which caused Londoners to question this mysterious spectacle which felt unearthly and supernatural.

Through these artworks mankind can be united in the way which Yì-Fú Tuàn proposes in *Space and place, The Perspective of Experience* (1977), that human beings are not socially distant, we share the same place and space planet earth. Our culture and environment has a massive impact on our experiences of the world however the distance between us is relational to how one perceives it. There is much more out there, also within, and the artist can allow us to explore realms beyond our world and imagination.



Figure 11. *Spectra*. Ryoji Ikeda

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