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*A Space In Between*

Acrylic paint, thread, polyester stuffing, tissue paper, and wood.

My installation addresses liminality. In the most general sense, liminality is the space in between. In life, we can often feel trapped in these spaces of transition. They can feel limitless and never-ending. In many senses, society itself is in a space of liminality. What makes this one so profound is that we cannot imagine yet what is on the other side. As I was researching liminality, I found it to be deeply entwined with our concept of time and culture. It evolved into an exploration of the physical manifestations of the endless cultural loop created by modernism.

Physical manifestations of liminal spaces are ever-present within our world and we increasingly find ourselves in between two realities. Liminal spaces can be places for reorganization and reassembling. They can be places in which we rebuild the future we imagine.

I created this piece on a door because it is a physical manifestation of liminality; it borders between two diametrically opposed things. It represents the ability to open up the space in which you currently reside into another. I wanted my work to feel dreamlike and evoke a feeling of impermanence. My goal was to capture the feeling of being in a liminal space.

# The Liminality of Place, Memory, and Meaning



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OS48

*Writers Note: This paper explores the idea of liminality through place, philosophy, and our concept of time. It addresses the questions- What is a liminal space? Why can't we imagine a new future? And, Is there a way out of the liminal state? This was written with the intent to explore the emotions surrounding liminality and unravel their causes and connections to broader philosophical concepts.*

When I was around 11 years old, I remember looking out from the backseat of my grandmother's Toyota and seeing an endless maze of roads against a gray sky. The only sound was the tires endlessly hitting the pavement. It was the first time I experienced what Søren Kierkegaard refers to as angst<sup>1</sup>. At this point in my life, I didn't have the vocabulary to describe my feelings. All that I knew was that I was deeply unsettled. I experienced this again when we were on the way to my uncle's lake house in South Carolina. We were driving into an endless tunnel of the night looking for street signs that had fallen away. In the early hours of the morning, we had to stop for gas. Something about the gas station's fluorescent lights and deserted state terrified me. My eyes filled with tears as we drove away. I didn't know why.

### **I. What is a liminal space?**

One day I stumbled across the well of liminal spaces online; thousands of images of strangely familiar settings that tied my stomach into little bows. Think of abandoned The longer I looked at them the more full of dread I became. I felt the same uneasiness that I had experienced all those times before. In the most general sense, liminal spaces are places of transition. They share a universal aesthetic belonging to no place in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Wierzbicka, Anna. "Angst." *Culture & Psychology* 4.2 (1998): 161-188.



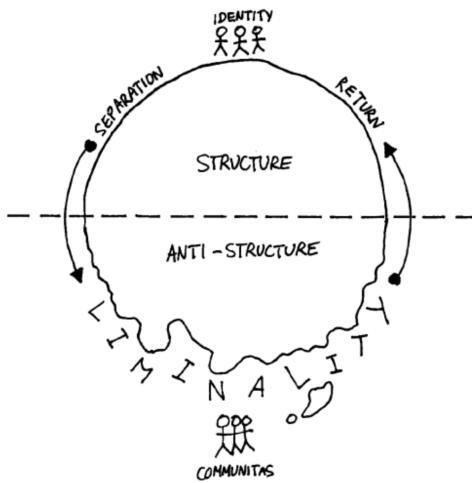
*Image via Wikipedia By Huuxloc - <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/backrooms-another-level-429f3c9ea8024f5e9bb78f6649c7bd26>, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=128609822>*

Many spaces that we associate with liminality have a sense of nostalgia attached to them.

They are often reminiscent of places we've seen before but, due to their unremarkable nature, have been forgotten. They look so familiar to us because there are thousands of spaces with this same absent, cold, and fluorescent-lit look. They are non-places<sup>2</sup> devoid of any individuality or relation to their broader surroundings' culture. They are products of modernism; a movement defined by seeking alignment with industrial life. Modernism promised people a future of endless innovation and limitless prosperity for anyone that works hard enough. The failure of this promise is part of what makes liminal spaces disturbing. The empty hallways devoid of adornment are a physical manifestation of the emptiness created by our post-industrial society.

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<sup>2</sup> A term coined by French anthropologist defining nonplaces as spaces that are not concerned with identity, historical or relational. They are products of supermodernity  
Augé M, Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity, Le Seuil, 1992, Verso, p. 122.



Liminal spaces acknowledge that the world is in a state of transformation; on the precipice of something. The term has been around since the early 20th century when it was first coined by Arnold Van Gennep<sup>3</sup> when he wrote *The Rites of Passage*<sup>4</sup> in 1909. Van Gennep divided the Rites of Passage into three phases: separation, liminality, and incorporation. Victor Turner would go on to build upon this idea of liminality in his work *Liminality and Communitas*<sup>5</sup> where he claimed that periods of Liminality were necessarily ambiguous since these persons (or spaces) slip through the network of classifications that normally define our understanding. Liminality has since been adopted in a wide variety of academic fields to make sense of the various transformations we go through as a society. Today, liminality elicits a strong emotional response with very vague definitions. It is adjacent to Kenopsia. John Koenig described Kenopsia in his 2003 book *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*<sup>6</sup> as “the atmosphere of a place that is usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet” he goes on to describe

<sup>3</sup> Van Gennep, A. (2019). *The rites of passage*. University of Chicago press.

<sup>4</sup> A book concerning the universality of rites of passage. Van Gennep argued that the rites of passage that accompany the landmarks of human life differ only in detail from one another depending on the culture.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, V. W. (2017). Liminality and communitas. In *Ritual* (pp. 169-187). Routledge.

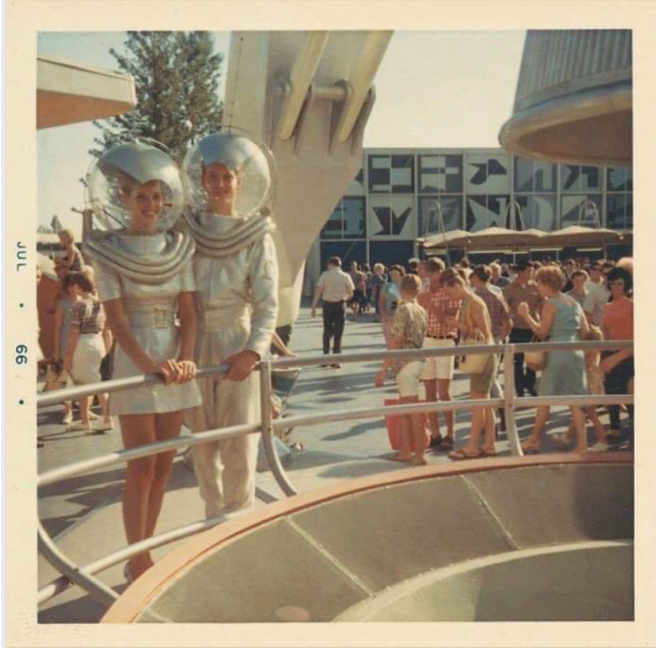
<sup>6</sup> Koenig, J. (2021). *The dictionary of obscure sorrows*. Simon and Schuster.

these places as “an empty or emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty, with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs.”. While the definition provided by Koenig of Kenopsia captures the emptiness of liminal spaces, it fails to capture the transience and nostalgia of these places.

Rem Koolhaas argued that nonplaces manifest themselves architecturally as Junkspace. Koolhaas defines Junkspace<sup>7</sup> as “what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout.”. He explains that the product of modernization is not modern architecture but instead Junkspace. Junkspaces are the endless carpeted halls of business complexes, they are the shopping malls with fake plants and escalators and the endless array of Walmarts. “Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda Triangle of concepts, an abandoned petri dish: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization.” The effect of Junkspaces goes beyond aesthetics, they are an embodiment of the state of our world. We are obsessed with instant and cheap accumulation. Instead of advancing and innovating beyond our current point, we are stuck creating more of the same.

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<sup>7</sup> Koolhaas, R. (2002). Junkspace. *October*, 100, 175-190.



*Image via Vintage Los Angeles on Facebook*

## **II. Hauntology and the ghost of futures that have never come**

Post World War II America was bustling with ideals for the future. The concept of futurism pervaded everything. Tomorrowland in Disneyland was designed to depict 1986 from the perspective of 1955. It featured space flight, Autotopias<sup>8</sup>, gondolas, monorails, and microwave ovens. It all draws heavily from the idea of retro-futurism<sup>9</sup>. Experiencing these places gives you the sense that we were once optimistic about the future and all of the technological advancements that would come. Today, in part due to our impending climate crisis and growing economic inequality, the futures we can imagine are increasingly bleak. Our cultural future seems to be running in an endless loop of nostalgia. Mark Fisher describes this as hauntology<sup>10</sup>. He claims that what haunts the twenty-first century is not the past but rather the future that the twentieth century

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<sup>8</sup> The United States highway system had not yet been fully developed so this gave people a taste of the excitement of driving on a multilane highway.

<sup>9</sup> Retro Futurism is inspired by renderings of the future from an earlier era.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, M. (2012). What is hauntology?. *Film quarterly*, 66(1), 16-24.

promised and trained us to anticipate but never came. To Fisher, this meant the deterioration of us to be able to conceive of a future radically different from our current reality. As Koolhaas writes in *Junkspace*, “Change has been divorced from the idea of improvement. There is no progress; like a crab on LSD, culture staggers endlessly sideways.”.

In Capitalist Realism<sup>11</sup>, Fisher argues that we are living at the end of history<sup>12</sup>: a time that we cannot imagine an end to capitalism. The idea of progress is perpetually shifted to mean profitability and growth above all else. The socio-political arrangement of Neo-liberal Capitalism has created an echo chamber of marketability in which everything further feeds the system. Fisher describes the paradox of resistance through Kurt Cobain:

*“In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to have to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought, and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché. The impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Fredric Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, where all that is left is to imitate dead styles in the imaginary museum’.”*

-Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism

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<sup>11</sup> Fisher, M. (2022). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*. John Hunt Publishing.

<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history?. *The national interest*, (16), 3-18.



Hauntology is the idea that we can never perceive things as being fully present.<sup>13</sup> The term was first introduced by Jacques Derrida in his work *Specters of Marx*. Derrida used hauntology to describe the situation of Marxism in 1993 after the fall of the Soviet Union two years prior. He argued that Marxism would develop a tendency to haunt Western society from beyond the grave. He describes Marxism's ontological<sup>14</sup> disjunction which would result in its presence being replaced by a deferred non-origins<sup>15</sup>. However, hauntology goes beyond trends and economic theories, every form of representation is haunted by not only their ideal form but also what escapes representation. No hyper-realistic painting will ever give you the same amount of information as what is physically there. We often forget this distinction in the digital age when everything imaginable can be reduced to digital representations. We forget to acknowledge what photographs and videos lack in rendering reality. Our representations consistently long for what is left behind when an image is rendered.

The internet has caused a contraction of space and time. This has been amplified by Augé's concept of the non-place. These spaces that resemble each other more than the location around them are proliferating rapidly, signifying the spread of everpresent capitalist globalization. The more the spaces around us look like one another, the more the boundaries of place are blurred. Instead of having individual cultures and an environment that is the byproduct of that culture, we just have a single ubiquitous cultural landscape that is the product of the internet. Technology is perpetually further disjuncting our traditional understanding of time and place.

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida, J. (2012). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*. routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Metaphysics dealing with the nature of being.

<sup>15</sup> Essentially a ghost

The cultural fascination with liminal spaces is a result of the hauntological time we currently reside in. These spaces were made to be populated, yet, the absence of life seems integral to their existence. The absence is what makes these spaces eerie. The artificiality of these spaces is uncanny. It is one thing to be lost in a forest, it is another to be lost in a man-made labyrinth of office spaces. Nature provides us with the comfort that the natural order still exists yet when this order is abstracted through the creation of artificial spaces, we are left in a state of liminality with our emotions occupied by angst. The perpetual proliferation of liminal spaces is a result of our continued disconnection from the reality in which we live; it is a disconnection between the space and time in which we reside. Darkness is a key element to liminality. It leads us to believe there is an endless nature of liminality. Just as hauntology leads us to believe there is an endless nature of capitalism.

### **III. A Way Out**

Liminal spaces in their unsettling, dark, and eerie nature leave us to believe that there is no escape and that we will constantly be stuck in a place that is neither fully present nor past. However, there is power in the space in between. If we choose to see our liminal state not as an endless steel-enforced loop unaffected by time and space but as deconstruction before regrowth we gain the power to create a new future. Liminal spaces are spaces of confusion and discordance. They are spaces where lines become increasingly blurred between the divisions that categorize everything. When the boundaries are blurred, our hierarchies are dismantled. Liminal states can be malleable places of fluidity. All it takes is to tear down the wall.

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