

Visual Arts

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Symphony of a Missing Room, Royal Academy of Arts, London – review

The Royal Academy hosts an extraordinary piece of immersive theatre



'Symphony of a Missing Room' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London

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Next month the Summer Exhibition opens at the Royal Academy of Arts in London: the largest open submission exhibition in the world and a tradition that goes back, without interruption, to 1769. When it opens, the focus will be on the artworks on the walls. But this extraordinary piece of immersive theatre for Lift (London International Festival of Theatre) takes you behind the preparations. Devised by Swedish artists Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl, it is a personal journey through the building but also through your own responses to art. It leaves you slightly spaced out and acutely aware of your senses.

It begins simply, taking participants seven at a time on a short wander through the half-finished rooms. This is interesting in itself as you pick your way past ladders, trolleys and stacked artworks. For a while you are left to sit on a stool and survey the scene, then summoned to follow a guide. So begins a process by which you are gradually separated from the real world, given headphones that replace actual sounds with a soundscape and a translucent blindfold that blocks visual detail. Instructed through the headphones to take hold of the hand in front of you, you have to submit to being led on a mystery tour.

It's disturbing at first, surrendering control to your invisible guide and to the gentle sing-song voice that issues instructions. But you learn to let go, to be drawn along, envisaging a fictitious environment around you by painting the scene in your mind's eye from descriptions whispered into your ears. The "missing room" is both a fantastical space in the gallery and the capacious chamber of your imagination.

To some degree, the piece considers the way art is consumed: what is selected for view; what happens to works unseen, rejected or long forgotten; how the space is affected by the history of what it contains. But what strikes you most are the paradoxes. The partial sensory deprivation makes you more attuned: you begin to notice tiny changes in air temperature, smell and texture. The emphasis on your inner eye makes you look more keenly once the blindfold is removed. The controlled nature of the walk is oddly liberating, freeing you from rational choice.

Some visitors may find the dreamy voice and drifting text rather enervating. I found it soothing yet extraordinarily stimulating, as if someone had dusted the inside of my cranium with a soft cloth.

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