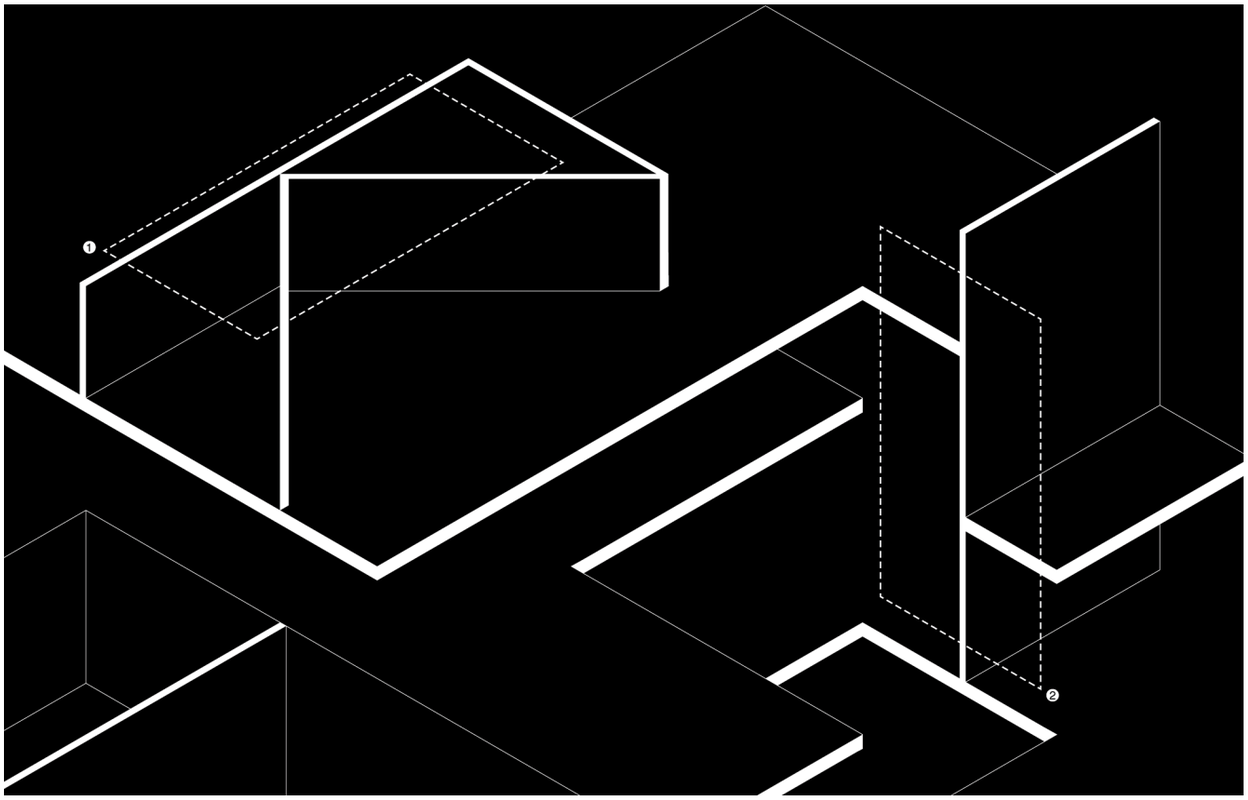

A spatial array diagram by Sarah Oppenheimer, 2014.

The Array

by Sarah Oppenheimer

IN THE LATE 1970s, the American urbanist William H. Whyte (1917-1999) set out to study the human habitation of public space. He positioned a time-lapse camera on rooftops and street corners in various U.S. cities and began the empirical process of recording the movement of urban occupants. Whyte found patterns in flow and stillness. He noted boundaries both physical (walls, doorways, stairs and ground) and immaterial (sightlines, sunlight and crowding).

An empirical model shapes my understanding of a spatial matrix. Quantifiable variables such as distance, temperature, speed and direction are inextricably entwined with the movement of bodies through an architectural envelope. These variables serve as the scaffold I use to transform each specific site into a rule-bound exploration of the elastic territories delimited by architectural boundaries.

Each project assumes the following:

1. Space is divided.

2. Spatial boundaries result from conventions of architectural and urban context. For example, materials and dimensions of interior space are proscribed by industrial relations and code requirements. Such contextual determinants create uniformity in the division of space (public courtyards, corporate lobbies, hallways, rooms, etc.). This regular division is "the array."

3. The array goes largely unnoticed. Much like user-friendly software, its ubiquity naturalizes the dynamics of spatial division. The array constitutes a spatial authority, inviting rupture within the patterned progression of space.

4. Habitation of the array is time-based, a flow embodied by a moving, active stereoscopic agent. Inhabitants experience the array over a period of time.

5. Memory knits the temporal chain into a cogent spatial map. Perceptual dissonance within this mnemonic map heightens the experience of spatial discontinuity.

The Baltimore Museum of Art presents a complex spatial array. The arrangement of galleries results from a patchwork of building renovations and additions that

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Sarah Oppenheimer's project *33-D*, opening at Kunsthaus Baselland, Basel, May 23; *W-120301* (2012), a permanent installation at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

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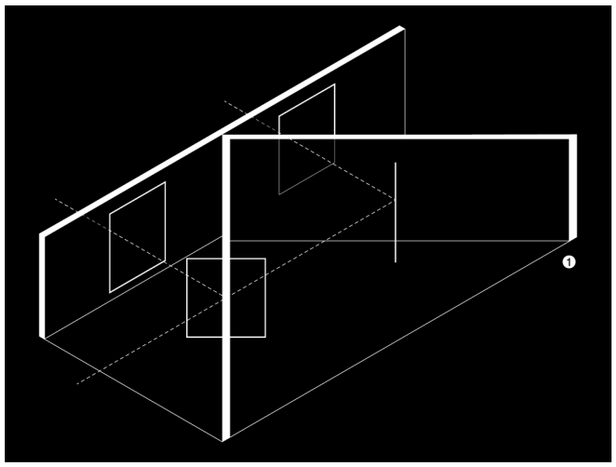
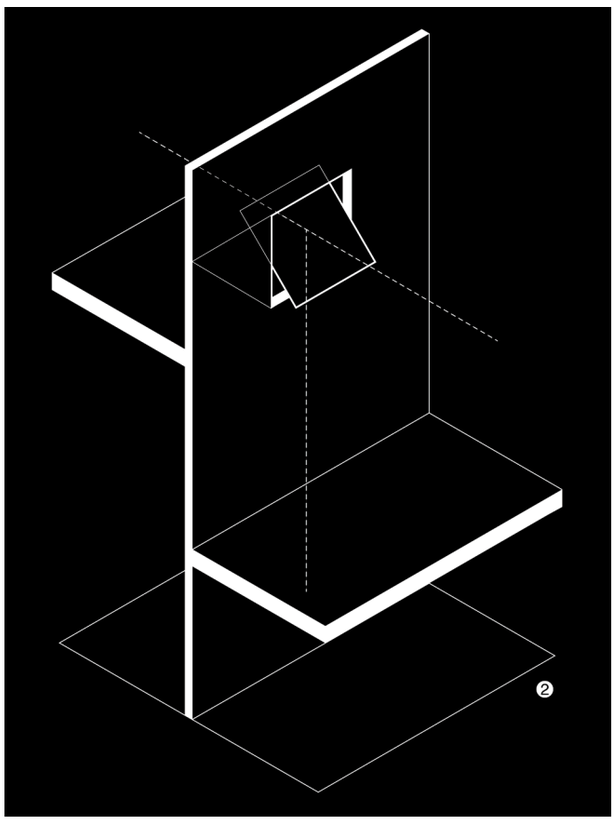
developed over time. A visitor's path through the exhibition spaces is shaped by these developments, resulting in unexpected juxtapositions in wall treatment, flooring and ceiling height. With no visible footprint, my work *W-120301* (2012) is located behind the veneer of these opaque surfaces. *W-120301* occupies a cavity between ceiling and floor previously designated for the building's mechanical and structural systems. Its location stretches the compressed void space by visually linking three museum galleries that are not sequentially adjacent. When passing through each of the three galleries that bound the piece, the viewer is presented with a distinct set of sightlines. The resulting reconfiguration of sightlines shuffles the mnemonic chain of the museal walk.





When viewed from the second-floor gallery, *W-120301* presents two prospects simultaneously: a reflected bird's-eye view of the space below and a direct elevated sightline across the museum atrium. The visitor sees a space that he or she recently occupied from an impossible vantage point: lateral motion is replaced with vertical vision. The visual equivalence between real and reflected views compresses vertical and horizontal sightlines on a single plane. The superimposition of multiple spaces on a single surface confounds an observer's perception of distance and spatial adjacency. Prior memory of a space is reinscribed with a new sequence and configuration.

Concealed cavities within a building's boundaries are not requisite for reconfiguring the mnemonic map. Transparent surfaces also offer opportunities to disrupt a viewer's mental model of spatial adjacency. *33-D* (opening this month at Kunsthaus Baselland) engages with such transparency. Interior walls constructed along two structural column grids subdivide the repurposed factory. *33-D* extends these interior walls using two large glass planes. The glass intersects with the museum's opaque surfaces, creating two sharp corners that connect a series of interior galleries. These corners, where the opaque and transparent meet, act as new interior thresholds.

Traversing *33-D*, viewers find their vantage point to be in flux. When crossing each threshold, their direct view of the adjacent gallery is overlaid with a reflection of the building's exterior. Exterior and interior vantage points, shaped by changing light levels and viewing trajectories, are collapsed on a single field. Glass provides a screenlike plane on which images are reflected and redirected.

The vantage point of viewing is central to considering the problem of spatial orientation. As the cognitive psychologist James Jerome Gibson (1904-1979) concisely argued, the visual field is in a constant state of flux and is not, as commonly presumed, singular or static. This instability results in part from the motion of the body through the environment. When passing through *33-D*, viewers find their moving vantage point mirrored by the glass, reversing the flow of motion within their visual field.

Much like the opaque architectural planes of the Baltimore Museum, the glass planes at Kunsthaus Baselland are responsive to the motion and memory of inhabitants. Transparent walls become a surface on which disparate spaces collide and connect. This surface also serves as a medium for a reciprocal relay of sightlines: inhabitants see themselves seeing others in other spaces seeing themselves. The decentralized and distributed network of active viewers invokes a digital interface. Users view real-time data from multiple locations on a single screen.

The spatial array is generative. It offers a place of work that is simultaneous and suspended, continuous and discrete. Its authority is elastic. The spatiotemporal stretching and compressing of architectural division transforms the fixed pattern of the array into a fluid matrix. ○

Top, detail 1 from Oppenheimer's spatial array diagram (*33-D*, Kunsthaus Baselland, 2014).

Bottom, detail 2 from Oppenheimer's spatial array diagram (*W-120301*, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2012).