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"PROJECT HAUNT": AN ATTEMPT TO BUILD A "HAUNTED" ROOM

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I WAS EARLY and sat on the steps outside a terraced house in North London idly watching pedestrians pass by and the pale late-summer light dappling the urban tree-edged scene. I had nervously pressed the buzzer for 'flat 1A' wondering what on earth lay within, but nobody was there yet. I looked out expectantly, until, after a couple of false alarms, it was clear that, as one man reacted to my presence and began walking down the garden path, he was the one I was waiting for. Usman Haque, an architect, had designed a 'space' that might trigger anomalous experiences and, in collaboration with Chris French, head of the Anomalistic Psychology Unit at Goldsmiths, was looking for participants who would observe their reactions to this space. We entered the small ground-floor flat, and from thenceforth the proceedings were swift and efficient. I read an information sheet that introduced the project and looked around whilst Usman got ready, initiating software on a laptop situated in a cramped area of the hallway that served as a kind of 'experimenter's room'. The front room of the flat was entirely taken over by some 'creation' of which I could see little other than a linen screen. It was quite incongruous, this prior living space transformed into some, as yet, to me, 'unknown installation'. Before I knew it, I had taken off my shoes and coat, rolled up my sleeve to have a device strapped around my upper arm that would measure my galvanic skin response (GSR), and began to walk into the 'space', knowing that I would spend the next 50 minutes in there and had to note down on a floor plan of the space where, when and what I experienced should anything 'unusual' occur. I was initially confused about where to go, but followed the linen edge, in relative darkness, round to the right, which led me away from the traditional perimeters of the square 'front room' and through an entrance into 'the space'.

Usman's intentions in creating this space appear to have been to explore the parameters of 'non-visual' architecture, "how the psychology of human perception gives rise to the construction of space" and how "the perceptions of space and objects in space are intricately affected by things we are not immediately conscious of" (see his website at www.haque.co.uk/haunt.php). Such endeavours contribute to the field of 'interactive architecture' and form a continuation of previous research by Usman with non-visual environments, using smell, sound, electromagnetic and thermal phenomena. What he describes as the 'hardware' of the space was designed to be visually unstimulating and as such has parallels with environments created in early sensory isolation research (see e.g. West, 1962) that were developed to explore hallucinations in visual and other sensory modalities amongst the 'normal' population. With pale uniform colouring, no moving parts, minimal features and dim lighting (1 lux), it consisted of a roughly circular chamber (measuring approximately 3m x 3m, and 4m high), with buff-coloured canvas walls, ceiling and carpet. The only visual contrasts, apart from the cylindrical contours, were the entrance, which spiralled into the canvas 'passage', an air-vent at the top of the 'wall' approximately 120º to the left of this, a dark circle near the centre of the ceiling and dim spot-lights on the ceiling. This hardware was compounded with the 'software' — the controlled humidity, temperature and air-movement and varying infrasound and electromagnetic fields. It was hoped that together, this hardware and software would interact with individuals' perceptual processing to create a conscious experience of a particular kind of 'space' - to 'synthesise' a "haunted" space.

Writing this several months later I am certain that there are inaccuracies in my recollection, however, I began by taking in the space visually and then walked

around its edges, looking, listening … I could hear the hum of what I presumed to be an air-conditioning system and occasionally, at the start, Usman moving about in the flat. It felt a little bit chilly (the temperature was apparently 18º Celsius). I sat in the middle of the room for a while and stared into the space, with my back towards the entrance so that there were less 'visual stimuli'. I didn't sense anything particularly 'unusual', apart from the novelty of the scenario and context itself, however, after a period of time I wrote down that I had a few 'blue flashes in my peripheral vision' and at a later point briefly imagined the hum of the air-conditioning to be an aeroplane outside, forgetting what it really was … I began to walk slowly around the room again to stop myself feeling a little light-headed, tried sitting in different places and at one point lay down and looked at the ceiling and the air-vent, noticing the asymmetries in the chamber's construction, until, eventually, I heard my name being called - it was time to leave the space.

I had got so used to the pressure of the GSR monitor on my arm that I had forgotten it was there and was surprised when Usman took it off. When I was confronted with the 'busyness' of this visual field and interaction, I was aware of my sense of 'groundlessness', which was a bit like waking up from a deep sleep too quickly or the aftermath of being in the ganzfeld! So, I was quite relieved to prolong my 'inner directedness' by having a cup of tea and filling in some questionnaires. These asked about my experiences in the 'space', my belief in paranormal phenomena and about experiences in daily life related to temporal lobe lability, (such as "Sometimes an event will occur which has special significance for me only" and "People tell me I 'blank out' sometimes when we are talking"). From a brief chat with Usman about the project I learnt about the different experimental conditions and that I had been randomly assigned to be subjected to 'electromagnetic fields'. I then wandered into the buzzing hub of London, passing another enthusiastic seeming participant on my way out who had arrived to experience 'the space'.

From Chris French's perspective (French et al., 2006) the aim of 'Project Haunt' was to construct an artificial 'haunted' room by systematically varying environmental factors that have been associated with reports of 'anomalous experiences' by susceptible individuals that are similar to those experiences reported at alleged haunted locations. The neutral room acted as a control by avoiding any salient stimuli that may or may not be considered 'spooky' by participants. It was thought that the interactive nature of this study, enabling people to walk freely about the 'site', being more 'naturalistic', might lead to experiences being reported that were akin to those that might be experienced in 'haunted houses', in contrast to procedures that require subjects to remain still with their eyes closed.

The study's rationale drew upon several strands of research: 1) Persinger's claims that anomalous experiences can be induced by applying transcerebral complex magnetic fields to the temporal lobes (see e.g. Persinger, 2001); 2) Persinger's claims that people who score highly on a scale that pertains to measure experiences in daily life that are related to increased electrical activity of the temporal lobes are more likely to report anomalous experiences in this scenario (see e.g. Cook & Persinger, 1997); 3) Reports from 'haunted sites' of anomalous levels, variability or complexity of electromagnetic fields (EMF) (see e.g. Braithwaite, 2004); and 4) the association between infrasound and apparitional experience (see e.g. Tandy & Lawrence, 1998).
With technical advice from Vic Tandy, Paul Stephens and Jason Braithwaite a purpose built infrasound cabinet (which amplified and emitted an infrasound waveform that was generated by combining two sine waves at 18.9Hz and 22.3Hz) and two electromagnetic coils (that created a magnetic field waveform based upon that used by Persinger) operated to enable four experimental conditions: exposure to infrasound; exposure to EMF; exposure to both infrasound and EMF; or exposure to neither, beyond the baseline. Participants were randomly allocated to one of these conditions.

On his website Usman lists some of the experiences that participants recorded whilst in the space: a "sense of presence", "chills on the spine", "uneasiness in a particular part of the room", "glowing ball", seeing flies in the chamber,

hearing coughing in various parts of the chamber and “mist”. Chris French kindly sent me some preliminary analyses of the study, based on 63 participants (35 male, 28 female; a mean age of 33.7 years), stressing that the final analyses are still underway and have yet to be published. Responses to the ‘post-space questionnaire’ across all conditions show that a startlingly high number of participants reported feeling dizzy or odd (74.6%), about a quarter felt a sense of presence (25.4%), 7.9% reported seeing vivid images, and 9.5% images from recent dreams, 41.3% reported ‘tingling sensations’, 25.4% felt detached from their bodies, 49.2% reported feeling like they were spinning round and 11.1% reported feeling terror (this covering only a selection of responses). Such a seemingly wide range and high affirmation of ‘anomalous sensations’ is less surprising when one considers the ‘space’ as a mild ‘sensory deprivation chamber’, and the effect of the psychomanteum on consciousness (as described by Hallson in this issue).

Participants did not differ according to belief in the paranormal or temporal lobe lability (TLL) across the four conditions. Those with high TLL reported significantly more experiences in the space than those with low TLL ($F(1, 62) = 4.34$, $p < .05$), and significantly more ‘anomalous sensations’ based on the total scores on the ‘post-space questionnaire’ ($F(1, 62) = 10.63$, $p = .002$). Further, TLL correlated significantly and positively with belief in the paranormal ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). However, no significant difference was found in the indices of anomalous experiences across the four experimental conditions, suggesting that exposure to neither EMF nor infrasound led participants (either with high or low TLL) to report more anomalous experiences compared to the baseline condition. Although, as some of the cells in the design only included six participants, Chris pointed out that a clearer picture will emerge once more data have been collected.

This outcome, leads Chris to support the idea that the experiences may be due to suggestion (following Lange & Houran, 1997), which was inherent in the title of the study: ‘project haunt’ and in participants being primed to expect unusual experiences in ‘the space’ - some participants being more suggestible than others (high TLL). As part of further analyses Chris intends to test whether or not more anomalous experiences were reported in the quadrant most affected by EMF compared to the others, and questions whether participants’ wandering about may have impacted upon the efficacy of the EMF and infrasound conditions. Of course, we also await the outcome of the GSR data to see how this physiological measure of the degree of arousal of the autonomic nervous system (associated with flight or fight responses) may have varied under experimental conditions and according to TLL. Further, it might be interesting to distinguish between experiences that are typically associated with sensory deprivation (e.g. hypnagogic-like visual hallucinations) from those which are typically associated with haunted sites (e.g. a sense of presence and feelings of terror) in subsequent analyses.

In terms of the study’s aims, its ‘success’ (at this stage) may be seen to be mixed, it seems that, in terms of reported experiences, Usman managed to create an ‘anomalous space’, but this does not appear to have been due to unconscious environmental stimuli (EMF and infrasound) but perhaps merely to the lack of ‘visual architecture’ itself plus some expectation. Having said this, Chris’ report doesn’t refer to baseline levels at the site, which I assume were not ‘anomalous’ in any way…

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