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Special Issue Reprint

Framing the Virtual

New Technologies and Immersive Exhibitions

Edited by
Kate Mondloch and Emily Lawhead

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Guest Editors

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About the Editors

Kate Mondloch

Kate Mondloch (PhD, UCLA) is Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture in the College of Design at the University of Oregon, where she also serves as a Faculty Fellow at the Clark Honors College. Her research focuses on perception, embodiment, and new technologies in art and the social realm in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. She is the author of *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010; reprinted with University of Minnesota's open access Manifold platform in 2024) and *A Capsule Aesthetic: Feminist Materialisms in New Media Art* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), for which she developed a related multimedia publication, *Installation Archive: A Capsule Aesthetic*, using the Scalar platform. She is currently working on a third book, tentatively entitled *Art of Attention*, which explores body–mind awareness in 21st century art. Dr. Mondloch has been awarded research fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the University of California Humanities Research Institute, Banff Centre, and the Oregon Humanities Center. Her research has also been supported by the Getty Research Institute, the Clark Art Institute, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Emily Lawhead is Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City. She holds a BA in Comparative Cultural Studies from Northern Arizona University, an MA in Museum Studies from the University of San Francisco, and a PhD in the History of Art & Architecture from the University of Oregon with a certificate in New Media & Culture. Her research explores intersections of contemporary art and technology with an emphasis on Japanese new media artists and collectives. Her dissertation, "Networks of Experience: Interactive Digital Art in the 21st Century", considers interactivity in digital art practices including virtual reality, immersive installations, and social media art, with a focus on long-term preservation strategies when acquired in museum collections.

At the UMFA, Emily spearheads the *salt* exhibition series for emerging artists in addition to the Museum's vibrant and growing photography, new media, and modern and contemporary art collections. She also serves as Co-Editor-in-Chief for the *International Journal for Digital Art History* (DAHJ), is an Assistant Curator of the DAHJ VR Gallery, and is a Digital Futures Scholar with the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures.

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Editorial

Framing the Virtual: New Technologies and Immersive Exhibitions

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1. Blockbuster Immersive Art Exhibitions

In 2017, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden organized a major retrospective of Kusama Yayoi's *Infinity Mirror Rooms* that enjoyed a six-venue tour of North America. The exhibition was a blockbuster hit; it attracted thousands of visitors at each museum who were willing to wait in line for hours to experience forty-five seconds of Kusama's work (Sutton 2017). The immersive installations promised portals into alternate worlds with dazzling lights and the artist's signature polka-dot dreamscapes, where visitors could capture themselves as reflections in an infinitely expanding universe. Kusama was catapulted to fame for a new generation—some art lovers, some not—many of whom were unfamiliar with her decades of work as a painter, sculptor, performance artist, and designer of immersive installations. Whether or not visitors appreciated the full extent of Kusama's artistic practice, they flocked to museums to experience her work in person, and, crucially, to post about it online.

In the past decade, immersive art exhibitions have exploded on the international stage. Van Gogh-themed immersive experiences were developed by numerous companies in Europe and the United States in the 2010s; their worldwide popularity was inspired in part by appearing as a stage set for yet another virtual world—an episode of Netflix's *Emily in Paris* in 2020. Immersive exhibitions on other historical artists followed suit, with *Frida: Immersive Dream*, *Monet: The Immersive Experience*, *Immersive Klimt Revolution*, *Imagine Picasso: The Immersive Exhibition*, *Dalí: The Endless Enigma*, and others debuting in major cities across continents. In 2016, Meow Wolf opened its flagship space in Santa Fe, which allows visitors to climb and crawl through a mysterious house and portal to another dimension. In 2017, the Color Factory launched interactive, playful spaces designed by artist Leah Rosenberg to saturate visitors in rooms of color. Other organizations formed to support artists working with experimental digital technologies, including Artechouse (est. 2015) and Superblue (est. 2019) with dazzling displays of high-tech art. In 2018, teamLab's *Borderless* opened in Tokyo with 107,000 square feet of intertwined galleries for the collective's cutting-edge digital projections. The Frameless immersive art center, devoted to staging encounters with digitally reimagined masterpieces, opened in London in 2022. And in 2023, André Heller's avant-garde amusement park *Luna Luna* was resurrected from its 1986 installation in Hamburg to a Los Angeles warehouse for a six-month run that attracted 150,000 visitors (Purić 2024).[1]

Although immersion itself is not new to the history of art, recent developments in technology and communication networks point to a new relationship between immersive art and what Kate Mondloch has identified as the attention-experience economy: a cultural and economic system where immersive art installations and digital experiences are designed to

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capture and monetize audience attention and engagement. This Special Issue seeks to draw critical attention to these developments as they continue to unfold—from deepening our grasp of present-day immersion to proposing a continuum between shallow tech gimmicks and meaningful artistic encounters. By way of introduction, this editorial reflects on the history of immersion in art, the ways in which new technologies have solidified immersive art as a key element of the attention-experience economy, and emerging research trends. It is our hope that the diverse contributions and perspectives within this Special Issue will shed new light on both the pitfalls and the potentials of immersive art exhibitions in the years to come.

2. Immersion in Art History

Philosophers have explored ideas of immersion, perception, and the nature of reality for thousands of years. In many cases, immersion relies on metaphors related to water—a plunge into an environment that offers an all-encompassing sensory experience. Today's scholars rely on this metaphor to examine immersive experiences with art: Fabienne Liptay and Burcu Dogramaci argue that immersion is centered on "the idea of a liquefaction of space, which makes the experiences of 'immersing,' 'melting,' or 'plunging' into a medium possible in the first place (Liptay and Dogramaci 2015). Brooke Belisle approaches immersion as "a state of engagement in which viewers or users feel transported into and absorbed by the world of representation" (Belisle 2016). And Panayiota Demetriou describes how people are "almost bathed by different stimuli" when they are "haptically, visually, auditorily, and narratively incorporated into the action" (Demetriou 2018). Immersion is intricately linked to this understanding of experience as flooding a person's senses to such an extent that they are transported to a new reality.

Immersive experiences are often understood as physical, but these experiences cannot be separated from the cognitive. Oliver Grau approaches immersion as "an illusory setting where time and space are one" (Grau 1999). With this definition, the phenomenon of immersion can be experienced in visual art, virtual reality, the imaginary, or in a situation of intense emotion or focus. Katja Kwastek advocates for "the emotional and cognitive intensity of an experience" as a measure of immersion, which is often overlooked in studies on illusory or immersive spaces (Kwastek 2015). Indeed, as Janet Murray argues: "A stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us" (Murray 2016). In today's art history, there is ample ground to explore both physical and cognitive experiences of immersion as modes of interaction with artworks. Immersive experiences might engulf visitors in a fully interactive physical space, plunge them into a new cultural setting or language, or capture their attention in a stirring narrative flow.

In any case, it is important to realize that these experiences build on a long history of immersive art. In his foundational article, "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality", Oliver Grau traces this phenomenon to Second-style painting in Pompeii, where people were inserted into narratives that were "meant to encourage an emotional, ecstatic participation" in Dionysian cult communities (Grau 1999). He also explores the Sala delle Prospettive in the Villa Farnesina in Rome, where the Renaissance master Titian was said to be "unwilling to believe that it was a painting" (Vasari [1568] 1978). Similar lore surrounds panoramas in the 19th century, where some visitors were "afraid to collide with the horses" when they visited the rotundas that attracted 100 million visitors between 1870 and 1900 (Grau 1999). Immersive experiences continued to be developed with stereoscopic technologies in the 20th century, including 3D cinemas and IMAX that were designed to complement the curvature of human eyes and modes of visual perception. Soon after, artists began to develop installation artworks that directly incorporate viewers into the

narrative, from everyday settings (such as Claes Oldenburg's *The Store*, 1961) to imaginative worlds (such as Kusama Yayoi's *Phalli's Field*, 1965), socio-politically charged spaces (such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's *Womanhouse*, 1972), and remote landscapes (such as Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–1976). By the 1980s, immersive experiences could be expanded into the digital realm with developments in Virtual Reality and the internet (such as Jeffrey Shaw's *The Legible City*, 1988–1991). Advancements in projection mapping and algorithmic programming in the 21st century provide even more space for dazzling displays of digital content (such as teamLab's *Planets*, 2018). Despite the transformation ushered in by our digital era (which we will turn to in the next section), it is important to note that the development of spectacular immersive exhibitions is part of a long-standing tradition of creating engaging, multisensory experiences for audiences.

3. New Technologies and the Attention-Experience Economy

Though the phenomenon of immersion has been explored widely, comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of technology in facilitating these experiences. Technological developments in the 20th and 21st centuries were instrumental in developing spectacular immersive exhibitions: panoramas, 3D cinemas, IMAX, Virtual Reality, projection mapping, and other materials and techniques contributed to immersive experiences that have attracted floods of visitors. More critical attention is needed to fully understand how these technologies—especially "new" technologies across time—create physical and emotional experiences of immersion.

Today's surge in immersive art exhibitions, however, demands a spotlight on cutting-edge communication networks, which continue to revolutionize how we experience and interact with art. Major advancements in mobile phones and apps since the 2010s have set the stage for new forms of experiencing and communicating about immersive exhibitions: iPhone 4 was released in 2010, which included the first front-facing "selfie" camera and Retina screen (Coulstring 2023), allowing for social media to become fully mobile and ingrained in day-to-day life. Instagram launched the same year as one of the first social media platforms designed for mobile devices instead of desktop computers (Cara 2018). Other image-based apps such as Snapchat followed suit, which has remained one of the most popular social media platforms in the world since its launch in 2013 (Dean 2024). These elements of networked communication are entangled with the technologies that produce immersive exhibitions. As Gloria Sutton argues in her essay for the *Infinity Mirror Rooms* exhibition catalog, Kusama's immersive work "does not hinge on technological developments in film but on the introduction of network-based models of communication" (Sutton 2017). It is no coincidence that blockbuster immersive exhibitions opened in the 2010s, responding to the rise in accessible, mobile social media. People now experience immersive exhibitions through their phones—both as documentation of their experience and as a portal through which the immersive experience occurs. Laura Lee terms this phenomenon "hashtag art", or "contemporary exhibitions that are designed to be visually spectacular and thus lend themselves to picture taking and social media posting" (Lee 2022). Some experiences are even designed to be seen through the phone camera lens, which often results in "better" photographs than the in-person view. Blockbuster immersive exhibitions are intricately linked to our use of phone cameras and social media, aligning them with the technological tools that produce the physical sense of immersion.

The increasing entanglement of communication networks with the development of blockbuster immersive art exhibitions ultimately results in the commodification of attention itself. In an article for the New Yorker, Jackson Arn writes that "all art makes some initial pitch for attention. In immersive art, sustaining attention isn't the means; it's the point, the work's way of justifying itself. As such, the pitch is almost always the hard sell—

intense, elemental sensation, immediately delivered" (Arn 2023). In many ways, immersive experiences are the realization of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, "where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible *par excellence*" (Debord 1970). To Debord, spectacle becomes the vehicle for commodity, an abstraction of commerce by way of images that capture society's full attention. This commodification is nothing new—the mass popularity of stereoscopic technologies in the 19th century is one example of images functioning as an accessible, individual, and portable commodity (Belisle 2016). However, it is the dematerializing effects of today's late capitalist structure that require renewed examination of how companies "mine consumers' emotions, integrating audiences more fully into corporatized productive routines, profiting all the while" (Mondloch 2022). Social media platforms generate billions of dollars by capturing users' attention and keeping them engaged on their associated apps, a commodification that does not directly result from an exchange of goods or services. This engagement is deceptively passive for the everyday user but ultimately draws from their personal data and online interactions for massive corporate profit.

Immersive exhibitions have become a vehicle of a new attention-experience economy, or a commodification of people's time and attention on communication networks alongside ephemeral experiences that often require steep admission prices and membership fees.[2] In today's digital age, an immersive art exhibition is not complete without the chance to capture and share the experience online. Sensory overload and virtual transportation are just the beginning—the real thrill comes from documenting every dazzling moment for your social media followers. Artists are often caught in the middle, navigating a desire to attract new audiences while critically engaging with pressing socio-political concerns. The artists involved in immersive exhibitions risk becoming what Panayiota Demetriou terms "imagineers", simultaneously acting as "an interaction designer, an experience designer, a user experience researcher, a facilitator, a connector and networker, a translator, a project manager, a visionary entrepreneur" while also cultivating their work as "creative, artistic, curious" (Demetriou 2018). As artists navigate the digital landscape, they face a growing challenge: creating experiences that are both visually stunning and critically significant, rather than just profitable spectacles. The far-reaching impact of the attention-experience economy blurs the lines between corporate and artistic interests. To truly understand today's blockbuster immersive art exhibitions, we must examine this complex interplay from multiple angles.

4. Framing the Virtual

This Special Issue, "Framing the Virtual: New Technologies and Immersive Exhibitions", takes on a wide range of topics that intersect with these introductory themes. The title itself takes inspiration from Jacques Derrida's understanding of the "parergon" frame, which is "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work, neither inside or outside, neither above nor below…" (Derrida 1987). Derrida describes a dual function of "framing" depending on perspective: when we look at a painting, we see the frame as part of the wall; when we look at the wall, we see the frame as part of the painting. Though it often goes unnoticed, the frame is a tool that defines both space and the conceptual limits of an artwork.[3] For immersive exhibitions, new technologies are a core element of the design that can be integral to the thematic or critical contribution of the work. At the same time, these technologies often melt into the background, allowing visitors to become engrossed in the "virtual" experience. Considering immersive exhibitions in terms of "framing" allows for multiple perspectives to emerge depending on where focus is directed—from examinations of the

technologies that facilitate viewers' immersion to deep attention to the visual aesthetics, narrative, or emotional impact at the heart of immersive experiences.

The contributions in this Special Issue act as powerful launching points, sparking a deep and critical examination of immersive exhibitions in the 21st century. Collectively, the authors not only illuminate current practices but also challenge us to rethink the boundaries and possibilities of immersive art experiences in our contemporary world. Some articles offer an expanded understanding of immersion in contemporary art, from Aleisha Barton's examination of psychedelic, kinetic lithographs to Jenny Lin's discussion of language and cultural immersion in diasporic Chinese video art. Others draw critical attention to the artists and institutions who are harnessing immersive exhibitions in powerful and successful ways: as a tool for facilitating an experience of surveillance or entrapment (in Cristina Albu's analysis of Nick Cave's *Hy-Dyve*), as a method of implicating participants in shared ecosystems (in Emily Lawhead's examination of *teamLab: Continuity*), as a vehicle for non-linear storytelling (in Rui Zhang and Fanke Peng's article on Aboriginal art in *Connection: Songlines from Australia's First Peoples*), and as a way to expose our relationship to technology itself (in Mathilde Roman's contribution on the artistic hijacking of LED walls). Francesca Albrezzi's reflection on virtual exhibition building and Ben Evans James's consideration of immersive documentary film take a curatorial angle, examining the design and curation of immersive space in our new, post-COVID world. And contributions by Dawna Schuld and Kate Mondloch take on the dematerializing effects of experiential art today and the corporate interests of the attention-experience economy. By exploring both the challenges and opportunities these exhibitions offer, the authors provide fresh perspectives and innovative approaches for understanding and evaluating the impact and significance of immersive art experiences in our current era.

5. Looking Ahead

This Special Issue both builds upon existing scholarship and catalyzes new directions in the study of immersive exhibitions, contributing to a rapidly evolving field of research. While it offers valuable insights, further scholarship is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of immersive art experiences—both in terms of contemporary art and the growing attention-experience economy. The articles in this collection demonstrate how deep analysis of compelling and impactful immersive exhibitions can reveal valuable insights into their design, reception, and cultural relevance. For example: those that are just as powerful (if not more) in person than on social media; those that balance critical engagement and accessibility to a general audience unfamiliar with art and art history; those that use technological media in a way that creatively integrates today's most pressing themes; and those that leave a lasting and thoughtful impact. As Jenny Lin writes, a quality experience with immersive art is "marked by an artwork's ability to absorb and the lasting impact of that absorption" (Lin 2023). On the other hand, immersive exhibitions must be approached cautiously. Many use spectacular emerging technologies as a smoke screen for experiences that are visually dazzling but have no qualitative substance. Others take advantage of the attention-experience economy to make art even more exclusive, taking on steep admission prices and restricted VIP access that further alienates audiences who might be hungry for new experiences with art. Scholars must continue to balance these angles as immersive exhibitions develop and unfold in the years to come.

Though the pace of the world seems to constantly accelerate, we are still grappling with the technological developments of the last decade and reconciling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The massive popularity of blockbuster immersive exhibitions is undoubtedly entangled with this current moment. As Brooke Belisle argues, the

development of immersive experiences is part of larger, more complicated relationships with technology, aesthetics, politics, and history. Immersive experiences throughout time result from "a temporary but powerful alignment between the technical conventions of a particular medium, the aesthetic form of a particular representation, the cultural logic of a particular historical moment, and the perceptual framework of a particular participant's embodied experience" (Belisle 2016). In other words, the conditions that bring about immersive experiences are not just tied to technological progress. In fact, they are inextricably linked to factors that define our modes of embodiment. This element deserves even closer examination moving forward. As Dawna Schuld writes in her article for this Special Issue: "What is missing, even repressed, is a critical awareness of the phenomenology of [immersive] experience, including how one's perceptual faculties are engaged to effect meaning and, therefore, how one's individual analog reality might differ from that of another" (Schuld 2023). Almost counterintuitively, further research is needed on our relationships with the physical world to better understand our experiences in virtual ones. The ways in which immersive exhibitions "frame the virtual", bridging the digital and physical realms, exemplify this cultural tension and represent a rich area for continued scholarly exploration.

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Notes

1 For more on the history and recreation of *Luna Luna*, see Heller et al. (2023).
2 For more on the experience economy, see Pine and Gilmore (1999).
3 See further expansion and analysis of Derrida's concept in Marriner (2002).

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Mondloch, Kate. 2022. The Influencers: Van Gogh Immersive Experiences and the Attention-Experience Economy. *Arts* 11: 90. [CrossRef]

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Article

The Influencers: Van Gogh Immersive Experiences and the Attention-Experience Economy

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Abstract: Van Gogh immersive exhibitions—multi-sited, branded multimedia environments inspired by the artist's life and paintings—are seemingly ubiquitous in 2022. These itinerant digital spectacles bundle reproductions of Vincent Van Gogh's most recognizable artistic motifs with tropes of fin-de-siècle madness, bathing their visitors in an artistic wonderland of projected images and soundscapes spread throughout cavernous exhibition venues. The popularity of these commercial juggernauts is unmatched. At present, at least five different companies are staging competing versions of digital Van Gogh art exhibitions in dozens of cities worldwide, with a particular emphasis at present on sites throughout North America. How are we as art critics to make sense of these exhibitions as well as their influence within the institutional context of the visual arts? Taking the digital Van Gogh phenomenon as its central case study, this article investigates the emerging art-themed immersive exhibition model and explores the specific mode of spectatorship it promotes. Situating these projects within the broader framework of the contemporaneous attention and experience economies, and with an eye toward the crucial role of social media, I propose that art-themed immersive exhibitions such as the Van Gogh immersive experiences exemplify habits of digitally-mediated, 24/7 immersive attention and consumption in art and in everyday life.

Keywords: immersion; attention; social media; exhibitions; Vincent Van Gogh; media installation; digital art; art-themed immersive exhibition; reproductions; virtual art

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1. The Influencers

> *Venture into an exciting new world; forego all preconceived ideas of traditional museum visits, dispel all notions of tiptoeing through silent art galleries to view masterpieces from afar, change how you engage with art. Vitalize your senses and challenge your beliefs in a completely unique, stimulating Vincent Van Gogh experience*. (Van Gogh Alive Website 2022)

> *Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? Now you can! Welcome to 'Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience.'* (Van Gogh the Immersive Experience Website 2022)

Van Gogh immersive exhibitions—multi-sited, branded multimedia environments inspired by the artist's life and paintings—are seemingly ubiquitous in 2022. These itinerant digital spectacles bundle Vincent Van Gogh's most recognizable artistic motifs with tropes of fin-de-siècle madness, bathing their visitors in an artistic wonderland of projected images and soundscapes spread throughout cavernous event spaces. Pricey, timed-entry tickets afford visitors access to one hour or so of agreeable Van Gogh-themed multisensory experience that is deliberately designed to promote social media sharing. The popularity of these undemanding art-themed immersive events is unmatched; Corey Ross, president of Toronto-based Lighthouse Immersive and one of the producers behind *Immersive Van Gogh*, enthuses: "We just passed 3.2 million tickets sold, which, as I understand it, makes it the most successful attraction in the world on Ticketmaster". (Capps 2021) The overflowing gift shops that bookend these exhibits peddle the likes of Vincent Van Duck bath toys, ear-shaped erasers, and espresso cups adorned with swirling nightscapes. Other fee-based

extras run the gamut from various techno-gimmicks—a VR journey through some of the landscapes on which Van Gogh's paintings were based; an AI component where you can "write Van Gogh a letter" on your phone and receive a response immediately—to special events featuring commercialized intimacy—the Los Angeles installation of *Immersive Van Gogh*, for example, markets "immersive" yoga, meditation, and date night packages prominently sponsored by Lifeway Kefir. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these influential commercial juggernauts have even spawned their own brand of Van Gogh-channeling satire:

> *When I died in penury, I thought about the fifty smackers each person would pay to walk through that conference center, immersing themselves in three-dimensional paintings that witnessed my plunge into existential despair. And I smiled. Because when life brings rain, you can let a smile be your umbrella. And an umbrella will make that conference center's gift shop $39.99 richer if it's shellacked with blurry reproductions of works I poured my heart and soul into.* (Burges 2022)

How are we as art critics to make sense of all of this? How best to account for these profit-oriented, art-themed immersive exhibitions as well as their influence within the institutional context of the visual arts? To begin, let us revisit the article's title. *The Influencers*. At first blush, the "influencers" are those we might expect: the professional influencers and individual visitors (or "micro-influencers") upon whose social media publicity the financial success of the digital Van Gogh shows rely. If defining who is influencing whom seems fairly straightforward however, consider this curious mise-en-abyme. Many writers locate the viral success of the Van Gogh experiences with the cameo appearance of one such exhibition during an episode of the Netflix series *Emily in Paris*: a show which follows the exploits of a young American social media influencer working abroad.[1] In other words, people are flocking to see immersive Van Gogh exhibitions because a similar immersive experience was featured in a show about an influencer visiting a Van Gogh immersive experience.

As though a fictional influencer influencing the behavior of other prospective art experience customers-cum-influencers was not mind-boggling enough, it is important to recognize that the immersive art-branded exhibition model has emerged as an "influencer" in its own right. As we shall see in what follows, these immersive events not only impact visitor behavior, but also, and significantly, these exhibitions are influencing art exhibition models themselves. (Tellingly, the production companies sponsoring the Van Gogh exhibitions describe themselves as "global influencers," plainly stating their undisguised ambitions.) The immersive Van Gogh-themed experiences' prodigious success in attracting the attention of mass audiences has generated an outpouring of comparable shows. To name just a few, there exists *Immersive Frida* and *Immersive Klimt*. Meanwhile, in an apparent endorsement of the more-is-better model pioneered by the digital Van Gogh events, *Monet by the Water, Beyond Monet*, and *Claude Monet: The Immersive Experience* are also in the works.

The transformative "influences" of immersive art-themed exhibitions continue to advance alongside their proliferation. While the trend toward "edutainment" in arts institutions is by no means new, even the architecture for hosting art exhibitions is shifting under pressure from the immersive art-themed model.[2] Presumably responding to the latest viewer preference for immersive walk-through displays, Newfields (formerly the Indianapolis Museum of Art) recently removed the entire fourth floor of contemporary artworks from their building to create room for a permanent immersive exhibition space. Known as "The Lume", the space comprises 150 digital projectors covering 30,000 square feet of former gallery space (Capps 2021). Its first show promises a "must-see cultural experience" featuring immersive galleries showcasing, fittingly, digital Van Gogh.[3]

As the collateral effects of these commercial immersive art reproduction exhibitions continue to unfold, it is imperative for art critics to theorize the understudied spectatorship patterns associated with these profit-oriented, art-themed exhibitions and examine their broader impact. This article explores the artistic and cultural consequences of the institutionalization and commercialization of art-themed immersive exhibitions through a case study of immersive Van Gogh shows, the largest and most popular example to date of

this evolving genre. I examine the specific mode of multisensory, spectacular, and social media-based spectatorship these multimedia exhibitions promote and propose that their significance is best understood in relation to the priorities of the contemporaneous experience and attention economies. First, however, an overview of the Van Gogh immersive experiences and their reception is in order.

2. Descriptive Overview of the Exhibitions and Their Critical and Popular Reception

The inspiration for these enormously popular shows began in Western Europe—the comparatively modest prototype, *Vincent Van Gogh*, *la nuit étoilée*, debuted in 2019 at L'Atelier des Lumières in Paris—but varied Van Gogh-inspired immersive exhibitions now reach across venues and cities worldwide, with a particular emphasis at present on sites throughout North America.[4] (See Figures 1–3). Currently, there are at least five different companies sponsoring competing digital Van Gogh experiences: *Immersive Van Gogh Exhibit* (by most accounts, the most similar to the "original" version in Paris); *Imagine Van Gogh: The Immersive Exhibition*; *Beyond Van Gogh*; *Van Gogh Alive*; and *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*.[5] While each production company promotes its own distinct brand of digital Van Gogh, this article proposes that their broader cultural impacts are best identified by considering them jointly. Indeed, their confoundingly similar exhibition titles collectively advertise the main attraction: an immersive multisensory experience with Van Gogh's work—an artistic encounter that is supposedly categorically distinct from so-called "traditional" art viewing—is the big selling point. This enticement to upend convention by eliminating any expectation of silence, seriousness, or "hands-off" viewing behaviors, while at the same time inviting nonstop social media consumption, is continually reinforced through the companies' effusive marketing campaigns. "Step inside Van Gogh's paintings!, enter *Bedroom in Arles!*, snap a selfie with sunflowers in an Insta-worthy mirrored room! Be prepared for a vibrant symphony of light, color, and sound!" (Van Gogh Alive Website 2022).

If you have not attended one of these immersive events, you may be surprised to learn that none of these multimedia art experiences display original works of art by Van Gogh. Rather, the event sponsors promise intense art-inspired multimedia episodes brimming with emotional resonance and sensory reverberation: "You can't react passively! . . . you will *feel* it! . . . it stirs the senses!" (Immersive Van Gogh Exhibition San Francisco Website 2022) Creatively animated digital images inspired by Van Gogh's life and works are projected onto the exhibition spaces' walls, ceilings, and floors, typically in large warehouse-like spaces. Digitized versions of the artist's paintings are collaged, modified, and made mobile, albeit with sometimes puzzling results; for example, in one particularly memorable segment of *Immersive Van Gogh*, one can find an amped-up rendition of Van Gogh's *Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette* appearing to literally puff on a cigarette (Davis 2021). While the rival shows differ somewhat by producer and venue, their moving image projections tend to be accompanied by a multimedia array of Van Gogh-related narrations, soundtracks, animations, dramatic props, and even fragrances. Of course, there are plenty of mirrored surfaces befitting our age of social media. (More on that later).

It is noteworthy that these immersive art-themed events are exceptionally cost-intensive to produce. *Bloomberg CityLab* estimates an average of about USD 1M for each Van Gogh pop-up venue in the US (excluding animation and other extra expenditures), with estimates soaring to anywhere between USD 4M and 15M for spaces customized to house permanent spectacles (Capps 2021). The technological outlays are equally astonishing. At the time of this article's writing, the company that produces *Immersive Van Gogh* is the largest buyer of Panasonic projectors in the world. (Fun fact: *CityLab* points out that "[l]aid end-to-end, the fiberoptic cables for the New York show at Pier 36 would stretch from the Statue of Liberty to the top of Manhattan" (Capps 2021)). Correspondingly, these self-described "family friendly" multimedia exhibits are also remarkably expensive to visit. The minimum entry fee is about USD 35, but prices range well beyond USD 100 depending on time, date, and experiential extras. Unburdened by fragile original artworks or a discernable

instructional mission, these are unapologetically for-profit enterprises. Each company runs multiple versions of their trademark immersive Van Gogh experience simultaneously, incorporating robust appeals to local corporate event planners and countless commercial tie-ins at each site.[6]

Figure 1. *Vincent Van Gogh, la nuit étoilée* is considered to be an inspiration for many of the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions to follow. Photo by marc carpentier is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

These trendy exhibits, especially their North American renditions, have garnered considerable publicity and spawned analyses in venues from *Artforum* to *Forbes*, the *New York Times* to local TV affiliates. Predictably enough, reviews are mixed. While the fact that opinions differ is hardly surprising, one critical trend is worth emphasizing: art critics tend to be the only writers who insistently locate their critiques of the digital Van Gogh exhibitions in relation to actual material art objects. That is, arts writers, in contrast to other commentators, routinely draw comparisons between visiting the Van Gogh immersive experiences and experiencing original Van Gogh artworks first-hand. As one might expect,

the viewer's experience with the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions emerge as wanting (even reckless) when viewed in this light. Beyond the supposed indignity of seeing an animated version of the artist's *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* actually puffing on a cigarette, other moments of art historian negative affect abound: from the awkwardness of lounging on life-sized, 3D sculptural versions of the furniture tenderly depicted in *Bedroom in Arles* as if testing out an IKEA showroom (*Van Gogh Alive)*, to the mortification at witnessing a re-interpretation of *Café Terrace at Night*, inexplicably "transformed into a curtain blowing in the wind, the image divided like one of those rubber curtains at a carwash."[7]

Figure 2. Installation view of *Immersive Van Gogh* in New York City. Photo by Nina Westervelt is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

Although my own initial reaction to these exhibits was perhaps less contemptuous than that of other art critics—I am a firm believer that if audiences are consistently seeking to engage with art outside the institutional context of art museums, we should at least be examining why—I too found myself to be fixated on making comparisons with viewing "real" art objects. Why would so many people queue and pay so much money to see a not-so-spectacular Van Gogh-inspired multimedia spectacle? Why choose to visit a digitized Van Gogh exhibition when, especially in the major cities which host these events, one could see any number of original paintings by Van Gogh or his contemporaries for much less money? In hindsight, I realize that authenticity is almost beside the point; instead, the lure of a digitally-mediated and multisensory encounter with the artist and his oeuvre is central.

For most non-art commentators, the differences between the immersive Van Gogh experiences and viewing genuine Van Gogh paintings in an art museum or elsewhere are so apparent as to go almost without mentioning. The exhibition creators, notably, never claim to exhibit original artworks: it is simply not part of the pitch. In recounting their goals and processes, their emphases lie in the alleged novelty of an immersive artistic experience. This experience, notably, is emphatically marketed as divergent from conventional (read: dusty and boring) art viewing. The *Van Gogh Alive* promotional materials, for example,

rally potential visitors to "Venture into an exciting new world; forego all preconceived ideas of traditional museum visits, dispel all notions of tiptoeing through silent art galleries to view masterpieces from afar, change how you engage with art. Vitalize your senses and challenge your beliefs in a completely unique, stimulating Vincent Van Gogh experience" (Van Gogh Alive Website 2022). Mario Iacampo, exhibition producer and artistic co-director of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience*, puts it this way: "[W]e don't look at it as 'Come and see paintings of Van Gogh.' We look at it [as] 'Come and experience *Van Gogh*.'" (Iacampo 2022) Echoing Iacampo, the other Van Gogh exhibition organizers similarly bypass the issue of authenticity, trumpeting instead their efforts to promote accessibility and anti-elitism, to preserve the aging and "over-visited" Van Gogh originals, to offer a more comprehensive representation of Van Gogh's vast oeuvre than any single museum could accomplish, and to provide "socially transformational" educational experiences.[8]

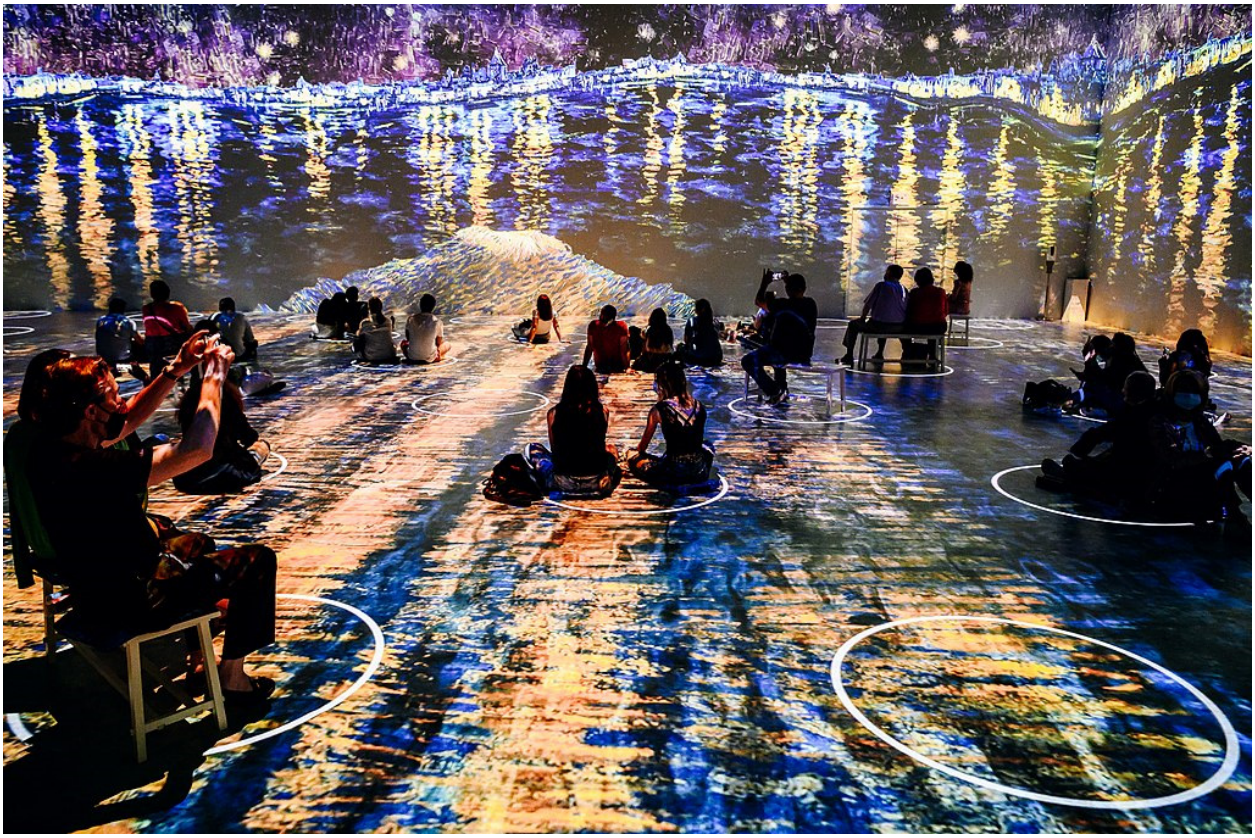

Figure 3. Installation view of *Immersive Van Gogh* in New York City. Photo by Nina Westervelt is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License, via Wikimedia.

We will return to the promoters' intriguing claims in what follows. For now, it is important to grasp the wider popular reception surrounding these shows. Local news publications, for their part, often describe the delightful escapism the Van Gogh immersive events facilitate (although not without some misgivings, especially as related to the price of admission). More to the point, and due to the events' nearly indistinguishable titles, these site-specific publications tend to spend a large amount of time focusing on the thoroughgoing confusion over various competing Van Gogh experiences, often judiciously counseling their readers on how to choose the best experience for their particular needs and interests. (The title of Kevin Slane's review in *Boston.com* says it all: "We Visited Boston's 2 Van Gogh 'Immersive Experiences.' Here's Which One You Should Choose". (Slane 2021)) Business journals, on the other hand, often do not discuss the artist or his paintings at all. They delve right to the heart of the issue in analyses of the market share, branding, and enormous investment opportunity of these massively popular and rapidly multiplying immersive experiences. (A 2021 article in *Market Watch* gushes approvingly that the team at

Lighthouse Immersive, presenter of *Immersive Van Gogh*, "collectively have sold about 4.5 million tickets, translating into roughly $250 million in revenue, to all their *Immersive Van Gogh* presentations . . . And that's not counting $30 million in ancillary gift-shop revenue." (Passy 2022).)

While arts writers' over-emphasis on comparisons with viewing Van Gogh's actual works of art arguably obscures other critical issues regarding the spectator's experience, the non-art commentators, by focusing on attendance figures as the sole gauge of the immersive exhibition model's success or failure, are similarly shortsighted in their analyses. Zeroing in on the different type of viewing experience and mode of attention these art reproduction immersive exhibitions solicit and promote allows us to bridge these perspectives. It is here where (media) art historical perspectives become invaluable. The discipline's longstanding investment in the study of the viewer's perceptual engagement with art and media objects makes it uniquely equipped to theorize these experiential art events within the context of the conquest of attention, particularly visual attention, which is always sorely limited.[9] Yves Citton makes this case thoughtfully in *The Ecology of Attention*: "art historians and researchers in aesthetics," argues Citton, are "better placed than economists and specialists in marketing and management to understand what is at stake over the long term in the attention economy." (Citton 2014)[10].

Following Citton, and as savvy arts writers in fact have demonstrated, there are compelling cases to be made for locating the Van Gogh immersive media exhibitions in relation to earlier art exhibition models and their modes of spectatorship. Panoramas, world's fairs, expanded cinema, blockbuster exhibitions, biennials, and, of course, large-scale multimedia installations immediately come to mind. Predictably, these are the precedents cited most frequently in the literature. Jason Farago's trenchant review in the *New York Times*, for example, observes: "The shows hark back in particular to multi-projector attractions at the World's Fair in Queens in 1964 and at Expo '67 in Montreal, which cast humanist visions of the future in all directions." (Farago 2021)[11] Christopher Knight of *The Los Angeles Times* takes a more recent point of comparison. His head-to-head appraisal of the Los Angeles variant of *Immersive Van Gogh* and Pipilotti Rist's concurrent exhibition of media installations at the Museum of Contemporary Art is broadly representative of the defensive tone of many arts writers. "A bunch of high-resolution slides of famous, hundred-year-old paintings being projected on surrounding walls at an admission price of 55 bucks is simply no match for lounging on a floor pillow to be welcomed into Rist's eye-popping video garden of electronic Eden. Actual art by a gifted artist is better than reproductions of art sold by a corporation any day—especially at one-third the price." (Knight 2021)[12].

Keeping these previous exhibition models in the forefront, Citton's caution about presentism is appropriate: "While the digitalization of our attention of course opens unprecedented perspectives—for the better and for the worse—often, it only leads to the reinvention of modes of interaction that have already been experimented with in earlier contexts." (Citton 2014) After all, and as these exhibition model precedents demonstrate, catering to mass audiences is not new; putting "experience" on display is not new; mining emotions is not new; profit-making populist ventures are not new; multimedia immersion is not new. At the same time, however, we should be careful not to elide important distinctions. Examining the mode of spectatorship associated with these works—*how* we see and experience these exhibitions and their effects—enables us to appreciate the truly novel aspects of these immersive art-themed experiences. As we will see in the following section, the digital Van Gogh shows exemplify habits of digitally-mediated and profit-driven 24/7 immersive attention in art and in everyday life. This is important because this emergent exhibition model associated with these commercialized, art-themed exhibitions, far from being an insignificant fad, enables us to recognize and assess an evolving form of art spectatorship in our era of social media and ubiquitous digital devices, one with an outsized yet underappreciated influence upon art institutions and their audiences.

3. Immersive Experience, Social Media Sharing, and the Attention-Experience Economy

While written in a different context, Peter Osborne deftly articulates the urgency of defining changing patterns of media art spectatorship, such as those inaugurated by art-themed immersive exhibitions. He explains: "As the economic logic of the cultural industries imposes itself on art institutions, subsuming them into its cycles of reproduction (as the research and development sector of advertising and design), the question of what modes of attention and experience are specific to art, at any particular historical moment, finds itself enlivened once again by technology." (Osborne 2004)[13] What is important to emphasize is this: due in large part to changing media technologies, exhibitions such as the immersive Van Gogh experiences are no longer seen as a place to go to passively look at the materials on display, but rather to offer "a place to document experiences and share those adventures with followers through social media accounts." (Carlsson 2020).

It is no exaggeration to say that the omnipresence of digital devices and the pervasiveness of social media sharing have transformed how we see and experience the world.[14] Art-themed immersive exhibition experiences are no exception. Indeed, I will go so far as to propose that 21st-century art and spectatorship are now invariably informed by our 24/7 habitual attention, distraction, and sharing across various screens and social media platforms. What's more, this is true irrespective of the work's form and whether or not any particular viewer actually engages with a digital device during their visit. Phone-reliant viewing now verges on being normative even in "traditional" art museums such as the Van Gogh Museum and the Museum of Modern Art; the Van Gogh immersive experiences, however, take these phone-mediated experiences to a new level, deliberately designing a screen-based, social media-centric environment.[15] Farago's review of the multiple digital Van Gogh exhibitions in Manhattan pinpoints what is at stake: "Individual absorption, rather than shared wonder, is the order of the day now. From every vantage point you will fill your phone's backlit screen with glowing imagery." He adds, foreshadowing our discussion of selfies, "and there's more than enough space to crop out other visitors and frame only yourself." (Farago 2021).

Exhibition models such as these correspond to the demands of the so-called experience economy, in which companies are in the business of selling consumers memorable experiences, transcending the exchange of material goods. Rachel Monroe's assessment of how new technologies enter this equation is apt: "The ideal experience-economy offerings are engaging enough to distract us from our devices but also optimized to be shared on those devices." (Monroe 2019)[16] One may be dazzled by what appear to be teeming fields of sunflowers in a mirrored room, but the invitation to see oneself as the star of the screen-based show is unmistakable. Again, this is true even if one is not personally taking selfies or posting to social media, since the experience is dominated by those who are (and, indeed, the entire exhibition is designed around those interests).

With this conduct in mind, we might describe the mode of spectatorship engendered by the immersive Van Gogh exhibitions as a merger of the well-known experience economy mentioned by Monroe, in which businesses orchestrate and sell noteworthy experiences to their customers, and the more recent attention economy, in which, revenue is a function of continuous consumer attention.[17] In the attention economy, "the new scarcity is no longer to be situated on the side of material goods to be produced, but on the attention necessary to consume them." (Citton 2014) Simply put, from the perspective of an attention-based economy, the more time a consumer spends with a product, service, idea, or any other simulacrum of a brand, the better.[18] The digital Van Gogh shows exemplify an attention-experience economy partnership not only because they sell experiences in order to try to capture attention *within* each exhibition (by way of selfie spots, grand scale, visual and auditory effects, the development of a story that leads to a climax, and so on), but also because they need to compete among each other for consumer attention within the crowded marketplace of Van Gogh experiences and art-themed immersive exhibitions elsewhere[19].

The attention-experience economy is a helpful rubric to understand the logic of these immersive events, especially because the commercial success of these relentlessly for-profit

enterprises hinges upon inspiring consumer behavior with their digital devices. Armed with smart phones and habituated to constant sharing, audiences are enthusiastic to become part of the exhibition by documenting themselves within it, sometimes sharing their photos or videos online with others in conveniently interconnected digital content. In this way, visitors become micro-influencers and brand ambassadors. In practice, this means that any user-generated digital content considered strategically more valid can be selected by the immersive Van Gogh promotional media teams and made visible on their websites, which in turn co-creates value for the event sponsors.[20] While the dynamic of co-creating value via social media engagement is by no means unique to the immersive Van Gogh experiences, these shows in many ways typify institutional ambitions to generate digital engagement.[21]

The principal attraction of the immersive Van Gogh exhibitions for viewers, then, is hybrid and complex. It is a desire to engage in an immersive, embodied artistic encounter: a desire to be physically "in" the work, creating one's customized experience, as opposed to merely observing from afar. Moreover, and crucially, it is a desire underwritten by a 21st century interest in how that individualized experience might be represented or circulated online (whether or not one chooses to document it through social media). Having visited three versions of these exhibitions in person—*Van Gogh Alive* in London, *Beyond Van Gogh* in Portland, and *Immersive Van Gogh* in Los Angeles—I can confirm, at least anecdotally, that nearly everyone was using their phone camera at some point, and especially to take video footage of themselves and their friends within the event space. Judging from the phone panning motion, the favoring of video over still photography, and my informal interviews with visitors and employees, it seemed very clear that audience members understood the Van Gogh "experience" to involve their personalized involvement within a process-based total media environment, as opposed to a discrete or static work. User-generated images posted online further confirm this interpretation: they routinely foreground their individualized experiences within the multimedia environment over and above the Van Gogh-themed imagery or objects themselves.[22]

While some writers consistently decry the use of social media within art exhibition contexts, the tide seems to be shifting, and in ways significant to understanding the attraction of these immersive exhibitions. Selfies tend to receive the most attention in these debates. Scholars who champion the use of selfies typically deem it to be an empowering and democratizing practice that productively disrupts the alleged disciplinary function of art institutions. Chiara Piancatelli, Marta Massi, and Andrea Vocino, for example, contend that selfies empower "art consumers" to develop narratives and identity projects; this is especially significant, they argue, because "traditionally the development of the narrative is apanage of an elite." (Piancatelli et al. 2021)[23] E.B. Hunter's article in *Text and Performance Quarterly* makes a similar argument. "Museums perform institutional control over displayed objects through guards, vitrines, and motion sensing alarms that beep if visitors get too close, but museum selfie takers steal a little control back, using the presence of their bodies in the frame to commandeer the viewer's attention." (Hunter 2018) Hunter further theorizes the use of selfies as a means to satisfy viewers' desires to physically engage with works of art. He makes a convincing case that "Museum selfies are the twenty-first century version of touching the art—an outlet for museum visitors whose sensory access has been restricted to the visual by multiple protective barriers, but who still crave embodied engagement with artworks." (Hunter 2018)[24] As for Piancatelli, Massi, and Vocino, agency, haptic engagement, and embodied experience are central to Hunter's affirmative conception of interactive meaning making via selfies.

Although these critics focus on the role of selfies specifically in relation to art museums, their claims are equally persuasive in understanding the place of selfies and other forms of media documentation in the context of the immersive Van Gogh art experiences. As affirmed at this article's outset, getting as close as possible to the art-based images and objects on display seems to be a large part of the appeal. Crucially, however, it is also a key part of the promoters' sales pitches: we're prompted to "change how [we] engage with art"

(Van Gogh Alive Website 2022), and we're roused to make our fantasies come true: "Have you ever dreamt of stepping into a painting? Now you can!" (Van Gogh the Immersive Experience Website 2022). By rewarding social media habits and explicitly rejecting "elitist" art museum protocols, these immersive exhibitions allow viewers to literally see themselves within Van Gogh's art. While this is not necessarily problematic in its own right, it is important to dig deeper in understanding what this model of multisensory and highly emotional form of digital attention with Van Gogh-inspired media might reveal. As we will see in what follows, by facilitating multisensory immersion and digital documentation in straightforward, approachable, art-based environments, today's various digital Van Gogh shows seamlessly answer the demands of nonstop digital consumption in our attention-experience economy.

4. Mining Emotions and Hyper Attention

Given the exhibition organizers' objective of ensuring audience attention and engagement, the decision to showcase Vincent Van Gogh among all possible artists is far from coincidental. "We had an interest in Van Gogh's paintings because it's [*sic*] full of emotions . . . when you look at his tableaus, they're already immersive", explains Orphee Cataldo, artistic co-director of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* (Iacampo 2022). He goes on to consider how this impacts the exhibition's overall design, reflecting that "[h]e's done the work for you. You just have to expand it." (Iacampo 2022) The choice of Van Gogh is plainly linked not only to the immediate sensory appeal of the paintings' highly emotional form and content accentuated by Cataldo, but also to the heart-wrenching elements of the artist's well-known biography. Tellingly, the artist's severe depression and lamentably romanticized psychosis features conspicuously in each of the competing exhibitions. (*Immersive Van Gogh's* San Francisco presentation cheerfully invites: "Experience the organic landscapes of Van Gogh's imagination, and journey through his brilliance and madness." (Immersive Van Gogh Exhibition San Francisco Website 2022)) Van Gogh's status as a tragic spiritual visionary neatly guarantees the exhibitions' visitors emotional response, as advertised.

The commercial advantages of securing viewers' attention through their emotional connections to Van Gogh's life and work are many. A thought-provoking study in the *International Journal of Market Research* describes direct correlations among experience, emotion, and social media sharing. Their data suggest that the more participatory and emotional the art environment, the more people tend to share their feelings with others (Piancatelli et al. 2021). The study's authors explain it this way: "Emotions induced in the museum context lead to increased levels of engagement that, in turn, affect visitor behaviors. *The emotions–engagement–behavior relationship is particularly evident in contexts characterized by spectacular consumption*" (Piancatelli et al. 2021).[25] The relevance of their assessment for understanding the case of the Van Gogh immersive experiences, particularly the research team's clear-headed assessment of the commercial implications, is apparent. "The creation of a playful and engaging environment . . . encourages visitors to interact with the exhibition itself, pushing them to share their experience online and activating a co-creation of value" (Piancatelli et al. 2021). In other words, the more prominent the emotions, the higher the engagement; the higher the engagement, the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the marketing value. None of this is lost on the event producers. "The cool thing about the immersive world in general is that we are able to play with smell, taste, sight and all these other things that are sort of built in natural emotional triggers", remarks one of the exhibition designers (Baltin 2021). (And, a skeptic might point out that these "natural emotional triggers" make bank.)

That the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions are in the business of vending highly emotional, affective, art-based experiences is indisputable. That the exhibition organizers profit handsomely from viewers' earnest desires to get as close as possible to the art and emotions on display is equally evident. Even so, it is imperative not to lose sight of what they're *not* selling. They traffic not in material art objects made by Van Gogh, but in Van

Gogh-themed digital animated environments. *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience's* Iacampo, for one, deems the "digital transition" to be an asset in advancing ways of exploring art. "Digital media in itself is art because we're not just taking paintings and showing them—you know—as a picture. What we're doing is we're exploring each painting. We're animating each painting" (Miner and Spindler 2018). Iacampo's untroubled endorsement of digitizing and remixing Van Gogh's oeuvre is worth unpacking in light of our discussion of the attention-experience economy. Specifically, what might the exhibitions organizers' sidestepping of static material paintings in favor of large-scale, animated digital mash-ups reveal? What could this tell us about the particular mode of engagement these experiences promote and reward?

N. Katherine Hayles' analysis of changing attention patterns in higher education is instructive in this regard. Through a careful examination of classroom dynamics, Hayles proposes that we are living through a rapid and dramatic generational shift in attentional systems and cognitive modes. Teachers and their students are out of sync, in large part because the former tend to rely on habits of "deep attention", whereas the latter tend to favor habits of what Hayles calls "hyper attention". She explains: "Deep attention . . . is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times." Hyper attention, instead, "is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom." (Hayles 2007) It perhaps goes without saying that the Van Gogh immersive experiences epitomize a throughgoing endorsement of hyper attention in art as in everyday life.

Adopting Hayles' framework and terminology, we could interpret these art-themed exhibitions' unfettered enthusiasm for animation of all kinds—of paintings, of emotions, of multisensory experience, of user-generated video—to be symptomatic of a broader cultural turn. To cite just one example, we might recall that the much-discussed inaugural advertising campaign for Meta (formerly Facebook) also showcased a "creatively" animated digital rendition of a famously evocative painting. Like so many twinkling stars and swirling sunflowers, Henri Rousseau's celebrated *Fight Between a Tiger and a Buffalo* (1908) now moves and grooves, set to music and leaping from 2D to 3D. Analogous to the digital Van Gogh events, the would-be museum visitors depicted in Meta's "The Tiger and the Buffalo" ad are whisked out of the staid galleries and immersed into a famous painter's imaginary jungle-themed world.

On the topic of experiencing art in the age of hyper attention, it bears asking: do 21st century audiences now require immersion and animation to appreciate otherwise static, 2D paintings? And, if so, what does this mean for art spectatorship and its relationship with the attention-experience economy? From the perspective of art and attention, the question is not an idle one. The answer remains ambiguous, although we might make some educated guesses. Have our well-intentioned art institutions unwittingly evacuated emotion and pleasure? Have they failed to signal their accessibility and approachability to the extent that they are now forced to watch audiences meet their needs through commercialized, animated art-flavored spectacles, or even through staging similar shows or exhibition spaces themselves? Farago contemplates this issue in an especially thoughtful way. On his recent experience of viewing Van Gogh's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he muses: "you can stand as long as you like in front of Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, the agitated clouds rolling like waves, its climbing greenery edged with trembling blacks". He concludes with a heartfelt call to action: "I want everyone to discover, right there in the thick grooves of the oil paint, the wonder and vitality of art that needs no animation". "There has got to be a way to lead people back to that discovery", resolves Farago, "even if some of us take a selfie afterward" (Farago 2021).

If critics such as Farago maintain optimism for a renewed interest in sustained engagement with material works of art, theorists of the attention economy paint a more sobering picture. Sven Birkerts' ruminations on art and attention in the Internet age have special

meaning in this context. "The short version is that the world, its elements, its nouns, seems to have receded a bit, as has its intractability, the defining obstacles of time and space", he writes. Birkerts adds, wistfully, "It's almost as if world and screen were in inverse relation, the former fading as the latter keeps gaining in reach, in definition, in its power to compel our attention" (Birkerts 2015). In *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again*, Jonathan Hari describes how our focus has in effect been stolen, leaving us uniquely vulnerable to corporations determined to raid our attention for profit. Jonathan Crary, in his celebrated treatise *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, takes this line of critique even further, identifying the structural problems that undergird what Hari calls our technology-induced anxiety and lack of focus. Crary convincingly posits that the constant stress and 24/7 expectations of our contemporary "grind" culture may be even more impactful than digital devices and social media, while also being more challenging to identify. His diagnosis is chilling: "As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion" (Crary 2013). "An attention economy", he continues, "dissolves the separation between the personal and professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication that is inherently and inescapably 24/7" (Crary 2013). On Crary's unsparing read, the Van Gogh immersive experiences substantiate both corporate dominance and the imperative of non-stop productivity and communication: with their clarion calls to continually engage digital devices, these immersive art-themed spectacles mine consumers' emotions, integrating audiences more fully into corporatized productive routines, profiting all the while.

The exhibition producers, for their part, see it differently. While they don't go so far as to refute the fundamental commercial nature of their enterprises, they do contend that their experiences offer educational and even social value. Accessibility is a strong point. The producers of *Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience* estimate that about 50 percent of their audience has never set foot in a museum before coming to see their exhibition (Zaller 2022). The co-creators behind *Immersive Van Gogh*, the aptly-titled Impact Museums company, are more explicit about the perceived social relevance of their projects.[26] They characterize themselves as a "change company" and as "global influencers," devoted equally to entertaining spectacle and meaningful social exchange.[27] They describe the company's mission to *Forbes*, somewhat breathlessly, stating that:

> *Our vision for the business is to build experiences that tell those incredible stories where people feel inspired to share on their social media and become a part of the movement and feel less helpless and feel their individual actions can actually make a difference because they see all of the individuals they come through with, plus their hundreds or thousands of millions of followers engaging, and we become an amplifier for a movement*. (Baltin 2021)

Arts writers may cringe at the flamboyant digital remakes of Van Gogh's renowned brushstrokes and the bald-faced co-option of the artist's inner turmoil for revenue-generating emotional impact; theorists of the attention economy may despair at the unabashed management of individual attentiveness and activity in the service of a 24/7 digital marketplace; but, for production teams such as Impact Museums, reworking Van Gogh's life and paintings into easily digestible, art-themed multisensory presentations is just the beginning. The long-term influence of the consumerist, screen-based immersive attention they foster in art and in everyday life remain to be seen.

In summary, to critically assess the significance of the digital Van Gogh events that crowd our contemporary cultural landscape, art critics must move beyond the myopic focus on Van Gogh's original paintings and unfavorable comparisons to engaging with original works of art in a museum. Rather than critiquing the immersive Van Gogh shows for not being authentic—for their inability to replicate the experience of viewing Van Gogh paintings in person—I have proposed that these exhibitions represent a new form of immersive media spectatorship: they satisfy a desire to enter Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers, starry nights, and all the rest, in order to create (and perhaps document) one's

own customized digital experience with the work. I have further theorized how this 21st-century media art spectatorship reflects an alignment with the consumerist demands of the hybrid attention-experience economy and is buoyed by the ambitions of the profit-driven exhibition organizers. I have revealed how these interlocking dynamics merge seamlessly with visitors' desires for Insta-ready personalized experiences and contemporary habits of our so-called hyper attention. In the face of the meteoric rise of the immersive art-themed exhibition, it is urgent to develop a robust critical framework for assessing the model's current and impending influences. I hope that this article offers a first step in that direction.

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Notes

1 The titular character of Netflix's *Emily in Paris* visits a Van Gogh immersive exhibit in Episode 5 of Season 1.

2 "Edutainment" refers to programming that is meant to be both educational and entertaining. For a compelling examination of edutainment at the intersection of entertainment industry and arts institutions, see Balloffet et al. (2014).

3 The choice of Van Gogh isn't a mere coincidence. The Lume was created by Australia-based Grande Experiences, producers of the global sensation *Van Gogh Alive*.

4 Although the Van Gogh immersive exhibition phenomenon is global in scope, this article will focus primarily on sites in North America due to the current predominance of immersive exhibitions in that region.

5 After a hiatus of a few years, *Vincent Van Gogh, la nuit étoilée* (produced by Culturespaces, Gianfranco Iannuzzi, Renato Gatto and Massimiliano Siccardi) will return to L'Atelier des Lumières in August 2022.

6 The online promotional materials for Grande Experiences, producers of *Van Gogh Alive*, are representative of the digital Van Gogh production companies' enterprising approach. "If you're looking to host a touring immersive experience, establish a new semi-permanent, multi-sensory gallery in your venue, help reinvigorate the nightlife of your city or to establish an iconic, next-generation digital art gallery, please see the contact details at the bottom of this page." (Grande Experiences Website 2022).

7 *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette* (1885–86, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); *Bedroom in Arles* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam); Café Terrace at Night (1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands). The carwash *bon mot* is from Davis (2021).

8 See, for example, Christina Morales's article in the *New York Times*: "The immersive experiences are meant to complement the work displayed in a museum, not take away from it, according to [*Imagine Van Gogh's* Annabelle] Mauger and other producers of the exhibitions. They are particularly useful, they said, in introducing art to children, who, because of their height, may not see paintings well in crowded museums. It also replaces the often rigid museum etiquette, with its near silence and strictures intended to protect the artwork, with a looser atmosphere filled by music, lounging and chitchat." (Morales 2021).

9 For a cogent summary of the foundational media spectatorship theory debates, see Mayne (1993).

10 For a detailed account of histories of attention and perception in relationship to visual art, see, for example, Crary (2001) and Stafford (2007).

11 While Farago's immersive commercial exhibition historical references are definitely on point, it's worth noting that Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels predates both examples. See Mondloch (2004).

12 For more on Rist's exhibition, "Big Heartedness, Be My Neighbor", see the Museum of Contemporary Art website. Despite Knight's confident assertion that Rist's media installations are "the real thing", disambiguating the Van Gogh immersive exhibitions from the genre of media installation art is an exceptionally complicated task. I will take up this issue in a separate article. For now, we might well ponder Joseph Henry's prophecy: "Pity the virtuous intentions of today's serious media-installation artist" (Henry 2021).

13 The profoundly influential concept of the culture industry, which proposes that the increasing commodification of culture in modern capitalist society has transformed culture itself into a crucial medium of ideological domination, was first introduced by Horkheimer and Adorno (1944). Following these thinkers, many of the foremost cultural critics of the twentieth century have convincingly argued that we must be ever vigilant against the uncritical embrace of the popular and the new, particularly insofar as they are bound up with the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno), commodified spectacle (Debord 1995), and the seeming insatiable quest for the "experience of experience" itself, in relationship the experience-hungry contemporary art museum especially (Krauss 1990).

14 On how the emergence of social media has changed how individuals interact and engage with their surroundings, see Campbell et al. (2014). On the topic of how visitors engaging with social media tend to experience art viewing as an immersive and interactive experience, see Brown et al. (2011).

15 Farago (2019) offers an evocative consideration of painting spectatorship in the 21st century through a case study of Van Gogh.

[16] While Monroe's piece is devoted to the activities of the arts and entertainment company MeowWolf, there are significant parallels between these art-based commercial ventures in terms of the attention-experience economy.

[17] For an influential definition of the experience economy, see Pine and Gilmore (1999). On the attention economy, see, for example, (Citton 2014; Franck 2019; Goldhaber 1997).

[18] For a prescient look at how offering entertaining content and a robust experience has become imperative in the race to capture the public's attention (otherwise known as the "e" or entertainment factor), see Wolf (1999).

[19] Counts (2009) identifies four categories of technique associated with the design of spectacular exhibition offerings: dramatic effects (e.g., sound and light); plot mainly through the development of a story that builds to a climax; grand scale (e.g., the use of IMAX or giant screens); and authenticity (i.e., credibility of the effects used).

[20] Piancatelli, Massi, and Vocino succinctly summarize the critical discourse on social media value co-creation as consumer labor: "while most authors have adopted a positive stance on value co-creation, emphasizing its advantages and benefits, others . . . [such as Zwick et al. (2008), Cova et al. (2011)] argue that co-creation equates to exploitation of consumers because they are not rewarded for participating in the value creation practices".

[21] Note that the exhibition organizers actively solicit social media influencers to promote their brands. The "Calling all influencers!" page on *Immersive Van Gogh's* website is exemplary.

[22] See, for example, the social media feeds shared to the exhibitions' websites. For a representative example of user-generated video documentation, see Hanuska (2020).

[23] The researchers further propose that selfies, beyond merely co-creating value for the exhibition organizers, demonstrate a sort of iconic authenticity, in which each viewing experience is understood to be *iconically* (if not *indexically*) authentic to each visitor. They observe that selfies and their iconic authenticity of viewer experience, in a seeming paradox, may resuscitate the idea of artistic aura.

[24] The author points out that touch was understood as central to a visitor's encounter with an artwork well into the nineteenth century. For an historical account, see Candlin (2010).

[25] My emphasis.

[26] Impact Museums was founded by Josh Jacobs, Vito Iaia, Mark Shedletsky, and Diana Rayzman. Their *Immersive Van Gogh* exhibition was co-created with Lighthouse Immersive.

[27] The Impact Museums team outlines the inspiration behind their hybrid entertainment-social action method this way: "We have always sort of talked about the idea that it's hard to get people to take their medicine when it comes to serious topics . . . you need to begin by entertaining and that in order to reach a mass audience you need to be an entertainment medium; but in the process of entertaining you can educate and then inspire, so these can be sort of foundational change vehicles that take people through that entire gamut." [If] "you can do that on a kind of global scale, where you're reaching millions of people you really do have the ability to start aspiring to not just be an entertainment company, but be a change company." (Baltin 2021).

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Augmented Reality and the Dematerialization of Experiential Art

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Abstract: One of the most compelling effects of digitally enhanced and digitally enabled immersive exhibitions is their paradoxical dematerialization of "analog" experience. What leads exhibition visitors to accept that immersion is a state achieved only through technological mediation? Are we not already perceptually immersed in the world, as the phenomenologists asserted? This essay explores how digital enhancement disengages self-awareness by masquerading as immersion. In contrast, contemporary artists Karin Sander, Janet Cardiff, and Chris Salter employ desynchronizing and dislocating tactics to challenge naïve notions of what comprises an aesthetic experience, in order to requaint viewers with their own perceptual and ethical agency.

Keywords: perception; spectacle; dematerialization; sensorium; phenomenology; immersion

1. Introduction: The New White Cube

Augmented reality. It is a curious phrase, implying a capacity to take the measure of reality and top it up, like a cup of coffee "augmented" with a spoonful of sugar, but only if we also existed within that cup of coffee, immersing ourselves in it. Or, perhaps it is more apt to think of ourselves as now living in our computers, even as though we are our computers, whose experiences are constantly updated, augmented, and extended, not only by new technologies themselves but, through them, by experiences or content produced by others. What rich and diverse lives we can lead![1] This technologically determined self-image is hardly far-fetched, or even very new. Indeed, for decades we have adopted, adapted, and internalized such a computational, or cybernetic, metaphor, in the process recognizing communications technologies as extensions of humankind and, reciprocally, that human experience is in some sense programmable (Wiener 1948; McLuhan 1964). These compelling, if problematic, models have contributed to significant advancements in military planning, goods distribution, neuroscience, as well as arts and humanities research. But somewhere along the way we inverted and internalized them, digitizing our selves—or self-images masquerading as selves—in the process (Fedorova 2020).[2] If technological advancements in the 1960s contributed to a dematerialization of the art *object* (Lippard and Chandler 1968), today's art *subject* is dematerializing into an atemporal and perpetually displaced representation of itself[3]. By isolating visual phenomena from the circumstances in which they arise and replicating them in decontextualized and decontextualizing virtual space, artists and technicians working in the new experience economy can achieve an all-too-effective simulacrum of formalist aesthetics—an ersatz presentness in lieu of presence, realism posturing as reality.

Some may note that this problem dates to at least the Renaissance, when artists applied perspectival geometry to produce what Anne Friedberg describes as a "virtual window" on the world (Friedberg 2007). But commercial spectacles like "Van Gogh Exhibition: The Immersive Experience" now employ augmentative technologies and advanced graphics to enable an illusion of stepping through the frame and occupying the visualized space so depicted.[4] What is missing, even repressed, is a critical awareness of the phenomenology of such an experience, including how one's perceptual faculties are engaged to effect meaning and, therefore, how one's individual analog reality might differ from that of another. Again,

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these are not new questions. But mid-twentieth-century debates about sculpture, when "pure form became pure experience", in the words of Jack Burnham, are instructive for a new generation of artists now grappling with similar concerns and pushing back against the dematerializing effects of the experience economy.

Sixty years ago, technophilia promoted the novelties of connection over an embodied understanding of aesthetic experience and in the process produced a hyper-visualized yet predominantly passive viewership.[5] Art historian Kris Paulsen rightly challenges the "strong tendency in media theory and media art to stress the radical 'newness' of contemporary technologies and effects", in light of the fact that artists and engineers employing cutting edge technologies such as closed-circuit television and analog video recordings as early as the 1960s "foreshadowed the ethical and phenomenological effects of today's networked actions" (Paulsen 2017). But this effect cannot simply be ascribed to technological advancements in visualization, which evolved in concert with the ocularcentric aesthetics of twentieth-century formalism that also privileged spectatorship over presence (Jay 1988).[6] "Who is this Spectator, also called the Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver?" He (very much "he" when Brian O'Doherty wrote this in 1976) is a curiously passive creature, "a dark-adapted wanderer", "the vivant in a tableau" (O'Doherty [1976] 1986). The description befits a resurrected phantom Spectator, one now occupying the "immersive art" environments of today and somehow still standing in for us all. Collectively, we have produced a new white cube, one even less obtrusive and much more capacious than the idealized space O'Doherty describes, capable of housing everything from NFTs to "Jurassic World". Filled to the brim with content but stripped of context, this is a "reality" that fairly begs for augmentation. But popular transhumanist dreams of singularities and mind uploading notwithstanding, we cannot evade the underlying physicality of the world and our experiences in it, though we can and do persist in disregarding these facts at a cost to self-awareness and, by extension, to our relationships with others.[7]

Historians of technology have long established how modernization came to be defined through devices that modulate visual perception, shifting control away from the viewer-user to the device through which content is communicated (Crary 1990, 1999; Weibel 2007). A sensory hierarchy, one that privileges sight, is evident in the way we continue to shorthand studio art-making, including sculptural and interactive art practices, as the "visual arts" (as distinct from music's aurality, for example). Arts practices that combine sensory modalities become the exceptions that prove the rule when we describe them as "interdisciplinary", implicitly reinforcing disciplinary primacy (Jones 2005). To date, virtual (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies remain overwhelmingly visual in nature, in keeping with entrenched pictorial practices that conflate aesthetic experience with spectatorship (Halpern 2014). Perhaps the most compelling evidence of AR's dematerializing effects is that, having uncoupled visual attention from bodily awareness and dimension from location, developers are now working to supplement this illusory or virtual form of reality with artificial re-incarnation or "a realistic sense of presence" (Oculus 2021). Not presence, mind you, but a "sense of it". Put another way: "In a seemingly slightly desperate attempt to integrate its users' bodies into its simulations, VR has been recast to create a believable sense of bodily presence and that *ironically can only be achieved in the virtual world by artificial perceptual machinery*: sensors, high-resolution displays, and computers processing millions of high-polygon graphics" (Salter 2022)[8]. The presence phenomena still excluded from this equation are not potential add-ons, but the (problematically unquantifiable and messy) fundamentals of practical knowledge and human connection that are repressed in favor of producing more visual content. Our fascination with these seemingly elusive phenomena, writes critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "is based on a longing for presence that in the contemporary context can only be satisfied in conditions of extreme temporal fragmentation" (Gumbrecht 2004). In an era of synchronous uniformity, exacerbated by a pandemic-induced retreat to our screens, his words resonate. But presence, in its latency, cannot and need not be manufactured; it only wants coaxing, to be prodded into conscious-

ness from the asynchronous, dislocating perceptual borderlands where virtual reality and reality (or "life") coalesce.

In this essay, I explore the work of three contemporary artists whose work foregrounds the constitutive role of presence to aesthetic experience. Each artist takes as a given that experience is—still—produced by (physical, fragile) bodies in (actual, temporally bound) space. All exploit the paradoxically unsettling potential of perceiving ourselves perceiving, that is, experiencing ourselves *as* bodies rather than through our bodies. In practice, this intentional experience, as the phenomenologists describe it, involves scrutinizing a given situation and making an experience of it, rather than the obverse (Husserl [1913] 2012). *An* experience, writes Dewey, is not passive: "We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take* in" (Dewey 1934).[9] In this phenomenological sense, the aesthetic realm is one of openness to the world and to others, "a question mark opposite the *solipsist* sphere" (Merleau-Ponty 1968).[10] Not one of these artists—Karin Sander, Janet Cardiff, and Chris Salter—is a luddite; indeed, each has made their mark by embracing and employing new technologies as a means of heightening perceptual self-consciousness, facilitating feedback, and promoting understanding. Most notably for the present context, their work interrogates the habits and conventions that might lead viewer-participants to conclude uncritically that virtual immersive states are somehow materially different from or offer more than bare "reality". While certain "augmentations" masquerade as presence by disengaging self-awareness, Sander, Cardiff, and Salter employ AR and VR devices so as to challenge naïve notions of aesthetic experience as mere visual enhancement. In so doing, they reacquaint art audiences with their own perceptual and ethical agency.

2. Visibility and Presence: Karin Sander

> *"Art allows you to understand something non-verbally because you can place what you see in a context that you yourself create".*
>
> —Karin Sander (2002)

Since 1986, Berlin-born Karin Sander has been burnishing painted gallery walls to an almost obsessive degree and making art of it. The resultant glassy-smooth surfaces have to some extent become signature pieces, epitomizing an elegant simplicity that characterizes Sander's work both visually and conceptually. On occasion, Sander has polished an entire gallery but more often she simply demarcates a portion of the white wall, preparing it as one would for a small mural or fresco and then buffs it to a reflective gleam.[11] One such work, a glossy rectangle measuring 180 × 140 cm, was included in a 2021 exhibition at Copenhagen Contemporary and shown alongside works by an earlier generation of Light and Space artists, most of whom contributed to an etherealizing turn in the phenomenology of American minimal sculpture predominant in and around Los Angeles.[12] The formal relationship of the wall piece to works by the Californians is readily evident, as with Mary Corse's white paintings, which variously reflect, refract, and emit light, or Helen Pashgian's translucent resin sculptures that are polished to evanescence, at once revealing and containing their reflected circumstances. These works do not reproduce well as images, despite their seductive appeal: you simply have to be there (Schuld 2022). Likewise, Sander's wall pieces do not command attention; they elicit it on the sly, in a glint, a reflection, or even in a glimpse of one's own likeness. In this context, the perceptual immediacy of one's encounter with Sander's work was foregrounded by its historical resonance (Clark 2011).

There was an added poignancy to this particular iteration of Sander's wall piece: opening in late 2021, in the wake of worldwide lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition became a reunion of sorts—for the gallery with its public, for visitors with one another, and for spectators with themselves as perceiving bodies, newly released from the incorporeal confines of FaceTime and Zoom. "Being there" was an imperative but it was also an occasion for renewal. What visitors encountered was not the world of Light and Space as historical phenomena but a rediscovered world of quotidian perceptual marvels.

At around the same time, in June 2022, a retrospective of Sander's work opened at the Esther Schipper Gallery in Berlin. Directly and indirectly, the exhibition addressed the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on art viewership that included travel restrictions, a learned aversion to physical copresence for fear of contagion, and the corresponding relegation of social encounters to online platforms where experience was digitally re-formatted.[13] In these circumstances, Sander had the artworks from twenty-two previous exhibitions carefully packed in their transport crates along with corresponding materials lists and installation instructions, labelled, and shipped to the gallery, where they were arranged, unpacked, like minimal sculptures throughout the space. To "see" the works encased in their containers, visitors employed hand-held viewing devices through which they could virtually encounter the work as it had been exhibited elsewhere. Entitled "What You See is Not What You Get (22 Exhibitions)", the presentation generated a contradictory tension between seeing the work and being there (Figure 1). One could *either* encounter the work in its present-but-hidden state *or* view the work as seen elsewhere at another time. The reunion of visibility and presence that marked the Copenhagen exhibition remained emphatically unavailable to visitors in Berlin.

"We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace". So wrote Michael Fried in 1967, in an effort to distinguish two types of experience: aesthetic and commonplace, or absorptive and theatrical. In so doing, he was critiquing the obdurate empiricism of minimal art, which valued art's actuality over its virtuality, or its atemporal potential. As others have noted, the various meanings of "virtual" are often contradictory. Its meaning here as "potential" predates interpretations of it as meaning "identical" (Paulsen 2017). Minimal art was and is actualized in the here and now, whereas technological innovations provide the means to be "both here and there", further complicating what we ascertain as the given features of the work of art (Ascott 1991). Sander, an attentive student of art history, clearly references the aesthetic and the language of the artists Fried described (or dismissed) as "literalists": "[The] apparent hollowness of most literalist work—the quality of having an *inside*—is almost blatantly anthropomorphic. It is ... as though the work in question has an inner, even secret, life" (Fried 1967). By presenting her own artworks simultaneously *in* their shipping crates and *as* shipping crates, Sander similarly hints at the art object's hidden life. In this, the crates bring to mind the minimalist cubes of artists like Tony Smith, who averred: "I don't think of them as sculptures but as presences of a sort" (Fried 1967). Blocking visual access to the work paradoxically heightened one's awareness of its physical existence in the present, while the VR goggles projected its dematerialized past. The exhibition title, "What You See is Not What You Get", is not only a riff on Frank Stella's pithy axiom, "What you see is what you see" (Glaser 1966), but is exhibited in a font that calls to mind Christopher Wool's "word paintings". The stenciled lettering (in Sander's work and in Wool's) evokes shipping labels, like those stamped on the transport crates, reinforcing a semiotic feedback loop from cargo to artwork to cargo. Wool's conceptual influence is also evident in the axiomatic nature of the title, particularly a painting from 2000, "THE HARDER YOU LOOK THE HARDER YOU LOOK". Wool's tautology is also a nod to Stella, but substitutes the minimalist claim for factuality with one of futility: if seeing is knowing, looking becomes an act of perpetual estrangement between the object/word and the viewing/reading subject (Brinson 2013).

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**) Karin Sander, "What You see is Not What You Get (22 Exhibitions)". Image: © Karin Sander, büro uebele. (**b**) Exhibition view: Karin Sander, "What You See is Not What You Get (22 Exhibitions)". Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin, 2022. © Karin Sander/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023. Photo © Andrea Rossetti.

This sense of estrangement arose in concert with one's awareness that the transport crates were not the only inscrutable presences in the gallery. With their faces hidden behind hand-held VR glasses, viewers disengaged from their physical circumstances, their attention directed towards a dematerialized elsewhere. Photos of visitors to the exhibition show individuals aiming their devices and bodies at blank walls or seemingly nowhere at all. The technology not only isolates the visual modality from other sensory information (in this case, virtual reality is purely visual, albeit with the added illusion of dimensionality), but also the person, whose experience is no longer shared with others in the gallery. Indeed, visitors could be "attending" up to twenty-two different exhibitions while nonetheless occupying the same physical place.

Friedrich Meschede notes that Sander's work since the late 1990s has a "new narrative quality", one that challenges and complicates the earlier work's emphasis on immediacy by showing how history is both bodied in the work of art and iteratively embodied by the perceiver (Meschede 2002). If the Copenhagen Light and Space exhibition invoked a Zen-like imperative to "be here now", the de-synchronizing maneuvers of the Berlin exhibition offered visitors irreconcilable iterations of "here" and "now". Sander's explicit separation of visibility from physicality at the same time cleaves past from present: simultaneity does not produce synchronicity. And if Copenhagen proffered a joyous reunion, Berlin pointed to the states of disunion that we often assume in order to have our experiences visually mediated and augmented. What separates her work from earlier environmental art and from the immersive spectacles of the 2020s is Sander's insistence on foregrounding the price of engagement.

3. Localization and Dislocation: Janet Cardiff

> *"I started these recordings as a way to remember, to make life seem more real. I can't explain it".*
>
> *—narrator, "The Missing Voice (case study b)"* (Cardiff 1999)

In 1980, the Sony Walkman freed music lovers to take their personal soundtracks with them and released an urban public from the impositions of the boom box. The device encapsulated the listener in her own audio sphere, her body navigating a physical environment augmented by the self-selected (or "curated") soundtrack she carried in her head. The "walkman effect", wrote Shuhei Hosokawa, is one of dislocated or "de-territorialized" listening "It intends that every sort of familiar soundscape is transformed by that singular acoustic experience coordinated by the user's own ongoing pedestrian act, which induces an autonomous 'head space' between his Self and his surroundings in order to distance itself from—not familiarise itself with—both of them" (Hosokawa 1984). In the crowd but not a part of it, the walkman wearer signals her autonomy and, in so doing, asserts the plural nature of an urban populace comprising countless individuals walking about to the tune of their own private hisories and fantasies. Unlike VR headsets that forestall engagement with others, headphones enable what Hosokawa describes as "secret theater": though the music or recording is unheard by others, its expressivity is evident in the affect of the wearer, in her facial expressions, and in the nature and cadence of her walk

In 1999, visitors to the Whitechapel Library in London could check out such a device (updated to a Discman) to listen to a 50-min "audio walk" to Liverpool Train Station, narrated by artist Janet Cardiff.[14] "The Missing Voice (case study b)", commissioned by British arts collective Artangel in 1999, introduces a fractured plot featuring a female character, "Janet", voiced by Cardiff, who picks up a mystery novel from the library shelf, only to get caught up in a dramatic plot of her own making. The tenor of her descriptions and the whispered warnings of a mysterious male figure, interwoven with a British detective's confused account, all evoke the suspenseful cadence of film noir. The audio was recorded binaurally, using two microphones spaced apart like ears, with the effect that the voice of "Janet"/Cardiff takes up residence inside the head of the walker-

listener in an eerily convincing manner, more immediately so than virtual imagery, which appears externally to the viewer's body. Importantly, the recording was made on site rather than produced in a studio, so that auditory incidentals, such as a bus pulling away or a conversation in Bengali, place it in the same streetscape as the walker-listener. The work is therefore doubly localized—internally, in the head of the speaker, and externally, in the environs of Whitechapel—while also doubly dislocating—in its personal nature as "secret theater" and in its multi-layered temporality.

Synchrony is the affective suture that lends the experience coherence, but it is also the agent of its unraveling. Unlike, say, the work of British artist Richard Long, whose "walking sculptures" bore the imprimatur of his presence, however lightly, on the landscape itself, Cardiff's walking sculpture imprints on the walker. The technology introduces an uncanny spatial dimension disturbingly different to the stereo recordings that constitute everyday personal soundtracks. The effects of binaural recording are introjective: because the technology localizes the voices we hear inside our heads, we internalize them, confusing them with our own real-time thoughts and perceptions. "Try to follow the sound of my footsteps" says the narrator, an impossible directive, apart from matching her tempo and following in the musical sense. More practically, she also provides cursory directions, citing street names and landmarks as navigational cues. But while the walk may have a fixed destination and duration, it is also open-ended, accommodating past and subsequent iterations and associations.

The neighborhood surrounding the library reverberates with personal and shared histories and diverse cultural associations. This was a particular challenge to Cardiff: how to incorporate these layers of prior experience without obviating the rich phenomenology of the present, indeed, to lend them presence. As she put it in a 2005 interview regarding her preparation for a similar "walk" in Washington, D.C., "I was fascinated by the layering of the past onto the present. It had a strange quality of creating a new world, blending together the physical and the virtual" (Gordon 2005). Historically, Whitechapel was a primarily working class community, characterized by ethnic and economic transience. Following the route laid out in the recording, the walker is accompanied by an auditory palimpsest of footsteps and voices—some actual, some recorded, some immediate, some distant—that evokes the London of Eliot's Unreal City (The Waste Land, Eliot 1922), replete with dead and living souls from the ancient to the recent past. At one point, the narrator quotes from Defoe's account of the plague year 1665, conjuring "hearses and coffins in the air" still hovering, however faintly, among the cars and the street vendors (Cardiff 1999). Whitechapel is also the neighborhood where Jack the Ripper found his victims amongst the local street walkers in the autumn of 1888. The audio walk takes place in and around the scene of these crimes but references them only indirectly: through the fictional narrative of a woman in some distress, and through intermittent accounts from a police officer who seems to be retracing her steps, picking up clues in the recording that in these moments loops in on itself. Cardiff acknowledges that the main character's nervousness echoes her own sense of paranoia as part of adjusting to life as a woman on her own in a strange city (Cardiff 1999). The paranoid state, exacerbated by the ambiguity and pacing of the narrative, is itself a secret theater with real-life effects: it defines the presence of others as threatening or reassuring, unbeknownst to them. This sense of vulnerability is only heightened when the narration ends and listeners are asked to return the device to the library, this time unaccompanied by their guide and left to their own thoughts and fears.

In later audio walks, Cardiff and her partner George Bures-Miller have combined the binaural audio with visual recordings, some of which appear to be recorded personal ephemera, while others include snippets from a noir film. If the audio is introjective, the introduction of a portable screen (at first via iPods and now smart phones) is projective, directing attention from the here and now to recorded images of an event occurring there and then. Twenty years on, visitors can still check out a recording for "The Missing Voice" to retrace Cardiff's steps and those of other walkers across the years. The mise-en-scène has changed and some of the landmarks are now gone, but this only increases the

walker's awareness of the precarious relationships of story to place and place to memory. As Christine Ross has noted, the act of walking is itself affectively historicizing (Ross 2013). Neither a novelty nor a historical artifact, the work retains its contemporaneity but it is not timeless. Retracing the walk now is not only an affirmation of the past but an acknowledgement of change, as one incorporates the steps of prior selves into a continuously unfolding narrative.

4. Sensorium: Chris Salter

"I'm forever pulled between the tensions of immersion and artifice".

Chris Salter (2015)

In his work and writings, Salter explores experiential gaps between a persistent anthropocentric naïve realism—what we as individuals think we know of the world, presuming it to be universally applicable—and an emerging awareness of the world's alien vitality. A self-described "artist-researcher", Salter's form of "gonzo ethnography" is fundamentally hybrid, exploring the sensory mesh that unites human and nonhuman, mind and body, visual and nonvisual, observation and participation, technology and nature, science and art (Salter 2015). Defamiliarizing rather than dematerializing, *Displace* (Figure 2) exemplifies a type of exploratory new media art practice that produces "an amplified, connected, expanded but also disequilibrated corporeality—a new sensorium" (Jones 2006). The project was developed in collaboration with sensory anthropologist David Howes and artists and researchers from the Hexagram network based in Montréal, including audiovisual artist TeZ (Maurizio Martinucci), "aroma jockey" Jorg Hempenius, human–computer interaction artist Harry Smoak, "eco-gastronomist" David Szanto, and art historian Caro Verbeek. They set out to interrogate the nature and meaning of sensory perception as the crux of social and anthropological understanding and, in so doing, undermine a "bureaucratized" aesthetic that isolates one sense from another and one viewer from another (Jones 2005). Yet de-bureaucratizing is also de-stabilizing, and Salter's account of the making of *Displace* and the group's findings exposes gaps between the desire for the illusions of immersion and the anarchic potential of art-making.

Unlike Sander's and Cardiff's projects, which originated within art institutions and so challenge those boundaries, *Displace* is a "research-creation project" that has origins in but exceeds the research laboratory. Its participants are "human-subjects" whose involvement is regulated by a university Research Ethics Board, and the first public iteration of *Displace* in 2011 was at an anthropology conference rather than a museum (Salter 2015; Bertolotti 2013). Participants lay down on a shared platform in a relaxed but vulnerable state, akin to the anxious passivity we might assume in medical situations. The clinical ambiance was not merely coincidental, but reinforced by the presence of attendants monitoring the proceedings and, later, conducting interviews. As events progressed, passivity merged into receptivity and visitors "took in" the situation in a profoundly literal manner, especially after the performer-attendants circulated, offering hexagonal jellies of varying flavors to taste. The longer they remained, the more the sensory inputs intensified: the lights changed color and flickered, sounds rumbled into noise, the platform shook. Sensations intermingled, becoming confused and confusing, even agitating.

Figure 2. Chris Salter, TeZ, David Howes, Jorg Hempenius, Harry Smoak, David Szanto, and Caro Verbeek, *Displace 2.0*, 2012.

Salter's descriptions of the collaborative process—the false starts, bureaucratic setbacks, and doubts—that culminated in the first iterations of *Displace* are reminiscent of a series of now (in)famous experiments conducted by Robert Irwin and James Turrell in the late 1960s alongside psychologist Ed Wortz, as part of the Los Angeles County Museum's Art & Technology program. Subjecting themselves and others to various sensory deprivation experiments, Irwin and Turrell were interested in learning how to "tune" experience as a means of fostering perceptual awareness. The most elaborate of their proposed projects (none of which were realized at the time) would have been intensely discomfiting, as it involved a sensory deprivation "cleanse" followed "sub-threshold light flashes and sound flashes", gradually increasing to "a point between hallucination and reality" (Livingston 1971).

This historical detour is instructive in the current context for several reasons: for the overt similarities and because of Irwin's and Turrell's influence on Salter's practice, but primarily because of the way the earlier project redefined artistic subjectivity as embodied and experimental. The Art & Technology group explored and combined extra-visual and synaesthetic perceptual phenomena, and their interest in "sub-threshold" stimuli corresponds to Salter's interest in "just noticeable differences" between what is and is not perceived at a conscious level (Salter 2018). In an interview with Douglas Davis, Irwin explained the significance of such experimentation to artistic development:

> It is my contention that modern art has been principally involved for twenty years in a disengagement from literate thinking, to place an emphasis on sensate awareness . . . We, in our project, started talking about developing spaces that are not going to tell you anything or lead you to anything or interpret anything for you, but are going to lead you into a situation where you are pretty much the *actor*. (Davis 1973)[15]

Irwin's use of the second person singular matters, as he is advocating for aesthetic agency and not just aesthetic effects. But these experiments were also isolating in the extreme,

focusing on an individual subject with whom the reader and/or participant is meant to implicitly identify. Despite Irwin's shift from "literate" modernism to a more literal modernity, he is a modernist nonetheless, substituting pure vision with pure experience.[16] Irwin's models, after all, are Mondrian and Malevich, who sought to reduce aesthetic experience to its essence—a "desert of pure feeling" (Weschler 2008).

This is where Salter and company differ significantly from Irwin, Turrell, and other "environmental" artists of their generation, even as they share an interest in promoting perceptual enactment. Irwin had trained as a visual artist but Salter's background is in theater, and he describes his role in producing *Displace* as dramaturgy. The goal was not to distill experience to its purest form (if such a thing is at all possible), but to emphasize its unsettling plurality—not sensory essences but "sensory otherness" (Salter 2015). Howes's involvement in the project is informative: a "sensory anthropologist", he explores how the senses are mediated by and through culture and modified socially. Rejecting the reductionism of Western experimental psychology, sensory studies "treats the senses and sensations as both object of study and means of inquiry" (Howes 2022). The sensory inputs introduced to the *Displace* environment derive from seemingly arbitrary and wide-ranging sources: Desana accounts of ayahuasca-induced visions, Thoreau walking in the woods, a Japanese tea ceremony. The ambition of the project was almost boundless, but its technical limitations were not. Anthropological accounts from the remote past and from distant cultures provided source material that was then translated into sensory stimuli by various artificial means—a color, a flavor, a sound. But the process of translating further displaced the sense experience from a localized, cultural specificity to a synthetic referent, one with sensory impact but dissociating rather than tokenizing. No wonder participants were discombobulated. More than once, Salter describes someone likening the work to a simulated drug trip, perhaps as a means of grappling with the work's strange and estranging effects.

More than anything, the work calls into question the hubristic presumption that we can know what someone else is experiencing, let alone prescribe that experience. In their recorded responses it is evident that participants were not experiencing some sort of empathetic experience with Thoreau or the Desana people; rather, they were confronted with the *limits* of sensory empathy. As Salter recounts: "This is *Displace* for me as a threshold, as a process of destabilizing sense and habit, of problematizing the localization of sense and perception and, with it, the very notion that culture contains fixed senses and a fixed sensing subject" (Salter 2015).

Salter and Howes's methodology brings to mind a popular description of people who came of age in the 2000s as "digital natives", which frames life online as a distinct culture and the experience of its users in anthropological terms. Since the 1960s, the lives of well-off individuals living in late capitalist societies have been increasingly mediated through communications technology, to such an extent that lived reality *is* virtual reality—the simulacrum has become the thing itself. In its emphasis on experiential differentiation (as opposed to essentializing cultural differences) sensory anthropology offers a means for evaluating this sensorily disadvantaged "culture" alongside that of other societies, as a means of returning us to our embodied selves.

5. Conclusions

However much we may choose to enhance it, human experience remains a stubbornly analog enterprise, requiring cognizant subjects for its realization. Coupling "immersive" with "experience" implies that experience is generally something other than immersive. Perhaps that is so, if we think of immersion as a form of intense engagement, when we are wrapped up in reading a book perhaps, or in the thralls of a new love. In both of these instances, however, we are the agents of our own immersion, in phenomenological terms consciously bracketing out the rest of the world in favor of the object of interest or desire. One of the pitfalls of spectacular "immersive experience" is that it simulates empathy while foreclosing on the incongruities, bewilderment, and humility that seek understanding.

The fact that we distinguish between "experience" and "immersive experience", "reality" and "virtual reality" is in itself illuminating and points to an extraordinarily stubborn Cartesianism that delimits aesthetic practices as epiphenomenal.

The artistic practices discussed here offer a path out of this cycle by asking visitors to invest themselves—their bodies and their time—in the production of experience rather than its consumption. As Caroline Jones notes, a more situational aesthetic outlook gives us options: "Aesthetic contemplation buys us time and space. Aesthetic practices locate how bodies are interacting with technologies at the present moment, and provide a site for questioning those locations" (Jones 2006). Maybe it is all too easy to mistake escapism for immersion, but when we seek to "augment" experience, it is worth taking a moment to consider how our experiences became so impoverished in the first place. Where and when did we leave our perceptual agency behind? Art that prods us into a state of self-awareness has an important side effect: it also prompts awareness that the experiences of *others* are similar but sovereign, deserving of our interest and respect. I do not know whether presentness is grace, but presence gives us pause. That is a start.

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Notes

1 Meta's "Presence Platform", for example, "a broad range of machine perception and AI capabilities—including Passthrough, Spatial Anchors, and Scene Understanding", is described as providing "you" an opportunity to "build more realistic mixed reality" (Oculus 2021).

2 As Fedorovoa explains: "A 'picture' of oneself generated through biofeedback is different from a mirror image and other forms of self-perception. The performances of the body, happening beyond the threshold of one's cognitive control, represent a type of cognition of their own".

3 For Lippard and Chandler, an art object was still seen as the likely end product of artistic ideating, though they noted that in 1968 it was already on the verge of becoming obsolete (Lippard and Chandler 1968).

4 See also: Kate Mondloch, "The Influencers: Van Gogh Immersive Experiences and the Attention-Experience Economy", in this issue.

5 As David Joselit points out, this is reflected in how the discipline of art history, with its emphasis on artists' lives and the objects they produce, has morphed into visual culture, with its focus on the viewer/consumer: "This emphasis on technologies of vision has helped to consolidate lively studies of specatorship in which meaning is associated as much with the consumption as with the production of aesthetic works" (Joselit 2010).

6 For an account of how ocularcentrism has "co-evolved" in humans and their machines, see (Hayles 2012).

7 Here I refer to popular futurist theories of artificial intelligence that invert the methodologies of computational neuroscience to conflate self with mind, and knowledge with information (Kurzweil 2006), and even anticipate "liberty from death via digital immortality". (Rothblatt 2014; Kurzweil 2006).

8 Emphasis in original.

9 See notes 8 above.

10 See notes 8 above.

11 "Projects 46: Karin Sander", Museum of Modern Art, 26 April–6 June 1994: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3079, accessed on 28 August 2022.

12 *Light and Space*, Copenhagen Contemporary, 3 December 2021–4 September 2022: https://copenhagencontemporary.org/en/light-space/ (accessed on 2 September 2022).

13 Karin Sander, "What You See is Not What You Get" (22 Exhibitions), 10 June–16 July 2022, Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin. https://www.estherschipper.com/exhibitions/1022-what-you-see-is-not-what-you-get-karin-sander/introduction/ (accessed on 28 August 2022).

14 https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/the-missing-voice-case-study-b/ (accessed on 2 December 2022).

15 See notes 8 above.

[16] As critic Jack Burnham described this development in modern sculpture, " . . . the tacit concerns of abstract illusionism based on model theory have been challenged, if not already discarded. These have been supplanted by idealistic notions of phenomenal perception" (Burnham 1968).

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Becoming (Un)Masked: Semiotics of Identification in Nick Cave's *Hy-Dyve*

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Abstract: Displayed in a Kansas City neighborhood with a history of blockbusting, Nick Cave's 14-channel video installation *Hy-Dyve* confronted viewers with a visceral sense of entrapment in traumatizing spaces of racism. The immersive environment portrayed deeply moving experiences of confinement and concealment, connecting narratives of the Middle Passage to present fears of racial profiling. Shown at different scales on the dilapidated walls of a deconsecrated church, the video images enabled visitors to sense what it feels like to be exposed to a scrutinizing and categorizing gaze. Building on Gilles Deleuze's theory of close-up operations, I explore how Cave both showcases and subverts the visual rhetoric of surveillance, inviting viewers to suspend processes of individuation and embrace alterity. I offer a semiotic analysis of the visual motifs in *Hy-Dyve* and show how their unstable meanings heighten the potential for immersion in conjunction with the projection mapping technique. The entanglement of video images with crumbling architectural features destabilizes perception and fosters reflection on the imbrication of past and present realities of racial discrimination. Placing *Hy-Dyve* in the broader context of Cave's body of work, I suggest that it conjoins two different sides of his practice: a post-black approach to issues of identity which is consonant with his *Soundsuits* and a more radical activist stance which addresses the particularities of black experience and the burdening history of racial abuse.

Keywords: affect; alterity; immersive art; masking; post-black art; postidentity; projection mapping; rhetoric of the gaze; surveillance; video installation

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On a very rainy morning in September 2018, I visited the space of a deconsecrated church on the east side of Kansas City to see Nick Cave's *Hy-Dyve* video installation. Upon opening the heavy nave doors, I discovered I was little prepared for the encounter with the frothing sea of images covering the floor and walls of this former religious site. Even though I had seen photographs of the installation on social media, I found the experience highly destabilizing. The images of gushing water projected on the floor momentarily impaired my balance, adding to the sense of confusion triggered by the vast emptiness of the church. Throbbing percussive sounds further enhanced the feeling of unfamiliarity. Video vignettes following different timelines unfolded on the dilapidating church walls, engendering a sense of temporal displacement. Despite the mystifying environment and the non-linear image sequences, one had little difficulty in recognizing all too familiar signs of subjugation and surveillance such as a trapped black figurine or the close-up of an eye anxiously surveying the surroundings from behind a mask.

Hy-Dyve powerfully evoked the sensation of being profiled and pursued, conjuring both distant and recent memories of racial injustice. Unlike most immersive environments, it offered a grounding in past and present socio-political realities rather than an escape into an imaginary realm. Enveloped in darkness, the altar canopy of the church did not confer any solace. Instead, it served as a ghostly frame for an oversized lifeguard chair. Left empty, the grandiose seat triggered more feelings of anxiety than protection. Its imposing height evoked a high vantage point from which an invisible eye of a surveilling authority might scrutinize the church interior. In conjunction with the installation title which offers a playful spin on the term "high dive", the vacant chair suggested an uncertain scenario in

which one might need to take a leap of faith and jump into the unknown, or, in this instance, risk being seen by an authority figure which may or may not be impartial. Given the combination of video images and sculptural elements, the environment was both absorbing and disruptive. It called the viewers' attention not only to mesmerizing projections but also to the dilapidating structure of the deconsecrated church. A space that may once have felt comforting was now unsettling, confronting visitors with an unfamiliar territory in which they would need to reorient their senses and make sense of ambiguous iconographic signs.

Nick Cave is best known for his carnivalesque *Soundsuits*, wearable sculptures made of eclectic materials such as beads, buttons, feathers, or hair.[1] Primarily displayed in museums as clothing items garnering the bodies of mannequins rather than as performative objects, they lose a degree of their critical edge and affective potential. While it is well-known that Cave designed his first twig soundsuit in 1992 in response to the beating of Rodney King, the increasingly exuberant aesthetics of his wearable sculptures and their joyful celebration of life have partly eclipsed the bleak realities which inspired them. Sensing that the institutionalization of his practice may take away from its disruptive potential, Cave has worked increasingly harder at integrating *Soundsuit* performances into public spaces. He has also invited LGBTQ youth and victims of domestic abuse to imbue them with more specific meanings. Most notable among his community-oriented projects are the *Dance Labs* organized in partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit in 2015 and *As Is*, a 2016 performance he prepared over the course of eight months in Shreveport, Louisiana. For both, he established long-term collaborations with dancers, musicians, and members of local communities. Performers with different backgrounds brought Cave's costumes to life in jubilant dances. In tandem with these endeavors to broaden participation in the design and performative activation of his *Soundsuits*, Cave has reoriented his practice towards staging immersive installations such as *Hy-Dyve* that can serve as ground for public congregations. Such works continue to build on cross-cultural references and flamboyant materials yet place viewers in more tense relation to processes of identity negotiation. Preventing voyeuristic identification, Cave's installations have disorienting qualities and ask visitors to have a more vivid encounter with the experience of blackness, or, more generally, the sensation of being perceived as different.

Composed of 14 video channels, *Hy-Dyve* was originally displayed in "Until", Cave's large-scale exhibition at MASS MoCA in 2016. Taking its name from the phrase "innocent until proven guilty", the exhibition featured seemingly joyous environments composed of a myriad of scintillating and colorful objects in the midst of which visitors could discover racist memorabilia and symbols of violence.[2] In this article, I address the Kansas City iteration of *Hy-Dyve*, which was part of "Open Spaces", a festival hosted in alternative art venues in 2018 (Figure 1).[3] The work is based on projection mapping, a technique used to project video images onto buildings and three-dimensional objects, thus transforming their surface into an illusionistic field of light. While the term for it has come into widespread use only in the last 15 years with its proliferation in the entertainment industries, the technique has deep roots in the art field. Stan VanDerBeek used the domed ceiling of his Movie-Drome construction for expanded cinema experiments in the mid-1960s, Robert Whitman projected cinematic images onto performers' bodies in *Prune. Flat.* in 1965, and Jeffrey Shaw, together with Theo Botschuijver and Sean Wellesley-Miller, projected film and slides onto an inflatable structure for *Movie Movie* in 1969. More recently, artists such as Tony Oursler, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and Krzysztof Wodiczko have resorted to projection mapping as a means of enhancing the affective impact of their works and revealing the psychological qualities of objects and buildings. The technique serves similar purposes in Cave's staging of *Hy-Dyve*. It creates an immersive space in which viewers are highly aware of the physicality of their surroundings while observing a shifting field of images. In the case of its display in a church space, the projections permeate the arched niches, enhancing their visibility and taking advantage of their depth to heighten the illusionistic attributes of the images.

Figure 1. Installation view of Nick Cave's Hy-Dyve at Hope Center in Kansas City (2018). Fourteen-channel video installation. Photograph by Liviu Pasare. Courtesy of Nick Cave Studio.

Taking note of the sensory and conceptual elements of *Hy-Dyve*, I discuss the ambivalence of this installation's symbolism in the context of the church and the friction it establishes between the overseeing eye of authority and the gaze of the Other behind the mask confronting surveillance and objectification. Decoding the artist's references to racial profiling, I offer a semiotic analysis of *Hy-Dyve* in terms of its critique of scopic regimes that perpetuate identity bias. I argue that the immersive experience the installation fosters does not undermine critical reflection and I build on Gilles Deleuze's theory of close-up operations in order to show how Cave disrupts processes of identification and undermines binary oppositions between the subject and object of perception. I also examine the multivalent meanings of his *Soundsuits* which make an episodic appearance in this video installation and function both as signs of otherworldly alterity and markers of more specific gender and racial differences. In *Hy-Dyve*, Cave brings these wearable sculptures in closer dialogue with the particularities of black experience while simultaneously maintaining the openness of their signification to elicit affective connections. Thus, he maintains his affinity with post-black art while concomitantly embracing a more explicitly political agenda stirred by ongoing abuses of power and racial injustices. Two vectors of his practice meet in *Hy-Dyve*: the ecstatic performances with *Soundsuits* celebrating fluid transformations of identity and the recontextualization of visual motifs of subjugation meant to underscore persistent racial tensions.

1. Nick Cave's Performative Disguises beyond the Post-Black Art Debate

Hy-Dyve is an installation about assuming risks while navigating the treacherous path of making one's differences visible in public space. At a time of repeated police assaults against African-Americans, Nick Cave opens up the experience of embodying his *Soundsuits* to a broader public by conceiving environments that metaphorically convey the anxiety of entrapment in social spaces that are still marked by vestiges of racial segregation. By immersing viewers in the disorienting space of installations created for the "Until" exhibition at MASS MoCA, the artist avowed that he aimed to give the public a sense of what it feels like to be in "the metaphorical belly of a *Soundsuit*" and unveil the "disturbing" experiences

which motivate him to create art (Gleisner 2017). This sensation of captivity that Cave wanted to provoke can be associated both with the experience of living in a society in which racism is still pervasive and with the suffering of African slaves transported in inhuman conditions in the belly of ships during the Middle Passage. Immersive technologies offer the possibility of acquiring a more embodied connection with the experience of those who are dispossessed, subjugated, or marginalized. Similar to Cave, Alejandro G. Iñarritu has conceived *Carne y Arena* (2017), a virtual reality environment in which exhibition visitors can relate to the experience of Central American and Mexican migrants at a more visceral level. While immersion is generally associated with spectacle culture, it can also serve activist agendas by confronting participants with disquieting experiences that can bring them in closer touch with the lives of those who face discrimination. The language of the senses can at times bypass barriers imposed by cultural, racial, and social biases. Instead of celebrating differences, primarily through the proliferation of colorful suits that undermine identity categorization, Cave has increasingly focused on showing a less joyful side of the experience of disguise. Anchored around visual tropes with unstable meaning, *Hy-Dyve* configures an environment in which doubt and insecurities prevail over the jouissance generally inspired by his soundsuit performances.

At the turn of the millennium, Cave's practice easily aligned with "post-black" art, a term applied by Thelma Golden to works by a young generation of artists who resisted the classification of their practice in terms of "black art" and built on Western and non-Western influences in order to unsettle categories and genealogies that impose constraints on their self-expression (Golden 2001). Artists associated with this post-black attitude include Glenn Ligon, an originator of the term together with Golden, as well as Mark Bradford, Rashid Johnson, Sanford Biggers, and Julie Mehretu. Three of Cave's *Soundsuits* were included in "Frequency" (2005), one of the five non-thematic exhibitions organized at Studio Museum in conjunction with attempts at questioning preconceived notions of black aesthetics. Through their resemblance with textile and raffia suits worn in African dances and their concomitant celebration of differences that elude specific cultural and racial markers, the *Soundsuits* easily aligned with the post-black tendency which privileged hybridity and favored departures from unitary definitions of blackness.

The "post-black" term proved controversial and garnered extensive attention from both artists and scholars. As Cathy Byrd explains, the term easily risked congealing into another prescriptive category and even artists associated with it were skeptical of its validity (Byrd 2002). In a more recent take on this debate, Margo Natalie Crawford points out that Golden's proposal of the "post-black" term was accompanied by a "wink", a slightly ironical take on the idea of moving completely beyond racial issues (Crawford 2015). Yet, Crawford is concerned by the depoliticizing implications of this concept even under these terms, arguing that it dilutes the tension involved in black aesthetic expression and overshadows continuities between the Black Art Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the practice of artists belonging to more recent generations. While her critique is valid, it does not fully account for the fact that "post-black" art was conceived in response to the multiculturalist policies pervading American art museums in the 1990s. Under the guise of promoting diversity, art institutions organized exhibitions framed around racial categories which enforced a fixed set of aesthetic and ideological expectations from artists representative of minority identities. In this climate, Golden refused the title of curator of African American Art at the Whitney Museum and oriented her attention to conversations with artists whose practice eluded the increasingly rigid "black art" category.[4] Cave's *Soundsuits* were consonant with this movement towards thinking about issues of identity beyond cultural specificity. They covered the body of performers in their entirety and suggested that an openness towards Otherness in the absence of easily recognizable racial or gender markers could heighten relationality.

Nevertheless, this broader attunement to a universal sense of alterity remains dubious today. It aligns too closely with modern humanism, which permitted the perpetuation of violent acts in the name of moral reforms that would guarantee universal equality based

on a shared set of values defined from a Western perspective. Gauging the relationship between difference and sameness without falling into the trap of oversimplification proves difficult, especially in a contemporary climate that has unveiled the mystification of past ideologies which consolidated white privilege. Even scholars supporting the relevance of postidentity debates following the multiculturalism of the 1990s insist that generalizations can obscure significant histories of oppression and falsely suggest that amends are no longer necessary. In pondering such problematics in relation to the distinctions between post-black, post-Chicano, and post-Indian art, Jessica Horton and Chérise Smith argue that "without qualification, postidentity claims can slide into dangerous assertions that America is a post-race nation" (Horton and Smith 2014).

Paradoxes of postidentity which cannot be easily tackled at the level of discourse can more easily be reconciled in Nick Cave's body of art which currently features both sculptural objects representative of the post-black agenda such as the *Soundsuits* and works based on thrift store items evocative of persistent marks of racism in contemporary societies. His exhibition "Made by Whites for Whites" (2014) at Shainman Gallery featured works such as *Sea Sick* and *Property*, which served as testimony to the propaganda machine of colonialism and racism enforcing the objectification of black bodies. Slightly reminiscent of Betye Saar's assemblages, such recent mixed media works take a stab at the persistence of symbols of black servitude in American visual culture. *Hy-Dyve* synthesizes these two sides of Cave's practice at the level of a non-linear narrative which shows that the desire for moving beyond identity categorization can coexist with that for acknowledging specific cultural and social histories which continue to inform one's identity and experience at present. In "Postmodern Blackness", bell hooks persuasively argues that we need to distinguish between the tendency to essentialize identities and the focus on commemorating collective narratives shaping black subjectivities. Critiquing the lack of discourse on black experience in postmodern theories, hooks explains that "there is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black "essence" and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle" (Hooks 2015). A similar desire to connect common sensibilities and legacies of oppressed groups with the singularities and multiple dimensions of their members' intersectional identities stands at the basis of Cave's non-linear construction of *Hy-Dyve* which reunites visual motifs of subjugation with images of resistance through acts of performativity. The installation has been termed one of the artist's "most personal videos", as well as one of his more explicitly political works due to its overt references to surveillance (Markonish 2017). Indeed, this is one of the rare cases in which Nick Cave partly makes his face shown in his work. Except for a series of photographs from 2006 in which he is donning a textile assemblage made out of found materials, he almost always appears in his works in suits that conceal his face. This turn towards becoming (un)masked, signals a shift from a visual rhetoric more closely associated with post-black discourse.

Hy-Dyve suggests that identity construction embraces multiple forms, including a kaleidoscopic rearrangement of pre-existing components which morph into new configurations and a more radical performative queering of selfhood. The former can be observed in the installation at the level of the collage of video projections on the church walls, and the latter is evident in the energetic dance of Cave's *Soundsuit*. As Chérise Smith eloquently argues, "identity is lived and experienced between the "real", the "fiction", and the performance" (Smith 2011). Given its virtual immersion of viewers in a narrative space of colonial and postcolonial dislocation, *Hy-Dyve* brings into visibility this fraught relationship with identity formation and ongoing transformation. Integrated in the church, the installation presents an augmented reality by merging dilapidating architectural features with images of performative transgressions of identity markers. Thus, it enraptures the imagination but does not obliterate the difficulties of self-definition. Cave's *Hy-Dyve* blatantly exposes the contingent quality of selfhood. It highlights the fluctuations of identity in relation to a complex set of personal, historical, and socio-cultural variables which influence the degree to which individuals feel liberated (or not) to unmask themselves. While observing

a plurality of gazes of one eye visible behind a mask and watching the shifting shape of the dancing soundsuit, viewers gain insight into the intricacies of conceptualizing black subjectivities. In what follows, I will delineate how the ambivalent meanings of visual motifs in the installation undermine fixed interpretations and play havoc with definitions of identity based on binary oppositions.

2. Narratives of Entrapment

Hy-Dyve is structured around six video vignettes which may appear quite disparate until viewers become fully attuned to their jarring interconnections at the level of, more or less, easily recognizable symbols of captivity. The immersive qualities of the video projections shimmering across spectators' bodies and permeating the church niches make up for the initial discontinuities in the video narrative. They are further amplified by the floor images of cascading water on which visitors tread hesitantly. Far from constructing a linear story, the vignettes convey contrasting emotions ranging from apprehension and panic to exhilaration and quietude. Notably, *Hy-Dyve* does not offer a totalizing experience which might diminish one's ability to ponder its critical message about racial profiling. It actively engages viewers in meaning construction, encouraging them to consider how what they already know about the history of slavery and racial discrimination relates to somewhat mystifying visual projections portraying performative acts of masking, dancing, and running.

The video scenes include an image of a rooster mask, a close-up view of the artist's eye peering out of the mask, a black figurine struggling to break free from an enclosure, a dancing soundsuit, an abstract red and yellow shape floating upwards, and a cartoonish character running at increasing speed. (Figure 2) Once completed, this sequence of wall projections momentarily comes to a halt while video images continue to flood the floor, illuminating cracks in its surface and making viewers experience a heightened sense of collective presence. As they metaphorically walk across tempestuous waters, visitors find themselves unmasked, made visible to others while partaking in acts of questioning their positionality in relation to the fragmented narratives proposed by Cave. Though the environment continues to feel pervasively immersive, especially since visitors become more acutely aware of proprioception while contemplating the images of gushing water beneath their feet, the construction of the installation becomes more sharply evident. The medium and the message do not coincide as Oliver Grau suggests it happens in the context of immersive artworks (Grau 2003). One becomes better conscious of the illusion of projection mapping while contemplating the now blank walls of the church showing even more signs of disrepair. Nonetheless, one continues to feel engulfed in the work, struggling to maintain balance in the face of this overwhelming deluge. The sound of water further amplifies the intensity of this absorbing experience and renders visitors even more alert to the difficulty of sidestepping natural and social forces that are beyond their individual control. Hereby, the state of immersion becomes a metaphor for contingency and interconnectivity.

The first video vignette depicts a rooster mask exuding pride. At first, the animal figure appears more as an animate being than an object used for disguise. Shown in profile with its strong beak, wide-open eye, and flamboyant crest, the rooster gazes down on the visitors in an act expressive of defiance or authority. It is initially part of a whole series of images of the same size that populate the church walls, making one feel watched from all sides. The domineering presence of these unflinching rooster heads is shortly counterposed to the abrupt collapse of other identical heads shown at smaller scale. Their fall inevitably makes one think of a violent act of decapitation even though they all calmly find their place in a cohesive multilayered formation. Exploring the literary references called forth by the rooster mask in the MASS MoCA iteration of *Hy-Dyve*, James H. Sanders III suggests that it alludes to the lyrics of folk tunes such as "killing the old red rooster when she comes" or stories such as "Henny Penny" (Sanders 2018). In the church context, though, I find that this collapse of rooster heads triggers closer associations with narratives of martyrdom, demonstrating the stoicism of individuals willing to suffer persecution or even

be condemned to death for their beliefs. More generally, the mask could be read as a symbol of masculinity and its fall could be interpreted as an act of questioning the heteronormative expectations associated with it. As with other visual motifs in the installation, the rooster constitutes a multivalent sign.

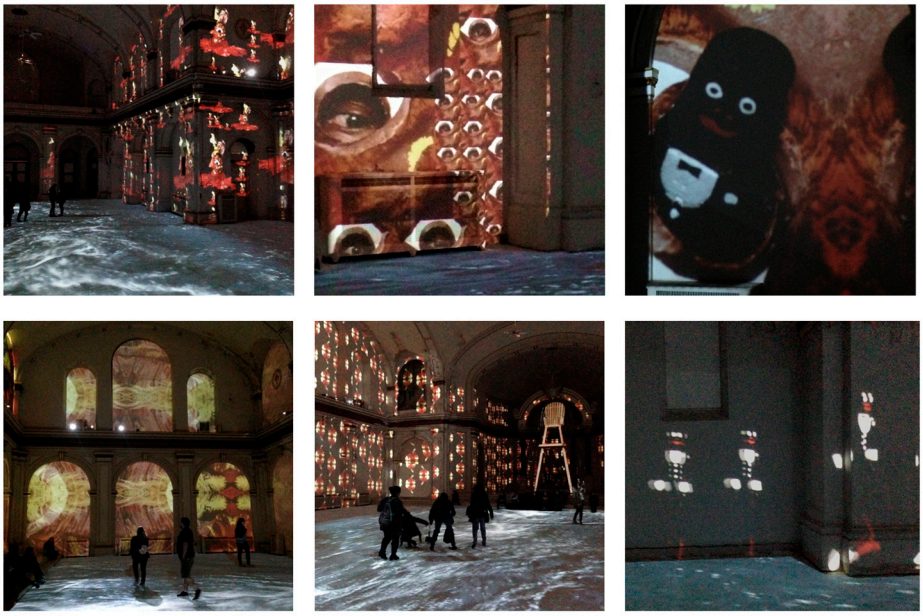

Figure 2. Video vignettes from Nick Cave's Hy-Dyve at Hope Center in Kansas City (2018). Fourteen-channel video installation. Photographs by Cristina Albu. Courtesy of Nick Cave Studio.

The next series of images takes viewers closer to the rooster head, suggesting that it is an embodied object turned subject: a mask concealing the face of its wearer. At least this is what one is led to infer upon encountering a close-up of the rooster eye opening which frames the peering gaze of a human. Multiple images of just one eye at various scales are projected into the church niches. (Figure 3) The eye's subtle movements have a forceful impact, captivating one's attention without allowing a complete decoding of the meaning of the gaze. In some images, the eye blinks softly, in others it is wide open, or it cautiously glances sideways, as if wary of an impending threat. Liviu Pasare, the designer of projection mapping for Cave's installation, explains that he took advantage of the tripartite elevation of the church to project multiple video timelines concomitantly (Albu 2022). The temporal and spatial variations resulting from this distribution of the imagery enhanced the plurality of the projections without diminishing the overall immersive effect of the installation.

This visual field composed of eye close-ups corresponds to what Gilles Deleuze calls the "affection-image", an image taken at close range that builds on the tension between an "immobile unity" and the potential for micro-movements across its surface (Deleuze [1983] 2013). In more concrete terms, the philosopher associates it with the isolated image of a face on which one can observe subtle yet notable changes. Deleuze further distinguishes between a "reflecting face", which is static and betrays absorption in thought, and an "intensive" face, which is more reactive, expressing minute affective changes and evading association with a specific attribute. In the absence of a full view of Cave's face, the "intensive face" is more evident in the close-up images of the eye, especially as one notes the contraction and dilation of the pupil or the shift of the gaze sideways. The artist is clearly intent on impeding any presumed understanding of the identity of the seeing subject, or, more precisely, any arbitrary projection of thoughts a viewer might ascribe to the figure in disguise. Instead, Cave invites attunement at a more visceral level by channeling visitors' attention to micro-movements of the pupil and the eyelid. Since the mask lacks the plasticity of the skin, the tension between the fixity of its surface and the moving eye is intense.

Figure 3. Installation view of Nick Cave's Hy-Dyve at Hope Center in Kansas City (2018). Fourteen-channel video installation. Photograph by Liviu Pasare. Courtesy of Nick Cave Studio, New York.

In view of numerous instances in which the emotions and intentions of black people have been misread, Cave impedes any attempt at imposing a narrow reading of the feelings or thoughts of the figure under the mask. Viewers gradually realize that they are surrounded by a multitude of expressive images of an eye captured at different moments in time rather than by merely pictures of it rendered at different scales. In an eloquent analysis of the limitations of a universal theory of affect in relation to black experience, Tyrone S. Palmer points out that emotional nuances are extensively overlooked in interpersonal relations with African-Americans when read from a white perspective. He argues that "Black affect" is perceived "as always already excessive, inadequate or both" (Palmer 2017). While Palmer agrees that one way of resisting misinterpretations of black expression may be embracing opacity, as Édouard Glissant suggested (Glissant [1990] 1997), he warns that such an act may actually provide further grounds for justifying racial abuse in the name of an inability of white subjects to recognize or decode affective cues.[5] This tension between legibility and illegibility can be vividly sensed in Cave's eye vignettes. Seeing just one eye of the masked figure, viewers experience a sense of an endlessly forestalled encounter. The plurality of eye movements observable across the video mosaic conveys an overwhelming feeling of anticipation. Different gradations of fear become apparent: from vigilance to nervous assessment of sources of danger, or utter terror in front of an unavoidable attack.

Despite the nuanced expressions and the ubiquity of the watchful gazes evident in *Hy-Dyve*, viewers have little doubt that the figure under the mask is being pursued. The images bring to mind Cave's statements on feeling vulnerable upon stepping outside the safe confines of his private space: "the moment that I walk out of my home, I can be profiled, and I am looked at very differently" (Gleisner 2017). As a queer black man, he is aware of the multiple nuances of discriminatory behavior. Although he references his own subjection to judgmental scrutiny, Cave may resist too close of an association of these images with his personal experience even though he is the one behind the mask. After all, he has repeatedly affirmed that he wants to serve the role of "messenger" between people (Bolton et al. 2014). In an interview with Bill T. Jones, he declared: "My work is not about me. I have to remove myself and then produce the work [. . .]." (Jones 2016). This may be

one of the reasons for which Cave hesitates to make himself fully visible. In *Hy-Dyve*, the unmasking is never complete. It is a process of baring parts of oneself that could more viscerally speak to the experience of others similarly exposed to profiling. The image of one and the same eye singularizes the experience of being pursued, yet its multiplication and dispersal across the church walls evoke a plurality of menacing scenarios and emotional reactions. As Deleuze astutely points out, "The close-up does not divide one individual, any more than it reunites two: it suspends individuation. Then the single and ravaged face unites a part of one to a part of the other." (Deleuze [1983] 2013). To be sure, the anxious eye in the video projections resists an individuating gaze. The lack of symmetry between the eye images, along with the movement of the pupil in different directions, additionally interferes with fixed subject/object binaries that inform identity categorization. Viewers' gazes end up floating across the intensive images, never returned, yet seemingly intuited by the masked figure who appears to be pursued from all sides.

The following video vignette in *Hy-Dyve* takes viewers literally and figuratively to the heart of the matter: the tension between the desire to drop the mask and the urge to seek protection when one is faced with objectification and racial profiling. Spectators are offered an even more proximate view of the mask eye hole, yet this time its aperture frames a moving figurine instead of a wary eye. The object is not easily identifiable, neither is the mask hole since it is shown from an oblique vantage point that makes it appear abysmal. The object turns out to be a black servant figurine once it emerges triumphantly from the aperture after a frantic series of twists and turns. Its escape provides some degree of comical relief from the somber mood of the mask scene. The fidgeting motion of the figurine contrasts sharply with the subtle movement of the masked eye. Despite these differences, both scenes convey the anxiety of entrapment. The figurine embodies a stereotypical representation of a docile black servant ready to fulfill his master's desires while donning a smile. But in this vignette, it appears as a disruptive force, a resilient individual finding his way out of the tightest confinement. Over the last decade, Cave has integrated such collectible items from the Jim Crow era in his works, re-inscribing them with meaning and keeping them in the public eye as undeniable evidence of the desire to reduce difference to sameness (Markonish 2017). In *Hy-Dyve*, the figurine stands for an unavoidable irritant of all acts of seeing and defining black identities. It is hardly accidental that the eye aperture in the rooster mask also resembles a gaping wound, especially in relation to the agitated motion of the trapped object. The vignette offers insight into a black subject's entrapment in a body carrying vestiges of past misjudgments which have impacted his self-perception. It also discloses his current entrapment in a visual culture that perpetuates biased views. The subject is thus trapped on the inside and the outside, having to shrug off both self-imposed and assigned masks.

Interestingly, the immersive experience fostered by *Hy-Dyve* brings to the surface the enfolding of individuals in surveillance societies, thus subverting a smooth state of absorption in its framework. Due to the plurality of images of one and the same visual motif, viewers are made aware of the framing of representation and the framing of black subjects repeatedly placed under supervision in anticipation of misconduct and even made to appear guilty through the manipulation of evidence. Consequently, viewers experience a sense of displacement which is generally found to be at odds with states of immersion. They may come to question if and how they might be seen in the installation or in society at large. In *Virtual Art*, Oliver Grau claims that immersion results from an experience of "unity of time and place" and a lack of awareness of deception (Grau 2003). Yet, in this instance, the environment plays havoc with such blinding absorption, making one sensitive to the framing of one's presence within and beyond the confines of the installation. More recent theorizations of immersion have shown that critical distance does not preclude immersion. While Grau does not actually argue that the two are mutually exclusive, he suggests that the possibility for reflection on one's experience diminishes when one is engaged in an immersive state. His rationale for this is the result of thinking of immersion primarily in terms of emotional intensity and neglecting the fact that action and cognition can be equally

absorbing and moving. Katja Kwastek proposes that we shift focus from an understanding of immersion in terms of "mental or sensual illusion" to a discussion of it in relation to both "emotional and cognitive intensity" (Kwastek 2016). She applies this idea to interactive artworks by looking at their reception through the lens of the concept of flow which defines an absorbing experience that can be triggered both by sensory engagement and by the performance of acts meant to complete the content of an artwork.

Although *Hy-Dyve* does not call upon viewers to become literal co-producers of the work through their creative feedback, it fosters an absorbing mode of participation by inviting them to explore meaningful connections between the video vignettes. Oscillations between various interpretive possibilities accompany the vivid sensations the installation provokes, equally contributing to its immersive impact as visitors attempt to identify some degree of narrative congruence between the video scenes. This is particularly the case with the vignettes including more easily identifiable figurative elements. The process of meaning-making becomes more unstable when witnessing the vignettes that veer towards abstraction. In this instance, absorption emerges more strongly from sensory stimulation. This pivoting between varying sources of intensity does not detract from the immersive experience. On the contrary, it maintains its hold and shows that our attention can be stretched and heightened through sharp shifts in the object of visual focus.

3. The Spatialization of the Body

In the two video vignettes following the one depicting the trapped figurine, the projected images no longer match the borders of the architectural structure neatly. More abstract in character, they extend across the boundaries of niches and arches, turning the church walls into a screen with diminished material presence. This shift in projection mapping interestingly corresponds to a change in visual content and perspective. While the prior scenes offered viewers an increasingly close vantage point, these vignettes convey more distant views and have a more impersonal character. In the absence of almost all figurative cues, the identification of what one sees becomes challenging. Moving rhythms and color patterns take front stage in a mesmerizing choreography which evokes ongoing transformations of matter. For those familiar with Cave's *Soundsuits*, the images are bound to conjure memories of effervescent dance performances and eclectic outfits. For others, they may appear as computer animations due to their tempo and the geometric patterns they encompass.

The tempo of the first vignette in this more abstract set of imagery is fast. An explosion of yellow and red fibers moving rhythmically takes viewers by surprise. (Figure 4) The atmosphere they create is so electrifying that one may fail to notice that the black figurine makes another appearance. Its gloved hands emerge from the vibrating fibers and seem to support an invisible ceiling. The frantic dance of quasi-unidentifiable matter ends in a dazzling outburst of light. The blinding sensation echoes the prior obfuscation of vision evoked by the entrapment of the figurine in the mask eyehole. Sensations take precedence over reflection in this intense moment of *Hy-Dyve* which brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's ponderings over affect and artmaking as instantiations of "nonhuman becoming." In their view, affect "is a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, beasts, and persons [. . .] endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their differentiation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1991). Cave places viewers precisely in such a liminal zone where the interpretation of the work strictly in terms of race is temporarily suspended. This video segment deepens disorientation both in sensorial and conceptual terms. At this level, the work moves beyond a strictly racial reading, interfering with attempts at differentiation based on identity categories.

Through its disorienting visual effects, *Hy-Dyve* parallels David Hammons's *Concerto in Black and Blue* (2002), a dark environment through which participants navigated with flashlights of narrow frequency. Responses to Hammons's installation, which focused merely on its correlations with racialized space in the U.S., served as the main premise for Darby English's eloquent critique of the tendency to "limit the significance of works

assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work's purportedly racial character" (English 2007). *Hy-Dyve* similarly encompasses allusions to acts of identification and recognition that surpass racial categorization.

Figure 4. Installation view of Nick Cave's Hy-Dyve at Hope Center in Kansas City (2018). Fourteen-channel video installation. Photograph by Cristina Albu. Courtesy of Nick Cave and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The fast-swaying strands which eventually transform into a field of throbbing light trigger a transgressive experience. Cave asks viewers to envision what it might feel like to experience the world through a different body which lacks human shape. The experience is defamiliarizing even for viewers who recognize the reference to moving textures characteristic of Cave's *Soundsuit* performances. The abstract patterns which emerge as the colorful strands jump and swing are entrancing, especially since they offer no specific cues to the source of their vitality. They seem to be imbued with a mysterious life force which eludes bodily constraints. Through the brightness of the colors and the shifting geometric patterns, this vignette resembles the aesthetics of a visionary experience. The luminosity of the images and the absence of easily recognizable symbols add to this impression, along with the aerial perspective upon a seemingly shape-shifting body hidden beneath the bouncing strands. Aldous Huxley suggests that visionary images connect us to the collective subconscious and momentarily permit us to surpass a self-centered view upon reality. According to him, art can open a gateway to such a transporting experience which connects us to "the Other World's essential alienness and unaccountability" (Huxley [1954] 2009). It is in this remote yet not entirely inaccessible layer of consciousness that Cave hopes viewers can overcome the urge to label what they perceive and define others solely based on identity markers.

By Cave's own admission, his *Soundsuits* are puzzling because they prompt questions of identification yet impede any clear-cut answer. In an interview, he states: "You're trying to find that link to something familiar. And yet, it's familiar from the perspective that it's figurative, and then that becomes where the difficulty falls in—because there's a sort of humanness to it, but yet it's not of this world." (Sharp 2015). In *Hy-Dyve*, Cave takes this otherworldly quality one step further by extending the moving texture of his *Soundsuits* to the surface of the entire church. In their overview of projection mapping, Daniel Schmitt, Marine Thébault, and Ludovic Burczykowski claim that this technique implies a "spatialization of the gaze" (Schmitt et al. 2020). Comparing it to cinematic projection, they point out that it is less likely to trigger processes of identification. Instead, it involves the dispersion of the gaze, which is no longer expected to be frontally aligned with the screen, and the mobilization of the viewers who are no longer confined to a seating area. In the soundsuit vignette, the church walls appear to pulsate to the rhythm of the bright strands which camouflage traces of humanity. Architecture frameworks and soundsuit images converge in this absorbing scene. Cave metaphorically portrays an act of queering of identity through the spatialization of body movement images which start by being associated with a dancing human figure yet eventually dissolve into a field of colorful strands that engulfs the church walls in its luminous vibrations. It is as if the outlines of the dancer in the soundsuit become infinitely malleable and expendable. Figure and ground become one, composing a vibrating and luminous space which contrasts with the gridded patterns of images observable in the preceding video scenes. This collapse of corporeal boundaries evokes the transgression of fixed signifiers of identity and the fluid mutation of selfhood. The vignette impedes identification, provoking instead a more visceral relation to the quivering body potentially inhabiting the mélange of colorful fibers.

This shift towards suppressing references to recognizable human shapes complicates Cave's earlier take on the *Soundsuits*. It may be read as his response to the failure of the universalist humanist project of the Enlightenment which served as an ideological platform for establishing different degrees of belonging to humanity based on racial differences. In *Becoming Human*, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson shows that both human and animal categories were redefined in relation to notions of abjection developed in the context of colonialism. She adroitly asks: "If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of the 'human?'" (Jackson 2020). Cave's *Hy-Dyve* invites us to experience this very rupturing of the human, understood in Western terms as the opposite of the animal, the embodiment of rationality, and the presumed upholder of an ethical stance which would prohibit acts of violence against other fellow humans.

The transformation of the soundsuit into a vibrating field of fibers highlights the affective and material bond we share, as well as our entanglement in a mutating array of relations which surpass boundaries between animal, plant, and human bodies. The yellow and orange hues of the fibers encourage viewers to recollect the rooster head mask seen in the first vignette. The visual episodes proposed by Cave connect in subtle ways, not through narrative lines, but through colors and rhythms which allude to affective ties and the performativity of identity. Resisting categorizations based on skin color or physiognomy, Cave asks us to see the body as a lively, mutating environment constantly undergoing processes of differentiation and attunement in relation to various psychic and social rhythms.

The next set of moving images also impedes attempts at identification of figurative elements but unfolds at a completely different pace. Shapes that resemble cocoons or sky lanterns slowly float upwards in parallel rows. They encapsulate the same colors as the dynamic moving strands. This color connection makes one see them as compact versions of the exuberant being celebrating difference in the prior scene. They appear to be infused with some sort of dormant energy that can burst back to the surface at any moment. The steady movement of the shapes up and down the walls evokes the flow of people engaged in migratory processes, a sign of the constantly evolving diasporic space.

This quiet moment in the unfolding of the projections offers viewers some respite before the encounter with the final vignette of *Hy-Dyve*, which confronts them with yet another tense experience.

4. The Burden of History

The black figurine makes its appearance again, this time in the guise of an animation character. The projections now appear only on the lower portion of the church walls. The figure first seems to be marching at a steady step. He is part of a whole row of identical individuals, mechanically moving in unison. Gradually, their pace accelerates, and they appear to run faster and faster, up to the point where their features turn into black and white patches. Conflicting interpretations arise: the running figures could be seen as docile servants performing their duties at a faster and faster pace or as individuals desperately seeking liberation from the conditions of servitude. Either way, the feeling of entrapment prevails over that of freedom because the figures run on the spot. It becomes increasingly harder to watch these endlessly running figures who embody the struggle of so many generations of African-Americans.

The running figure in *Hy-Dyve* conveys the urgent need to take a stance against racism. Cave made it clear that he created the works in "Until", the exhibition that *Hy-Dyve* was originally part of, under the impact of wrongful police shootings between 2014 and 2017: "As I was developing this project, the Michael Brown incident happened in Ferguson, Missouri; Freddie Gray went down, and then Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and Christian Taylor." (Gleisner 2017). He also explicitly affirmed that *Hy-Dyve* is about "feeling trapped" and time "running out" (Loos 2016). The running figure does not merely represent the Jim Crow era. In conjunction with the other vignettes, it brings to mind images of the victims of police pursuits that end in unwarranted violence due to racial profiling.

The encounter with the images of flight is suspended quite abruptly. The break in the flow of wall video projections increases the affective momentum. In this brief interlude, the experience of restlessness is prolonged. It is as if the pictures of the running figure have turned into phantom images that continue to haunt viewers while they endeavor to make sense of the connections between the vignettes. Visitors are left wandering, and wondering, in the midst of the floor images of tumultuous waters. The powerful stream of water bespeaks ambivalent associations. It could be read as a sign of the Middle Passage in view of subsequent images pointing to the struggles of African Americans, or a more contemporary reference to devastating floods affecting impoverished communities. Either way, it connotes tempestuous forces undermining human control. Cave has had an ongoing interest in challenging anthropocentrism, an ideology which is tightly connected to the rampant exploitation of both environmental resources and indigenous populations in the name of the presumed superiority of Western cultural values. In conjunction with "Meet Me at the Center of the Earth", a 2009 exhibition which focused on his use of animal imagery, Cave stated: "Animals have so much to teach us. [...] We are destroying the earth and continue to be naïve about it. We have to find ways to live with each other, extend our compassion to other communities, and take care of our natural resources." (Cave and Eilertsen 2009).

Hy-Dyve reflects Cave's desire to inspire communion. It creates a sense of belonging to an affective community menaced by, more or less, visible threats. In this interlude, visitors become more self-aware, as well as more vividly conscious of the presence of others sharing the installation space. At the time of my visit, I could not help but notice how a group of high-school students had gathered in a circle on the floor while another group had found refuge on the stairs leading to the altar. (Figure 5) As the images of water continued to flood the floor and the walls remained barren of projections, the traces of blight became more pronounced. The cracks in the wall looked wider and the vestiges of paintings which once adorned the space became more visible. The Gloria medallion at the top of the altar canopy also stood out better. Nonetheless, there was no resurrection of hope in sight, especially as one continued to be disoriented while treading on the images of gushing water. The

vastness of the church devoid of pews accentuated the feeling of displacement. The niches became more haunting, functioning as screens for one's imagination. Such a disorienting and ambivalent experience can hardly be replicated in a museum environment devoid of high ceilings or historical traces. The abysmal quality of the church space took one closer to the Middle Passage and the disorientation slaves experienced when they were uprooted from their homelands. Emptiness is the mark both of the psychic space of the dispossessed and of the territories across which they travelled. In *The Open Boat*, Glissant speaks of multiple dimensions of abysmal depth. He conjures up poetic images of the emptiness of the "belly of the boat" in which slave bodies were crammed, the chasm of the ocean depth, and the abyss of "the nonworld" to which those who survived the horrendous journey arrived (Glissant [1990] 1997).

Figure 5. Installation view of Nick Cave's Hy-Dyve at Hope Center in Kansas City (2018). Fourteen-channel video installation. Photograph by Cristina Albu. Courtesy of Nick Cave and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Cave's *Hy-Dyve* metaphorically places viewers in a vast space that evokes the experience of deterritorialization and carries the heavy imprint of contemporary blight due to the signs of neglect it conspicuously displays. Yet not everything is lost since there is a sense of intimacy, of desired or actual mutual understanding of those co-present in the church who are ultimately participating in an act of commemoration; not only of the victims of police brutality of recent years, but also of the numerous slaves who died at sea. As Glissant masterfully proposes, what is gained is "knowledge of Relation within the Whole" (Glissant [1990] 1997). This is also Cave's desideratum as he likes his presence to fade into the background to allow audience or community members to reclaim the space of his works.

5. The Charged Site

Cave is especially sensitive to the social histories of the sites in which his works are inscribed. This aspect is most prominent in his collaborations with communities staging

Soundsuit performances but is also increasingly apparent in relation to the adaptation of his installations to different display settings.[6] The floor projections in *Hy-Dyve* are usually filmed anew for each installation iteration so that they capture images of water representative of the location where the work is shown. Other differences are also apparent. In the Kansas City iteration of *Hy-Dyve*, the starkly illuminated lifeguard chair is positioned near the altar rather than in the middle of the installation, as in the case of its initial display at MASS MoCA. Thus, the chair's association with a vacant seat of judgment becomes more conspicuous, asking viewers to ponder both who gets to occupy the position of authority and what happens in the complete absence of a moral compass.

The church installation of *Hy-Dyve* included additional transformations, which were subtle yet notable. At MASS MoCA, the lifeguard chair was anchored by lateral benches which permitted visitors to adopt a more contemplative perspective and find some degree of refuge from the perceptually destabilizing effects of the images projecting across their bodies and under their feet. Beneath the chair seat, Cave also placed a transparent box containing the yellow and red soundsuit which makes an appearance in the video vignettes. This component was not present in the Kansas City installation, possibly because it may have constituted too much of an object of veneration when placed in the proximity of the altar.

In Kansas City, *Hy-Dyve* spoke to past and present oppression in a powerful manner. It represented even more of an emotionally charged site because the deconsecrated church in which it was located belongs to the Hope Center, a nonprofit organization which offers programs for disadvantaged youth.[7] In such a setting, the installation launched a poignant demand for practicing neighborly love. Cave's display choice was even more compelling since the venue is located on the east side of Kansas City, an impoverished urban area presently facing housing problems and high unemployment rates. It is a charged site given its history of inequities and interracial tension. Born in Columbia, MO, Nick Cave studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and is no stranger to the segregation policies that have shaped the physical and demographic geography of this city.

The Annunciation Church where *Hy-Dyve* was displayed was completed in 1924 at the intersection of Benton and Linwood Boulevard. The catholic parish to which the church belonged had moved from the inner-city area where the stockyards and railway systems were rapidly expanding (Hornbeck 2008). The Gothic Revival architecture of the church is imposing even today despite the fact that the steeples meant to cover the square towers flanking the church façade were never completed. Its interior is also impressive given the very wide, barrel-vaulted nave. The Linwood neighborhood near which the Annunciation Church is located witnessed major transformations in the 1950s when numerous white families started to move out at the first signs that black families were assuming residency there. For several decades before this, the Linwood Improvement Association had strived to impose racial boundaries, placing racist signs in public spaces and even organizing rallies to protest the presence of black people in this area. While initially real estate companies supported these campaigns, they eventually decided to encourage blockbusting to maintain their financial profit in the area. In response to this, Earl T. Sturgess, a pastor in the Southeast Presbyterian Church found just a couple of blocks away from the Annunciation Church, established a coalition in the 1950s to put a stop to the flight of white families from this area (Gotham 2014). He urged residents in this area to refuse to sell their properties to black people. His movement did not succeed, and the east side of Kansas City went through significant demographic changes. As sociologist Ken Fox Gotham rightfully notes, these changes in population deepened not only racial conflicts but also social inequities due to the imposition of restrictions on the loans taken by residents of this neighborhood.

Displayed in the vicinity of Linwood, Cave's *Hy-Dyve* installation acquired additional meaningfulness by temporarily occupying a terrain which has a long history of racial tension and still carries some of the marks of division. The sacred space of churches in Linwood offered no refuge from racial conflicts, especially since certain church leaders took an active part in vigilant coalitions in the neighborhood. The former Annunciation

Church is currently in an increasingly deteriorating state and appears on the list of the most endangered historic buildings in Kansas City.[8] Reminiscing the installation process, designer Liviu Pasare pointed out that he had to use ladders instead of forklifts for placing the video projectors because of the increasingly frail building structure (Albu 2022). Permeating all the corners of its empty space, Cave's *Hy-Dyve* highlighted dire signs of disrepair. At times, the video projections illuminated fissures in the walls and scant remnants of canvas paintings attached to the walls.[9] Since the stained-glass windows, originally made in Austria, were removed, the only sign of the sumptuous church past was the high baldacchino composed of richly colored marble. While contemplating images of slavery and racial profiling in the church setting, one cannot help but question why religious values have failed to prevent abominable acts of cruelty against black people. As someone who embraces spirituality but does not make public statements on his religion, Cave plunges visitors of the deconsecrated church into a sensuous space that elicits togetherness and bridges the presumed gap between poetics and politics. *Hy-Dyve* inspires activist advocacy for the local community without proclaiming a specific course of action. It ties in with Christian religious values such as love for one's neighbor without preaching. Instead, it places viewers, be they insiders or outsiders of east Kansas City, in an affective environment that permits them to envision what it might feel like to be torn between a desire to make one's differences visible and a need for self-protection.

6. Upstaging Identification

Bearing affinities both with his well-known *Soundsuits* and his more recent sculptures incorporating racist memorabilia, *Hy-Dyve* acts as a connector between these two facets of Cave's practice: an earlier stance according to which all differences are fluid and a more recent activist commitment to singling out the difficulties of the black experience across multiple generations. Coming to terms with differences ultimately calls for acknowledging their specificity and concomitantly accepting their susceptibility to change. Cave's installation forcefully conveys this idea by emphasizing the contingency of processes of self-definition which may accentuate or erode differences depending on the spatial and historical frameworks against which they unfold.

Hy-Dyve situates spectators in a liminal space between visibility and invisibility. Through transitions between light and darkness, effervescence and entrapment, the video vignettes convey a fluid process of definition of black subjectivities which transgresses binary oppositions but continues to carry the imprint of burdensome histories of domination. The chair looming at the center of the former altar signals that power relations are unavoidable, and all individuals are ultimately imbricated in their entangled threads. Its emptiness undermines facile good/bad polarities and suggests that we can all bear witness to each other's acts and resist the congealing of differences into fixed categories. Cave's decision to unveil his eye in *Hy-Dyve* is not merely an allusion to the statement that "the personal is political", but is a hint at the fact that we need to watch out for one another in times when trust in institutions in the United States is weakened. Fully masking one's face and body limits an openness to others. Cave's exposure of his gaze may thus come as an admission that staying disguised is not always a viable option because there are times when one needs to assume the risk of being seen in order to stand up for others.

In the 2000s, Cave's *Soundsuits* could easily be integrated into a post-identity framework given their association with performative acts of becoming the Other that elude categorization. Nonetheless, they are far from rendering racial differences irrelevant. In *Hy-Dyve*, the presence of the soundsuit is more closely associated with the experience of inhabiting a black body because of its juxtaposition to symbols of slavery. Yet its signification is not restricted to this dimension since it speaks of performing differences that elude legibility and impede identification in terms of binary oppositions.

Hy-Dyve reflects the mistrust and interracial anxieties persisting in American society in the new millennium. Despite its dark undertones related to surveillance and racial profiling, the installation also delivers a hopeful message about the recognition of the complex

dynamics of identity formation which move us past oppositional modes of self-definition. Art historian Amelia Jones persuasively speaks of the way in which artists enable us to "see differently" by maintaining "the *durational* aspects of how we identify in the foreground" (Jones 2012). This is exactly what Cave accomplishes in *Hy-Dyve* by using visual tropes with slippery meaning. He asks us to pause, pay attention, and relate affectively to the experience of being trapped, locked in an exchange of gazes that does not allow for fluid differentiation. To this rhetoric of the gaze, Cave counterposes communication through bodily movement which appears more liberating because it can sensitize viewers to the experience of otherness in a more immediate manner, thus upstaging the ascription of identity categories. This being said, the powerful bodily sensations fostered by *Hy-Dyve* do not hinder intricate acts of meaning making. Cave challenges viewers to question their position in relation to ambivalent visual motifs and imagine narrative lines which extend beyond the scope of the artwork.

Whether envisioned as the interior of a slave ship navigating across stormy waters (Lakin 2018), a visual metaphor for the tormented psychic space of African-American experience, or more broadly, the turbulent environment of contemporary societies where the acknowledgment of differences at the level of discourse does not bring about actual social change, *Hy-Dyve* speaks to past and present divides, visible and invisible constraints, anxieties and desires associated with processes of identification. Tension persists in the absorbing space of the installation. Sensory immersion in *Hy-Dyve* does not preclude reflection on the conundrums of identification or the dire consequences of racial profiling. The video projections are both gripping and disquieting, repeatedly prompting viewers to question what they see and how they assign meaning to images. By confronting viewers with visual tropes with ambivalent meaning, Cave enables them to inhabit a space of indetermination where judgments are forestalled and identity attributes restlessly mutate at different rhythms just as the kaleidoscopic symbols that form new arrangements on the church walls. He does not relinquish installation visitors from responsibility but compels them to take a stance, find meaningful ways to connect the video vignettes, and make sense of the deeply interconnected threads of past and present abuses of power.

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Notes

1 Nick Cave's *Soundsuits* have been used in parades and dances organized in public space. They recall Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolés* (1964–1979), colorful capes which were similarly used to create disruptive events and liberate bodily expression from society's normative expectations. The *Soundsuits* also resonate with wearable sculptures created by artists from younger generations such as Jade Yumang and Serge Attukwei Clottey.

2 The phrase "innocent until proven guilty" references the legal principle of presumptive innocence, which has been ignored by US police forces in the cases of many African-Americans subjected to violent acts and even deadly shootings.

3 "Until" traveled to Carriageworks in Sydney, Australia (23 November 2018–3 March 2019) and to the Momentary, a satellite venue of the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas (12 September 2020–3 January 2021). *Hy-Dyve* was also presented in "Nick Cave: Forothermore" at MCA Chicago (14 May–2 October 2022).

4 For a candid conversation on Thelma Golden's decision to leave her curatorial position at the Whitney Museum, see Enwezor (2001).

5 Glissant critiques the Western epistemology of transparency by questioning the notion that we can relate to others only on condition that we understand them. He reflects on the wrongful assumption that an individual's sense of selfhood can be decoded from someone else's perspective. He prioritizes opaque relations in order to undermine cultural reductivism and point out the limits of understanding the other. In his view, opacity is not identical with obscurity but implies a much-needed questioning of the absolute legibility of identity and interpersonal relations.

6 In the case of *Hy-Dyve*'s display at Carriageworks in 2019 (Sydney, Australia), the installation featured images of ocean waves filmed by drone across the coast of Little Bay.

7 Given the state of disrepair of the church, the Hope Center rarely uses its space. Most of this organization's community programs take place in the adjacent school. Prior to the display of Cave's installation, the church was primarily used as a storage area. The leaders of the Hope Center are applying for grants to start the restoration of the church.

[8] See "2019 Most Endangered List", https://www.historickansascity.org/endangered-list/ (accessed on 6 June 2020).

[9] For a short history of the church, see blog post: http://curmudgeonkc.blogspot.com/2005/11/annunciation-church-kansas-city.html (accessed 6 June 2020).

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Article

Continuity: Sharing Space in teamLab's Digital Ecosystems

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Abstract: In 2021, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco inaugurated the opening of its new contemporary wing with *teamLab: Continuity.* The immersive exhibition spanned six galleries and was fully interactive via sensors and digital projection mapping technology; flowers bloom and grow, flying crows burst into colorful chrysanthemums, and butterflies are born or killed at a moment's touch. The digital objects dynamically interact with one another and with humans, blurring boundaries between art, participant, and technology. This article examines *Continuity* as a "collective interactive experience" situated within a digital ecosystem. It explores teamLab's approach to the natural environment and its digital replication, with a focus on the relationship between humans and machines in shared exhibition spaces.

Keywords: interactive digital art; immersion; collective experience; exhibitions; media installation; projection mapping; virtual art; digital ecosystems

1. Introduction

As you approach the newest special exhibition space at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, you are confronted with a gaping dark chasm (Figure 1a).[1] Anticipating the vivid and mesmerizing space you have seen on social media, you walk through the doorframe and allow darkness to envelop your body. Your senses are immediately bombarded. You enter the world hidden beyond the entrance hall and simultaneously process an overwhelmingly sweet smell, a serene celestial soundscape, and a vibrant digital ecosystem of blooming cosmos flowers and orange spider mums, shimmering swarms of butterflies, and darting white crows (Figure 1b).

You shake off your disorientation and join the awestruck and gleeful people sharing this experience. The walls and floor are covered in varieties of flowers and leaves that grow, scatter, and wilt at your touch. Butterflies cheerfully navigate the environment until accidentally trampled or hit by an unsuspecting passerby (Figure 2). Crows that are caught or crash headlong into an obstacle suddenly burst and turn into a chrysanthemum (Figures 3 and 4). You continue to weave around fellow visitors as you explore this digital realm. With strategically placed mirrors and shiny floor tiles, some rooms appear to recede into infinity. One area births a kaleidoscope of butterflies while another generates a murder of crows. A school of fish rushes from one side of the exhibition space to another, shaping a path according to the human bodies obstructing the floor (Figure 5). As the potential for interaction within the environment becomes clear, you begin to join others growing flowers, catching crows, and taking photographs of the digital ecosystem in which you now play a part.

Time passes and the seasons change. The chrysanthemums of autumn give way to the deep blue pansies and violas of winter, followed by the geraniums and pink cherry blossoms of spring and the golden sunflowers of summer (Figures 6–9). Still, every visitor's action in the space has a consequence; standing still will grow a bed of flowers, grazing a hand along the wall may kill butterflies or crows; fish divert around the sea of people grouped in the room. The environment reacts and responds to the presence of both digital and human presence unique to each moment and relies on active engagement with the space. Even when you are ready to exit the exhibition, your impact on the environment

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remains for the next wave of awestruck visitors while you rejoin the more "traditional" gallery spaces of the museum.

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 1. (**a**) *teamLab: Continuity* entrance, 2021–2022, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022. (**b**). teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Figure 2. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021 and *Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders, Transcending Space*, 2019/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

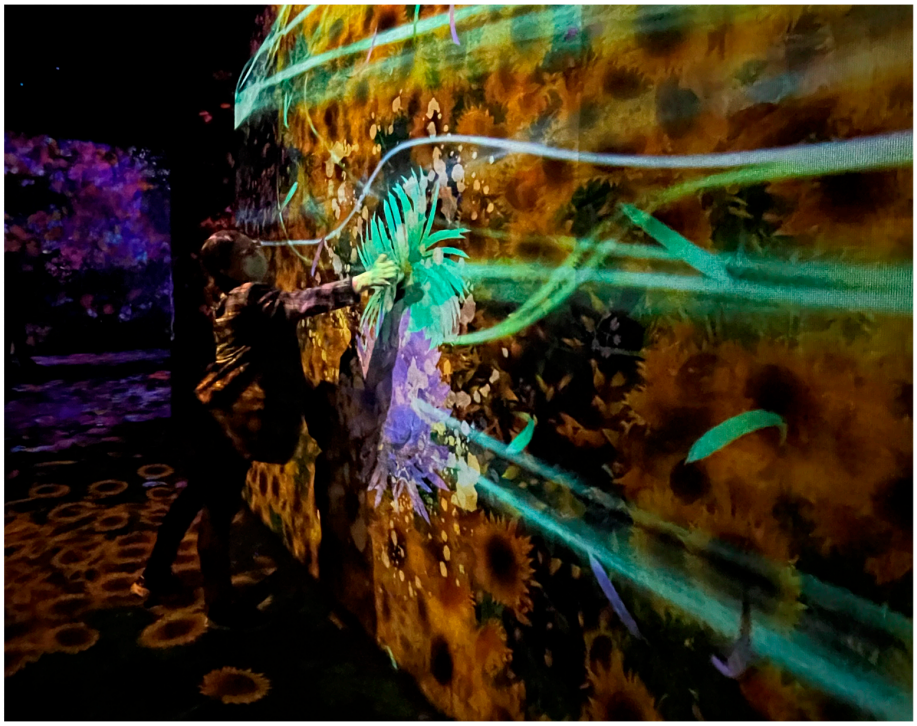

Figure 3. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021 and *Crows are Chased and the Chasing Crows are Destined to be Chased as well, Flying Beyond Borders*, 2018/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

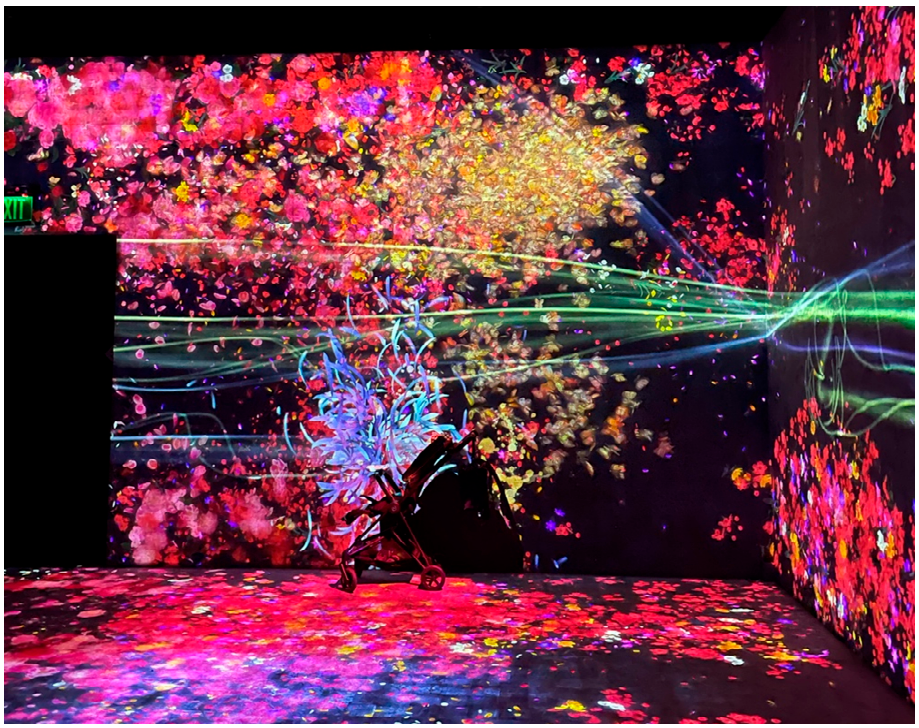

Figure 4. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021, *Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders, Transcending Space*, 2019/2021, and *Crows are Chased and the Chasing Crows are Destined to be Chased as well, Flying Beyond Borders*, 2018/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

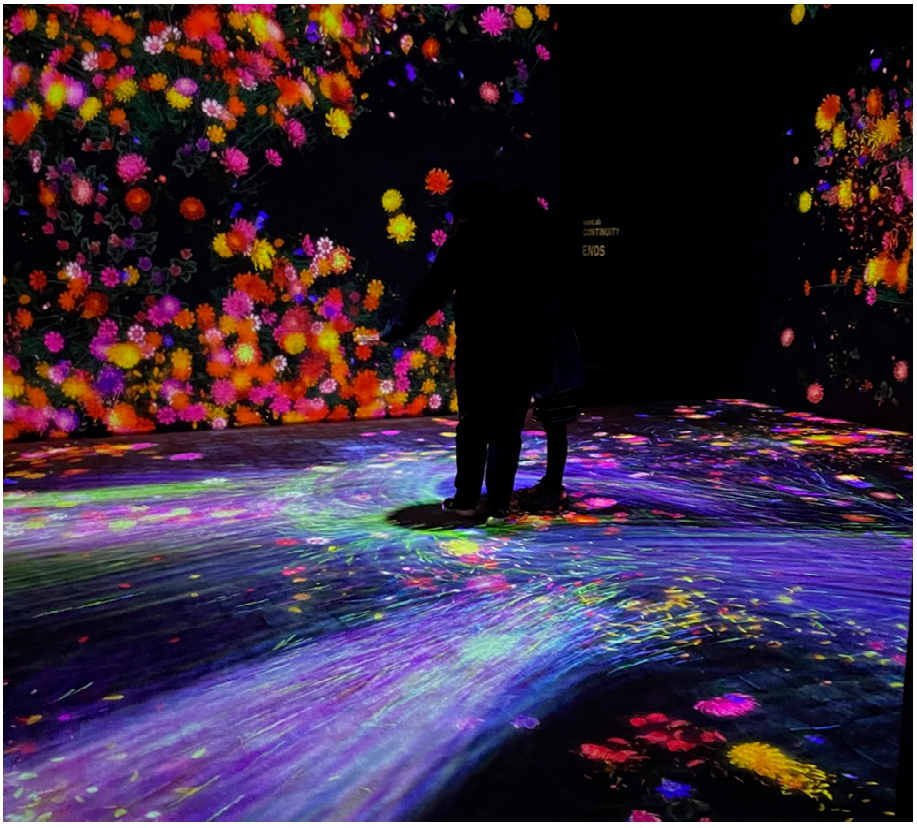

Figure 5. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021 and *The Way of the Sea, Flying Beyond Borders–Colors of Life*, 2018/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Figure 6. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (Autumn), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Figure 7. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (Winter), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Figure 8. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (Spring), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

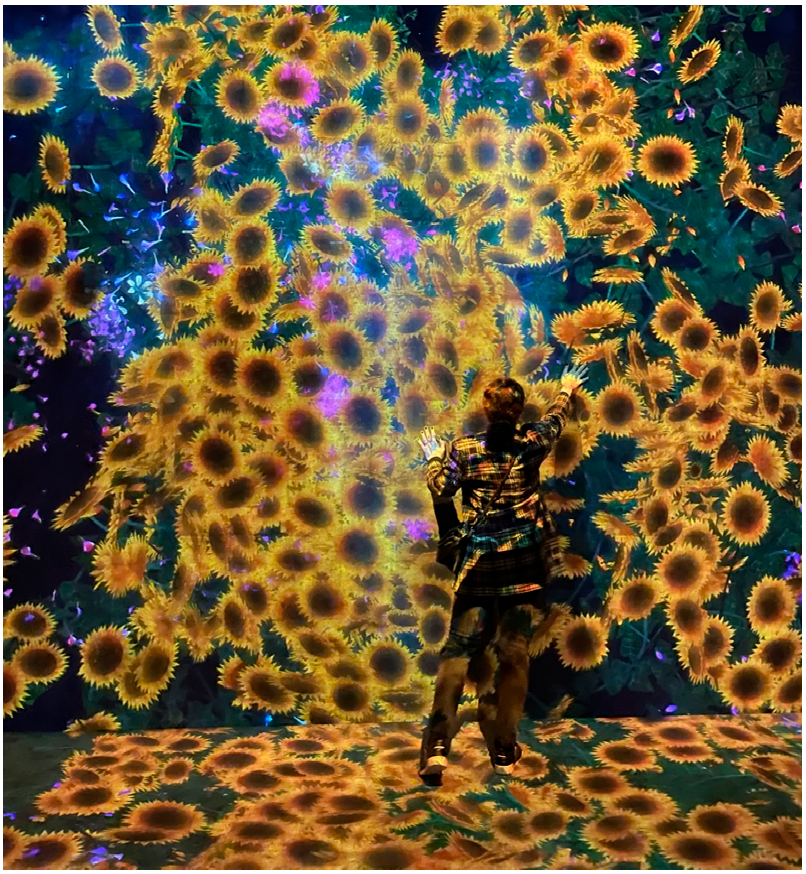

Figure 9. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (Summer), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

This immersive exhibition, titled *teamLab: Continuity*, was on display 23 July 2021 until 28 February 2022, attracting over 125,000 visitors.[2] According to teamLab, the Japanese artist collective responsible for the exhibition, *Continuity* was so-titled because "everything exists in a long, fragile yet miraculous borderless continuity of life" (Asian Art Museum Exhibitions Website 2022). People are meant to co-exist within the digital ecosystem, dissolving boundaries between one another, the artworks, and ideas of the natural environment. For this reason, the exhibition is a fruitful example of "collective interactive experience" in digital art. In this type of experience, humans share space with other humans in an environment that relies on physical presence and communal action; the existence of others inherently shapes the experience of the artworks and the themes they address. This article examines *Continuity* as a digital ecosystem that relies upon collective interactive experience for its realization as an immersive exhibition. It begins with an introduction to teamLab—a pioneering collective that has been instrumental in defining twenty-first century new media practice. It then offers a conceptualization of a collective interactive experience in digital art before an analysis of *Continuity* as a lively digital ecosystem. The article concludes with a reflection on collective interactive experience in the post-COVID-19, Instagram-oriented art experiences of the 2020s.

2. teamLab: The Ultratechnologist Group

teamLab was co-founded in 2001 with five members—Inoko Toshiyuki (b. 1977), Sakai Daisuke (b. 1978), Tamura Tetsuya (b. 1977), Yoshimura Joe (b. 1977), and Aoki Shunsuke (b. 1978)—each bringing specialized training in software engineering, robotics, and information technology (Lee 2022).[3] The collective calls itself the "Ultratechnologist Group" working to "navigate the confluence of art, science, technology, design and the natural world" (teamLab Website 2022). Founded as both an information technology start-

up and an art collective, teamLab established a commercial production wing to fund the group's artistic projects. While one side of the company develops search engines, digital products, and office space design, the other creates video and projection-mapped artworks that apply these advanced technologies to the visual arts. Because of this, teamLab's artistic endeavors are intrinsically tied to the commercial and financial interests of the collective in a broader media–technological milieu—a point that cannot be overlooked when situating teamLab between the commercial and institutional art worlds today.

teamLab's first major institutional art presence was at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 2008, where the collective exhibited *Flower and Corpse Animation Diorama* (2008) in the *Kansei—Japan Design Exhibition.* Using a dozen screens positioned around the exhibition space, the artwork surrounded visitors with a twelve-scene illustrated story that utilized premodern Japanese perspective techniques (teamLab Design Exhibition Website 2008). The exposure in Paris and affinity with the Superflat movement brought teamLab to the attention of internationally renowned artist Murakami Takashi (b. 1962), who invited the collective to organize a solo exhibition at the Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Taipei.[4] *LIVE!* (生きる！) was installed in 2011 and catapulted teamLab into the global contemporary art world. The collective grew exponentially. In 2013, teamLab participated in the Singapore Biennale. The following year, the group signed with Pace Gallery and opened their first exhibition at Miraikan in Tokyo, which attracted half a million visitors. In 2015, the collective represented Japan at the World Expo in Milan, which was closely followed by the opening of DMM.PLANETS Art by teamLab in 2016, their first large-scale immersive exhibition space. teamLab's success of the 2010s culminated in the opening of the MORI Building DIGITAL ART MUSEUM: EPSON teamLab Borderless in 2018, touted as the first-ever digital museum with 107,000 square feet of exhibition space in Odaiba, Tokyo. The need for even more space resulted in the Odaiba location's permanent closure in 2022 after breaking a record for the world's most visited museum, with plans to reopen as an underground attraction in the Toranomon-Azabudai Project's JP¥ 580 billion revitalization initiative (Steen 2022). The collective's artworks are now in permanent collections of museums worldwide, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and Amos Rex in Helsinki.[5] Today, teamLab is home to over 750 "ultratechnologists," bringing together artists, programmers, engineers, CG animators, mathematicians, architects, and designers for both its commercial and artistic wings (Mun-Delsalle 2018).

The interdisciplinary marriage of engineering, scientific research, entertainment industries, and art in teamLab's practice also represents a growing trend toward commercially oriented immersive experiences. teamLab's model—an artist-run company with integrated studios, Do-It-Yourself approaches, well-equipped collective workspaces, dedicated display space, and funding through ticketed experiences—lead the Research and Development Platform at Serpentine Galleries to label it as a "future art ecosystem" in 2020 (Serpentine R&D Platform 2020). Indeed, the group's international presence plays a key role in the recent explosion of spectacular, Instagram-oriented exhibitions. In addition to pop-up and semi-permanent displays, the collective has launched projects such as *Worlds Unleashed and then Connecting* (2015), an artwork designed as a "digital dining experience" at MoonFlower Sagaya Ginza in Tokyo. In this immersive experience, projection-mapped algorithms respond to dishes on the table in a luxury restaurant environment (teamLab MoonFlower Sagaya Ginza Website 2017). At the same time, however, teamLab is an active participant in the mainstream contemporary art world. With representation by Pace Gallery, teamLab's work is regularly included in solo and group exhibitions in more traditional museum and gallery settings. Though this conflation is not new in the long history of new media practice overall, teamLab is poised to further blur the lines between mainstream contemporary art and commercial immersive experiences in today's artistic landscape.[6]

teamLab's work is also deeply rooted in the history of art and technology in Japan, a history that helped establish new media art's mode of production today. Though the collective's approach is related to similar international collaborative studios such as Random

International (est. 2005), Studio Drift (est. 2007), and Forensic Architecture (est. 2010) that engage emerging technologies for their artistic output, teamLab should not be separated from its genesis in modern and contemporary Japanese art history. With a long record of art associations, loosely organized or strict membership groups, and interdisciplinary collaborations across industries, new media artists in Japan were poised to pioneer the model of team-based art production that is prevalent today. Morris Low agrees, arguing:

> The media-technological context of digital art in Japan originates in the context of collaborative practices between the digital media industry, research laboratories, programming specialists and research and education centers (sic) bridging the gap between art, design, and science. Technological developments undertaken by large companies such as Sanyo, Sony, or Matsushita, are being linked to Japanese craftsmanship, and in relation to nature and aesthetics. (Low 2009)

New media art in Japan is especially entwined with various interdisciplinary specialties and relies on collaboration between these entities. In fact, Japanese artists were some of the first to join forces with corporate giants such as Canon and NTT (the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation), a trend that Serpentine Galleries identifies as an important strategy for an "art-industrial revolution" in the 2020s (Serpentine R&D Platform 2020). This infrastructure continues to grow as a model for new media art production and innovation worldwide, and is born from a longer history of collectivity and approach to art–technology projects in Japan that deserve closer examination.

However, in contrast to the avant-garde structure in both Japanese and Euro-American art history of individual artists working to further their own practice within a group structure, teamLab works as a single entity. Though the 750 members of the collective have distinct roles, artworks are developed collaboratively and under the unifying name of teamLab. The group even prefers to conduct interviews about their artworks as teamLab regardless of the individual spokesperson who conducted the interview (Lee 2022).[7] In addition, apart from traveling installation crews, teamLab's activity is conducted on-site and in-person at their Tokyo headquarters. This allows the artists to create works that are both conceptually and practically steeped in a collective mindset. According to Laura Lee in *Worlds Unbound: The Art of teamLab*:

> . . . each individual's embodied contributions are transformed into imaginative acts that develop the image as it unfurls, such that the creative agency of viewers' communal behaviors plays an authorial role in the work. Thus, teamLab's emphasis on collectivity and collaboration in its working process—its dismantling of the single-artist model—extends conceptually also to the exhibition context, where individual and communal participation in creative activities represent what teamLab calls "co-creation". (Lee 2022)

It is this mindset of collaboration and co-creation that informs teamLab's application of collective interactive experience in their digital art installations. In teamLab's case, it is the entanglement of their conceptual approach with their working process that generates this type of experience in their exhibition spaces—a point that is particularly salient in the *Continuity* exhibition. The next section thus provides more definition to collective interactive experience as a particular type of interactivity in digital art before applying it to *Continuity* as a lively digital ecosystem.

3. Collective Interactive Experience in Digital Art

Various types of interactive experience can be achieved in digital art—from individual experiences that only engage one participant at a time to distributed experiences that connect participants across shared virtual platforms. In "collective interactive experience," digital artworks respond to multiple bodies simultaneously in shared exhibition space. Though the type often encompasses digital installation art that offers an embodied, immersive experience, collective interactive experience is not exclusive to a particular medium of artistic production. The public artwork *Impulse* (2015–2016) by Lateral Office (est. 2003),

for example, asked visitors to Montreal's arts district to play on see-saws that responded with light and sound according to the participants' movements and the expanded urban environment (Torrents 2018). On the other hand, Brian Knep's *Healing Pool* (2008) utilizes projection mapping and dynamic algorithms to allow people walking over an image to witness its scarring and healing process in a more formal gallery space (Shanbaum 2019). Though these artworks are different in site, material, and conceptual approach, they share the type of collective interactive experience in how participants are meant to engage with the artwork together.

The shared environment in collective interactive experience creates a sense of immersion in the artwork. According to Panayiota Demetriou, "the state of immersion increases if one experiences it with others and with relevance and immediacy" (Demetriou 2018). Whether or not people are physically surrounded by a digital environment, their engagement with the artwork and with others allows them to feel immersed in their experience. The social dimension of this sensation cannot be overstated, as the ongoing interaction between individuals allows them to "suspend disbelief" that they are in a constructed environment.[8] Demetriou understands this in terms of the "disappearance of signs:" "where to be truly immersed in a situation one must almost forget about the technological infrastructure used, as a type of 'unawareness' to the system in complete captivation" (Demetriou 2018). The focus thus shifts from the technology itself to the experience of sharing an artwork with other people engaged in the same activity.

The co-present nature of collective interactive experience allows artworks categorized in this type to emphasize co-creation, or the realization of works through direct engagement between participants and the art, artist, and/or each other. According to Ben Walmsley, "co-creation represents a broadening perspective of creative production from the individual to the collective and a socially led reconceptualization of creative consumption" (Walmsley 2019). Co-creation relies on the active presence of multiple participants that play a crucial role in generating the artwork itself. This is an important feature of collective interactive experience, as the type insists on engagement between an artwork and many people sharing a co-present situation. Co-creation can also manifest in the working process of an artist collective creating artworks in an interdisciplinary, team-based setting. In an example such as teamLab, the artist group co-creates the environment as a template, which is realized through the collective actions of participants co-creating their experience with the artwork.

Co-creation also recognizes the potential for uncontrolled, unplanned, and improvised action in shared space. According to Kenny K.N. Chow, "interaction between humans and digital environments should be continuous and simultaneous ... a digital environment has to accept user bodily motion as input and present perceivable constant changes" (Chow 2013). In collective interactive experience, these changes occur both by individual participants' actions and the actions of others that share the same space. The environment responds in kind to any motion; when multiple people are engaged simultaneously, the actions of one will fundamentally affect the experience of another. A design that allows for the perception of immediate reaction to bodily movement thus heightens the sense of unplanned co-creation in the space. In fact, Chow argues that participants sharing multimedia space become "co-performers" in a "live" interactive show. He argues:

> The multimedia artifact contributes to different versions of the performance, because the generative processes support pseudorandom variation, and interactivity facilitates human intervention. Hence, each presentation is like an improvised co-creation between the participants and the artifact. This kind of co-creation is more improvised than prepared because the designer can never exactly know how or when the participants would take action to interfere with the outcome. (Chow 2013)[9]

Participants' actions bring such artworks to life. Artworks must therefore be able to react and respond to a wide variety of simultaneous actions that could be random and impulsive. For this reason, experiences may be entirely different each time a participant enters into

new collective situations within the artwork—a phenomenon that is especially relevant to the *Continuity* exhibition as a digital ecosystem.

Co-creation is also tied to a sense of play. Especially when participants are joined by close friends and family members, they become comfortable and enjoy the opportunity to explore the limits of the interactive space. Chow contends that, in a lively digital environment, people "build habits to interact with the medium transparently, feel at home in the environment, develop a sense of intimacy and pleasantness with it, make sense out of it, and are encouraged to imagine" (Chow 2013). Miriam Bratu Hansen takes this a step further, discussing how collective play in technological environments could inspire modes of collective action by establishing new relationships between bodies and images (Hansen 2004). Indeed, in a collective interactive environment, participants have the opportunity to re-imagine their relationships with spaces, other humans, and digital technologies. This concept is a core of teamLab's practice. According to the group: "People think with their bodies as they move through the world, and much of human society has developed through creative achievements born from collaboration and collective play" (teamLab 2016). To teamLab, playful actions heighten participants' awareness of the world they inhabit and can inspire a reconsideration of their own impact upon shared ecosystems. It is for this reason that the collective rarely publishes instructions or descriptions of how their artworks function, instead encouraging visitors to explore the limits and capabilities of the installations on their own.[10] The next section explores these concepts further, with a focus on the construction of a digital ecosystem in *teamLab: Continuity* as exemplary of collective interactive experience.

4. *teamLab: Continuity* as Digital Ecosystem

Continuity featured sixteen artworks designed by the teamLab collective, ten of which were iterations of their ongoing designs of interactive digital installations. Using projection mapping and dynamic algorithms, the digital artworks were overlayed onto the Asian Art Museum's existing floor and temporary walls using fifty projectors and six high-definition screens, and were powered by an air-conditioned room full of computer equipment.[11] According to Laura Lee: "Projection mapping is a technique that produces mixed reality by utilizing spatial mapping—the virtual 3D reconstruction of an environment—to convert an object into a projection surface, thereby enabling rich media content to overlay actual objects and environments" (Lee 2022). Despite the necessity for bulky technical components, the meticulously designed and detailed projections allow the ceiling-mounted equipment to fade into the background. The brilliant artworks capture full attention. Because the space feels all-encompassing, the average visitor will likely never notice the tangle of projectors and wires above. When Emily Stokes-Rees visited Borderless, teamLab's exhibition space in Tokyo, she reflected: "As digital art exists outside of the constraints of materiality, in *teamLab Borderless* the building may be a significant physical structure, but somehow its presence—its walls and corridors and ceilings—melt into the background" (Stokes-Rees 2019). Indeed, the design of teamLab's projection-mapped environments create a highly immersive experience despite the need for technological equipment and presence of immoveable infrastructure.

In the *Continuity* exhibition galleries, the projected artworks do not have distinct borders; one area blends into the next and digital creatures, such as butterflies or crows, are free to roam widely. *Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders* (2015/2021) and *The Way of the Sea, Flying Beyond Borders—Colors of Life* (2018/2021), for example, overlay into *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (2017/2021) with no clear distinction between where one artwork begins and another ends. The seasons also gradually change—one year passes in the span of one hour—with a slow evolution of flowers and scents according to this lifecycle. The exhibition creates a digital ecosystem, with flowers, butterflies, crows, fish, and calligraphy interacting with both human participants and other digital objects in a constantly evolving space.

An ecosystem is defined as "a biological system composed of all the organisms found in a particular physical environment, interacting with it and each other. Also in extended use: a complex system resembling this" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). In *Continuity*, both aspects of this definition are in play. In the first instance, the exhibition mimics biological systems of birth, life, death, and interactive relationships between organisms in the natural world. Digital creatures exist in relation to the projected environment and respond to both each other and the humans sharing the space. In the second instance, teamLab's design necessitates a complex system of technological components that interact to realize the fabricated environment in a physical gallery. This layering of ecological concepts in the immersive exhibition allows for an understanding of digital ecosystems as both reflections of the operations of the natural world and highly artificial constructions. Indeed, teamLab's intention to present *Continuity* in terms of "everything exist[ing] in a long, fragile yet miraculous borderless continuity of life" recognizes both the thematic tie to this concept and the fragility of the digital ecosystem as a fabricated replica of the natural environment.

teamLab's use of interactive technology to produce a convincing digital ecosystem necessitates the perception of liveliness. Kenny K.N. Chow explores the technical requirements for this perception in his book, *Animation, Embodiment, and Digital Media.* He investigates two interrelated concepts of "animated phenomena" and "technological liveliness," which together produce a digital illusion of life. The term "animated," which at its core means "endowed with life," requires a "human-familiar, dynamic, lively *phenomena"* (Chow 2013). Movement alone does not endow an inanimate object with life; digital animations must also feature fundamentals of natural life, including "reaction to stimuli, adaption to changes in surroundings, metamorphosis (rapid shape shifting), growth in size or population (gradual change), and even breath (rhythmic and persistent change)" (Chow 2013). These phenomena—which range from subtle effects to obvious movement—can be digitally replicated as "technological liveliness" that simulates the natural world and works within the logical framework humans have constructed to understand organic life.

teamLab pushes the boundary of Chow's framework in an ongoing conceptual project entitled "Digitized Nature". According to the collective: "Nature has formed over a very long period of time. By turning nature into art we can gain a sense of the continuity of nature, that humans do not usually perceive" (teamLab Digitized Nature Website 2002). In the *Continuity* space, "Digitized Nature" is projected onto inorganic elements; gallery walls and floors serve as the foundation for the artworks' display. The digital objects are nonetheless lively replications of nature: butterfly wings curl in flight and flower petals drift off their branches and float away as if guided by air currents. Digital elements also react to each other and the gallery itself. Crows will burst into a chrysanthemum if they collide with the few high-definition screens installed in the southeastern gallery. Fish shape their route across the exhibition space according to the other digital creatures in their path. Flowers bloom, grow, and wilt away as the seasons change. These detailed aspects of teamLab's design and programming realize the projections as co-existent members of a dynamic (though highly constructed) ecological system that realizes an artificial cycle of life. Indeed, the condensed passage of time and change of season every fifteen minutes allows for the perception of the digitized environment as evolving at a recognizable pace despite the unnatural construction of this timeline.

Still, "Digitized Nature" is a simulacrum; it cannot replicate the phenomenological experience of interacting with a living environment. teamLab's reliance on technological liveliness and dynamic algorithms solidifies their immersive digital ecosystems as controlled, designed, and fabricated experiences. At the same time, teamLab's reliance on collective human actions to realize the artworks—actions that encourage both physical and social engagement with other living beings experiencing the exhibition together—is fundamental to their approach. At the beginning of the day, the walls and floor are largely blank, and the room is steeped in scented floral perfume.[12] It is the participants' movements—from actively pressing their body against the wall to standing still for a few moments or roaming the galleries—that slowly begins to grow seasonal flowers and diffuse scent throughout the

space. Butterflies are birthed in *The Void* (2016/2021), a set of blank monitors that explode with life as soon as a person enters the alcove (Figure 10). Crows emerge from *Crows are Chased and the Chasing Crows are Destined to be Chased as well, Transcending Space* (2014/2021), a projected video loop that is triggered by the presence of visitors in its gallery (Figure 11). According to Lee, "it is viewer interactivity that brings the formal configuration of the piece[s] into reality, with the work[s] changing uniquely in relation to the individual, the collective, and the specific moment" (Lee 2022). It is therefore the shared actions of people interacting with the space throughout each day that brings the digital ecosystem to "life".

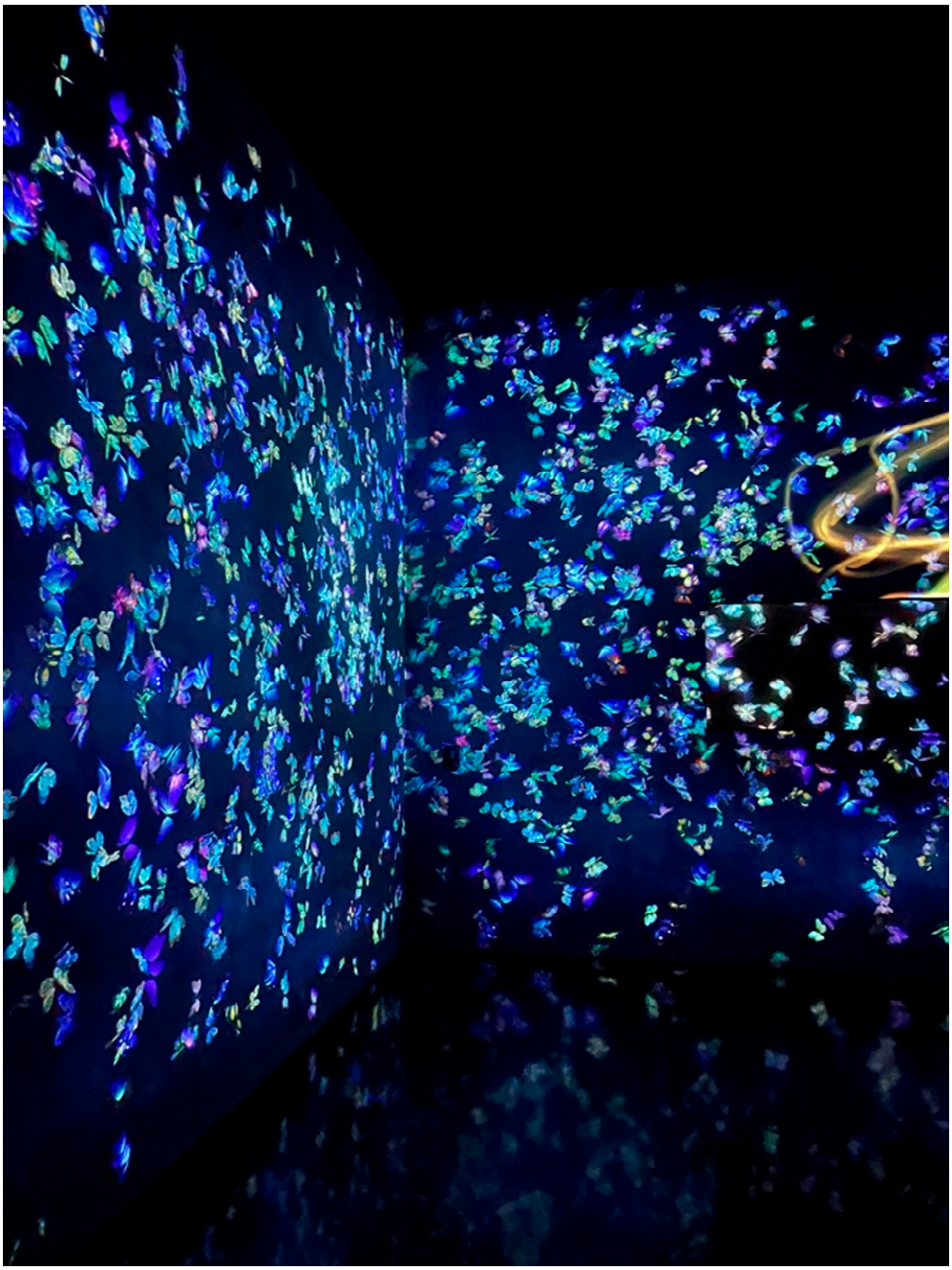

Figure 10. teamLab, *Flutter of Butterflies Beyond Borders, Ephemeral Life*, 2015/2021 in *The Void*, 2016/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Figure 11. teamLab, *Crows are Chased and the Chasing Crows are Destined to be Chased as well, Flying Beyond Borders*, 2018/2021 emerging from *Crows are Chased and the Chasing Crows are Destined to be Chased as well, Transcending Space*, 2017/2021 into *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn*, 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

Indeed, the presence of other people is a positive factor in the overall experience of the exhibition. Fellow participants are part of the ecosystem and are seen as co-creators and co-actors in the execution of the artworks. According to teamLab:

> *Viewers become part of the work. This changes the relationship between an artwork and an individual into a relationship between an artwork and a group of individuals. Factors such as whether there were any viewers that saw the work five minutes before you did, or what the viewer next to you is currently doing, suddenly become important. At a minimum, our interactive installations call more attention to the actions of the viewers around you than would a traditional painting. Unlike a viewer who stands in front of a conventional painting, a viewer immersed in an interactive artwork becomes more aware of other people's presence. The result is that the art gains the ability to influence the relationships between the viewers standing in front of it. And if the effect of another person's presence on the art is beautiful, it is possible that that person's presence itself will be seen as beautiful.* (Lee 2022)[13]

In contrast to other museums and galleries that emphasize solo experiences with individual artworks in minimalist, "white-cube" settings, teamLab's installations rely on the presence of others to activate the vibrant environment for all. According to Lee, "people must necessarily share the spaces for the artworks to properly operate, and the works are designed to encourage communality" (Lee 2022). Collective action is highly valued. However, with its melodic soundscape and gradual seasonal changes, the shared space encourages contemplativeness and awe. Rather than facilitating a fast or high-energy visit, participants are encouraged to slow down (Figure 12).[14] Flowers grow on a delay; it takes a few

moments for people to notice their impact on the environment and the exhibition demands patience to experience the yearlong cycle (Figure 13). Because visitors are not competing for space or time, they are able to exist among the evolving ecosystem as members of a shared experience.

Figure 12. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (slow down), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

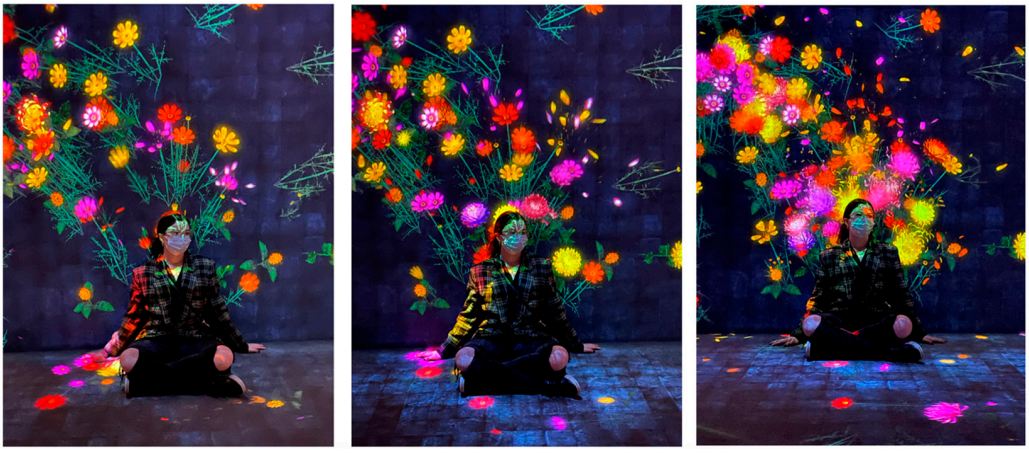

Figure 13. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* (slow growing), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

The co-presence of humans, flora, and fauna in the digital ecosystem also reveals teamLab's understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural environment. As mentioned at this article's outset, human impacts on the space have lasting consequences—even oblivious actions may result in the deaths of butterflies or crows and fish must alter their paths in response to human presence. A pessimistic view suggests that digital envi-

ronments such as this may one day be the only interactive depictions of healthy ecosystems left on the planet—especially if exploitive, capitalist systems of resource extraction persist in service of technological development. However, teamLab's philosophy points to a more balanced approach to humans and nature. According to the collective:

> *Rather than nature and humans being in conflict, a healthy ecosystem is one that includes people. In the past, people understood that they could not grasp nature in its entirety, and that it is not possible to control nature. People lived more closely aligned to the rules of nature that created a comfortable natural environment . . . we hope to explore a form of human intervention based on the premise that nature cannot be controlled*. (teamLab Forest of Flowers and People Website 2017)[15]

Instead of presenting a utopic ideal of the natural world or allowing human destruction to create a dystopic future, teamLab demands a dynamic relationship between humans and nature. Human presence is necessary for the artworks to function, and yet, participants fundamentally alter the space with their actions. The ecosystem thus allows for a more nuanced approach to the repercussions of sharing space with both other humans and various living things, even though teamLab's design is highly constructed and controlled by the collective's digital approach.

teamLab's goal is to change relationships between oneself, each other, and the world through art (teamLab Website 2022). By heightening our perceptions of the interrelated experiences we share, *Continuity's* digital ecosystem is intended to provide a microcosm of relationships in the external world. In fact, Lee argues that the group's use of digital tools (which could be seen as disembodying artifacts of a technology-driven age) instead "reinsert embodiment and harmonious collectivity within people's lives" (Lee 2022). In this collective interactive experience, the environment's embodying elements of immersive imagery, evocative soundscapes, and alluring scents transport participants into a virtual world in which they can imagine new relationships that might transfer to the physical world. teamLab agrees, writing:

> *With immersion of the body into the artwork, the boundary between the self and the artwork becomes ambiguous. And, through that experience, the boundary between the self and the world begins to disappear. Because our presence and the presence of others can cause change in the shared world of the artwork, it is possible that we will feel ourselves and others meld with the world and become one body*. (teamLab 2016)

It is in this setting that people might become more aware of how they intersect with their surroundings and begin to value the shared impact we make upon both each other and the environment. With today's anxieties surrounding climate change, the fractured political landscape, and adaptations to a post-COVID-19 world, this is an important exercise to emphasize commonalities in the relationships we share in our external lives.

As this article demonstrates, *Continuity* is a useful illustration of collective interactive experience via the development of a digital ecosystem. The exhibition relies on shared space and communal action that fundamentally affects all participants' experiences, and it is teamLab's working philosophies that facilitate co-creation and collective play in the exhibition space. As the group asserts: "Our hope is that through enjoying this co-creative experience people may become more creative in their everyday lives" (teamLab 2016). Indeed, teamLab's works are meant to extend beyond the gallery walls, inspiring a collective mindset in both the group itself and in the participants that experience their installation spaces.

5. Collective Interactive Experience in the 2020s

With today's proliferation of spectacular immersive art exhibitions worldwide, it is vital to understand how collective interactive experiences are designed and approached. teamLab's installations—simultaneously a technology showcase, a social media magnet, and an ecological platform for interrogating the human relationship with nature—are important contributions to new media art production and collective interactive experience with digital art in the 2020s. This continues a trend toward what Laura Lee terms "hash-

tag art," or "contemporary exhibitions that are designed to be visually spectacular and thus lend themselves to picture taking and social media posting" (Lee 2022) (Figure 14). Such experiences do not have to be entirely superficial. Lee argues that social media platforms do not dilute art, but rather facilitate its networked distribution and connection to popular visuality. For this reason, hashtag art "flies in the face of structures of exclusivity that separate art from the masses, with art's imbrication in the quotidian granting the public influence over its orbit" (Lee 2022). With the rapid expansion of organizations including Superblue, Artech House, and MeowWolf, in addition to exhibitions such as Immersive van Gogh, it is vital to interrogate how these experiences are designed, what larger themes they address, and if their hashtag tendencies are in service of democratizing experiences with art.

Figure 14. teamLab, *Forest of Flowers and People: Lost, Immersed and Reborn* ("hashtag art"), 2017/2021, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; photograph by the author, 2022.

For its part, *teamLab: Continuity* was instrumental in launching the Asian Art Museum's renewed dedication to contemporary Asian artists. The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Lang Pavilion expanded the museum by seventeen percent, giving unprecedented space for twentieth and twenty-first century art. The museum's director, Jay Xu, considers the museum's new vision in terms of "connection:" "Connection of the art of the past with the art of the present . . . of Asian art's global relevance and the rest of the world . . . (and) of art to life" (Desmarais 2020). Partnering with teamLab for this launch was intentional. Not only does the collective represent cutting-edge artistic production in Asia and internationally, but it also attracts a new generation of donors from the Bay Area tech industry. In addition, the collaboration furthers an ongoing relationship between the museum and teamLab, as the Asian Art Museum was the first in North America to accession teamLab artworks, *Life Survives by the Power of Life* (2011) and *Cold Life* (2014), in 2015. teamLab now bridges experimental pop-up spaces, traditional museum exhibitions and collections, and the commercial design industry. These factors will continue to define and influence both new media art production and the proliferation of spectacular immersive art exhibitions

worldwide, further blurring relationships artists hold with the institutional art world and the experience economy.

Furthermore, and especially in the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns, collective interactive experiences in digital art take on a new tone. *Continuity* itself was delayed due to the pandemic, as the exhibition was intended to launch in the spring of 2020. With the return to in-person museum visits, especially exhibitions that involve interacting with the space and fellow visitors, collective interactive experience feels both heightened and valued in a new way. As museums, galleries, and experimental art centers continue to engage with this type of experience, it is more important than ever to interrogate how collectivity and collective experiences manifest in digital art practices. It is through such experiences that we are reminded how connected we are, and how much we rely on the ecosystems in which we play a vital part.

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Notes

1 For this article, I consider the *Continutiy* exhibition as a single borderless installation except for the northestern room, *Born From the Darkness a Loving, and Beautiful World* (2018/2021), which featured calligraphic *kanji* (the Japanese writing system using Chinese characters) turning into elements of water, fire, and rainbows when touched.

2 This statistic was shared by Robert Mintz, Deputy Director of Art and Programs at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. *Continuity* feaetured many of the same artworks as those at teamLab: Borderless in Tokyo but was 1/10th of the size.

3 There remains an ongoing discussion in the field of global contemporary art on naming conventions for international artists and scholars. Throughout this article, names are listed according to the native custom (generally, for East Asia-born individuals, family name first and given name second; for North America and Western Europe-born individuals, given name first and family name second).

4 teamLab calls its mode of spatial perspective "ultrasubjective space," which is a compositional technique that makes 3D space appear "flat" as in traditional Japanese art. This technique is fundamental to teamLab's practice; it both ties their work to historical aesthetics and allows the group to push back against the dominant mode of single-point perspective in today's popular imagery. This approach is not unlike that of Murakami Takashi's, who founded the Superflat movement in the early 2000s to engage with Japanese manga, anime, and other pop culture that relies on "flattened" imagery as a commentary on superficiality in contemporary Japanese culture. See Murakami (2000).

5 For more history on teamLab, see Lee (2022).

6 For more on the history of tensions between mainstream contemporary art and new media art, see Shanken (2015).

7 This approach to teamLab's collectivism was embraced and understood in Lee (2022). However, it was challenged in the *teamLab: Continuity* exhibition catalogue, which made sure to attribute quotes to specific members of the team and highlight individual members of the collective. See Oen et al. (2020).

8 The idea of "suspension of disbelief" is important to histories of immersive technologies. The nineteenth century concept originates from poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge's analysis of live theater, as audiences know that what they are watching is "pretend," but they are still able to enjoy the experience. See Wilson Allen and Hayden Clark (1962), Laurel (1991), and Murray (2016).

9 For more on the idea of performance in a media environment, see Auslander (2008).

10 This was discussed with me in an interview with Alexa Canova-Parker, at the time a contemporary art intern at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, on August 10, 2021.

11 Installation and infrastructure information was told to me in an interview with Robert Mintz, Deputy Director of Art and Programs at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco on August 19, 2021.

12 teamLab partnered with the perfumer L'Occin in 2016, but *Continuity* used a private Japanese perfumer who designed the original scents. Diffusers throughout the space represent the four seasons, and the scents were replenished every two months. This information was gathered in an interview with Alexa Canova-Parker, at the time a contemporary art intern at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, on 10 August 2021.

[13] See this sentiment expressed in Stokes-Rees (2019) and Senda (2018).

[14] This point was reinforced in an interview with Karin Oen, curator of *teamLab: Continuity*, on 29 August 2021.

[15] These concepts are also tied to traditional Japanese values in Shinto. For more on how these traditions impact digital media, see Chow (2013).

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Article

Connection: Digitally Representing Australian Aboriginal Art through the Immersive Virtual Museum Exhibition

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Abstract: In 2022, the National Museum of Australia launched an immersive virtual exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art: *Connection*: *Songlines from Australia's First Peoples*, which was created and produced by Grande Experiences, the same team that produced the multisensory experience *Van Gogh Alive*. The exhibition employs large-scale projections and cutting-edge light and sound technology to offer a mesmerizing glimpse into the intricate network of Australian Aboriginal art, which is an ancient pathway of knowledge that traverses the continent. Serving as the gateway to the Songlines universe, the exhibition invites visitors to delve into the profound spiritual connections with the earth, water, and sky, immersing them in a compellingly rich and thoroughly captivating narrative with a vivid symphony of sound, light, and color. This article examines *Connection* as a digital storytelling platform by exploring the Grande Experiences company's approach to the digital replication of Australian Aboriginal art, with a focus on the connection between humans and nature in immersive exhibition spaces.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal art; digital representation; immersive virtual exhibition; museum

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1. Introduction

Since the first half of the twentieth century, museums in Australia have been collecting Australian Aboriginal art. In 1958, the New South Wales Art Gallery in Sydney exhibited a collection of funerary logs carved from Arnhem wood and painted with clay pigments by artists from the tropical north. This marked the first inclusion of Aboriginal artworks in an Australian art museum's collection (Goldstein 2013). In recent years, museums have evolved from being mere repositories of esteemed collections to becoming spaces for dialogue and multisensory experiences (Levent and Pascual-Leone 2014). Immersive technologies within museums allow visitors to actively engage in their search for meaning by interacting with exhibitions. Following global trends, Australian museums are at the forefront of digitally representing collections, introducing new technologies, developing innovative learning strategies, and engaging visitors.

This study focuses on a recent immersive exhibition called *Connection: Songlines from Australia's First Peoples*. The exhibition, which took place at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra from 8 June to 9 October 2022, offered a breathtaking immersive experience. It showcased dynamic imagery of Australia's First Peoples, encompassing individuals from remote, rural, and urban areas who engage in both traditional and contemporary art forms throughout the country. The exhibition emphasized their significant contributions to the arts and cultural heritage of Australia. This study investigates how immersive technologies were utilized to establish a museum space that fosters visitor engagement, inclusivity, and interaction. By examining digital representations of Australian Aboriginal art, including its materials, techniques, manufacturing processes, and the designer's narrative, this research demonstrates that immersive virtual experiences deepen the audience's engagement with and comprehension of Australian Aboriginal art. The insights gained from this encourage further development of immersive virtual exhibitions

to provide audiences with rich digital experiences and increased multisensory awareness of Australian Aboriginal art.

2. Understanding Australian Aboriginal Art

2.1. The Importance of Australian Aboriginal Art

"'Aboriginal' is a broad term that refers to Nations and Traditional Owners of mainland Australia and most of the islands, including Tasmania, Fraser Island, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Groote Eylandt, and Bathurst and Melville Islands" (University of South Australia 2021). In spite of colonization, Aboriginal citizens have been recognized as a distinct group with unique traditions and values with flourishing Aboriginal cultural forms in the arts and popular culture, particularly through the medium of Aboriginal art (Fisher 2016).

Fisher (2016) recalled the precolonial foundations of Aboriginal expressive forms and explored the way modern forms of Aboriginal art have been shaped by the history of colonialism in Australia in the 1980s. European exhibitions of Aboriginal art were first used to justify the invasion of Australia by suggesting that Aboriginal peoples were primitive and threatening to European culture. However, Aboriginal Australians responded by creating art for public sale to support their communities and preserve their heritage (Sutton 1997). In the twentieth century, what was considered 'Aboriginal art' was art made by Aboriginal Australians living in remote regions, because those living 'beyond the frontier' were distinguished by those who were 'contaminated' by modernity. Indeed, Smith (2006) argues that Australian Aboriginal art has undergone a complex process of modernization. Australian Aboriginal art has always been created by Aboriginal people, but its modernization took place as a result of contact with people of European decent. This process may have begun with the transformation of interrelated artefacts from social and religious rituals into marketable commodities. Accordingly, there are two main phases of Australian Aboriginal art—traditional Aboriginal art that was created before colonization, and contemporary Aboriginal art created after colonization. However, these lines are blurry, as many Aboriginal artists still work with traditional methods while remaining influenced by the colonized world. Thus, 'Aboriginal art' today includes paintings on canvas and linen with acrylics and natural ochres; paintings on bark; local art forms such as pearl shell and emu egg carvings, possum-skin cloaks, hollow log coffins, and spirit figures carved or woven; as well as fine crafts such as shell necklaces, ceramics, and fiber art (Fisher 2012). As an Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins suggests, "The possibilities of Aboriginal art practice are infinite and can have relevance and resonance outside their immediate cultural context while maintaining the integrity of speaking from within that context" (Fink and Perkins 1997).

Aboriginal Australians are the proud keepers of arguably the oldest continuous culture on the planet. Their heritage stretches across many different communities, each with its own unique blend of cultures, customs, and languages. Before the European invasion in 1788, there were more than 250 Indigenous nations, each with several clans (Malaspinas et al. 2016). Throughout the history of Australian cultures, art has been an integral part of knowledge systems that include mapping the landscape and making reference to understanding the landscape through the stories and teachings of Aboriginal ancestors (Neale and Kelly 2020). The development of Australian Aboriginal art form has been extensively documented (Myers 2002). Ever since Australian Aboriginal art has been produced for so-called western art markets, art curators (and cultural theorists) have been challenged to accommodate exhibits within (or beyond) the mainstream categories of art and/or culture (Wildburger 2013). Art and culture are meaningful practices that reflect social values and are also able to establish, affirm, or challenge these values (Schirato 2004). At the core of artistic production is the way Australian Aboriginal artists internalize locality, nationality, and indigeneity. Aboriginal art continues to evolve and negotiate with contemporary art around the globe. In order to make Aboriginal art understood by those who are not born

into it, Aboriginal artists have worked intellectually, culturally, artistically, and politically to ensure that it can be seen, experienced, and understood by others (Skerritt et al. 2016).

Australian Aboriginal art has been collected by museums in Australia since the first half of the twentieth century. In 1958, the New South Wales Art Gallery in Sydney displayed a collection of funerary logs carved in Arnhem wood and with pigments made of clay by painters in the tropical north. It was the first time that an Australian art museum had included Aboriginal artworks in its collection (Goldstein 2013). In recent years, museums have moved from repositories of venerable collections to spaces for speech and multisensory experiences (Levent and Pascual-Leone 2014). Immersive technologies in museums enable visitors to actively participate in their search for meaning by actively interacting with exhibitions. Following the global trends, museums in Australia are the mainstream in terms of digital representing collections, introducing new technologies, developing new learning strategies, and engaging visitors, etc.

2.2. Opportunities and Challenges in Creating the Immersive Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art

The immersive exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art at the National Museum of Australia presented a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges.

2.2.1. Opportunities towards Cultural Attraction, Education, and Collaboration via the Immersive Exhibition

Australian Aboriginal art, intricately woven with identity and spirituality, offers a potent mode of expression within the immersive exhibition. *Connection: Songlines from Australia's First Peoples* served as a channel for communicating the deep bond between Aboriginal art and culture, nurturing comprehension and reverence for cultural heritage. It played a crucial role in conserving and commemorating the abundant cultural legacy of Australian Aboriginal peoples. The collaborative and innovative strategies employed contribute to the transformation of traditional Aboriginal art practices, enhancing the cultural panorama. Additionally, it acted as a repository, preserving traditional knowledge, stories, and artistic traditions for the benefit of future generations.

From a practical perspective regarding the museum's public services, the immersive exhibition acted as a notable cultural attraction. Functioning as a dynamic and captivating educational platform, it imparted knowledge about the profound depth and diversity of Australian Aboriginal art and culture via a focus on storytelling. The exhibition played a significant role in fostering intercultural understanding by providing visitors from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to immerse themselves in the stories and perspectives of Aboriginal communities. The incorporation of cutting-edge technologies amplified the exhibition's storytelling and educational capabilities, offering visitors a more dynamic and interactive experience, thereby enhancing their engagement with the exhibition's content.

The collaborative essence of the exhibition engaged Australian Aboriginal artists, cultural experts, and communities in decision-making processes. This collaboration guaranteed a culturally sensitive and accurate representation while offering Aboriginal artists opportunities to explore new technologies and forms of expression. Simultaneously, it attracted the public to the National Museum of Australia, contributing to tourism and the local economy and creating memorable and impactful visits for patrons.

2.2.2. Challenges in Balancing Technology and Authenticity

Balancing accessibility and authenticity posed a challenge, particularly with high-tech immersive elements. While engaging for many, these elements might alienate visitors who prefer a more traditional museum experience. The risk of immersive technology overshadowing the art and culture it represents is evident. Overreliance on technology might detract from the authenticity of the experience, underscoring the necessity for a balanced approach.

Effectively addressing these challenges was vital to prevent misinterpretations or superficial perceptions of Aboriginal culture. Ensuring accurate, respectful, and com-

prehensive educational content represented another critical challenge. Navigating the complexities of Aboriginal culture was necessary to offer a meaningful and authentic experience for visitors. Therefore, strategic measures were needed to ensure that the educational content fosters a nuanced understanding.

The following section delves into the exhibition to address these opportunities and challenges from a design perspective.

3. The Immersive Experience within *Connection*

3.1. The Digital Representation of Australian Aboriginal Painting Materials

Upon entering the immersive space, visitors are encouraged to freely explore the exhibition at their own pace, engaging with the artworks by sitting, standing, walking, and investigating. The exhibition showcases a multitude of paintings by 80 First Nations artists residing in urban centers, rural areas, and remote communities. These artworks are digitally represented through large-scale projections on walls and floors, animating the paintings in a captivating manner (see Figure 1). The projections and enrichment of the content enhance every element of the artwork, including colors, images, and brushstrokes. Utilizing cutting-edge visual and audio technologies, a range of digital storytelling scenarios unfold in chronological order, providing visitors with a visual experience. For instance, visitors can sit, stand, or walk on ground-based projections, immersing themselves in the changing scenes illuminated by dynamic digital light and shadow. This allows them to observe the materials used in Aboriginal painting and gain a deeper understanding of the enigmatic history and culture of Aboriginal art. Additionally, contextual information such as stories about the creative process and the artists' way of life is presented through background media, including text and audio interpretations. In this informative manner, visitors are invited to partake in an immersive experience, delving into the lives of Aboriginal artists and the stories behind their artistic creations, which are both simple and sublime.

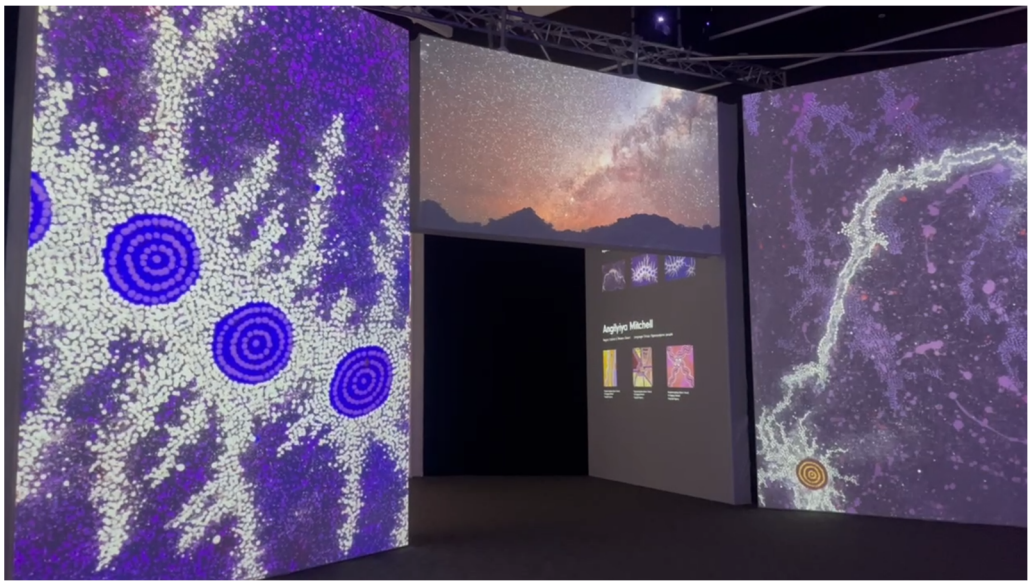

Figure 1. The entrance of *Connection: Songlines from Australia's First Peoples* features several large-scale projections that showcase Aboriginal art elements in an ever-changing interplay of light and shadow. Photograph by Rui Zhang, 2022.

Traditionally, Australian Aboriginal artists utilized materials sourced from the natural environment. A diverse range of materials, such as rocks, bark, wood, plant fibers, animal fur, and even human skin, were employed in painting and craft-making. Similar to many other art forms, Australian Aboriginal art involves a deep connection to the origins, usage, and preservation of these materials. Indigenous artists adhere to their own rules and techniques when it comes to handling artistic materials. Understanding these rules and

methods is essential for effectively incorporating immersive technologies into museum exhibitions, ensuring the appropriate application and integration of these technologies.

The utilization of local and distinctive materials in Aboriginal painting relies on the skills, techniques, and expertise of the artists. Immersive technology facilitates the audience's unrestricted movement within an immersive environment, allowing them to experience the material aspects of Aboriginal painting. Through a diverse array of high-definition images, the exhibition showcases the captivating blend of colors and the amalgamation of various materials, highlighting the ingenuity, skills, and expertise of Aboriginal artists. Within an immersive exhibition space, technology serves as a powerful medium to bridge the gap between visitors' experiences and Aboriginal artworks, as the connection between visitors and such artworks may not be immediate. While an experience with the physical artwork may offer a more powerful engagement with materiality, the argument underlying our exploration is that storytelling, particularly in the context of Australian Aboriginal artists' creations, is better communicated through immersive digital experiences. The digital representation of artworks in diverse immersive forms provides visitors with the freedom to choose how to direct their attention and engage their memory, in accordance with their individual cognitive capabilities.

3.2. The Digital Storytelling of Australian Aboriginal Artists' Creation

Storytelling serves as a method of interpretation, aiming to inspire internal dialogue and establish a genuine connection with visitors. It also acts as a strategy to create an environment that encourages visitors to construct their own meanings (Bedford 2001). In an interview, Dr. Valerie Keenan, manager of the Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre in northern Australia, highlighted that storytelling has traditionally relied on physical and oral processes such as dance, song, and painting. However, the introduction of new materials and artistic practices represents an extension of the past, as Aboriginal artists explore mediums like ceramics, photography, and video. These explorations enable the continuation of the storytelling tradition while embracing a broader global audience (Butler 2019).

Artworks are typically the result of deliberate human actions, and the production and recognition of art necessitates a diverse range of cognitive skills, including semantic memory and visual perception (De Smedt and De Cruz 2011). Art emerges from normal human perceptual and motivational processes (Barry 2006), and it can be studied and appreciated using cognitive psychology methods as an inherent component of human cognition (Dissanayake 2015). Since the 1980s, Aboriginal art has progressively found its place in the collections of numerous Australian galleries and museums, gaining widespread recognition as a significant aspect of Australian art (McLean 2011). The immersive scenarios presented in *Connection*, adopting a narrative approach, play a vital role in making complex relationships accessible and understandable to visitors (see Figure 2). They also help preserve a sense of identity, particularly in relation to the enigmatic history of Australian Aboriginal culture. Bruner (1993) discussed two characteristics of storytelling that are directly relevant to museum exhibits. Firstly, stories serve as a means of knowledge acquisition, ensuring that human histories and cultures are remembered through narrative construction. Secondly, stories assist in clarifying our core values and beliefs. In the case of *Connection*, the immersive narrative reflects the significance of artistic faith within First Nations communities. By employing multiple scenarios, connections can be forged between the works of First Nations artists and the memories and knowledge of visitors. Rather than being instructed on how to feel about the artworks, visitors are offered a far more powerful experience through the gift of digital storytelling, allowing them to interpret Aboriginal artworks based on their own cognitive processes. In essence, museum curators present a new story of the First Nations people's art, guiding visitors along a path they can design themselves, starting from any digital moment, thus fostering an immersive experience that establishes connections between diverse artistic scenarios through personal associations.

Figure 2. A child walks across the expansive floor projection, observing the shifting patterns of light and shadow that showcase various elements of Aboriginal art. Meanwhile, other visitors are either seated or standing, engaged in the exploration of virtual Aboriginal art. Photograph by Rui Zhang, 2022.

3.3. Visitors Immersive Connection with the Australian Aboriginal Artists' Spirits

When observing how visitors engage with digitally represented artworks, it becomes evident that their perceptions and understandings of Aboriginal art are shaped by the appropriation and contextualization of immersive technology within Aboriginal cultures, rather than solely by the technology itself. To gain a full appreciation of these immersive art-themed exhibits, it is crucial to examine how they are experienced—how visitors see, interact with, and interpret these works (Mondloch 2022). In comparison to traditional forms of art displayed in museums, *Connection* offers visitors greater freedom and the opportunity to explore Australian Aboriginal art from multiple perspectives. As visitors navigate through the exhibition, they encounter virtual Aboriginal artworks enhanced by narrated voice-overs contributed by the esteemed *Connection* curatorial panel, which includes Elders and leaders in the art world. The *Connection* experience also incorporates a curated soundtrack featuring the works of over 25 First Nations musicians, serving as a pivotal component of the overall experience. However, one issue worth noting and discussing is that at times, the narrations may not be clearly audible due to blending with the soundtrack, despite corresponding texts being displayed on the projections. An approach worth mentioning is found in *Meet Vincent van Gogh*, an immersive traveling exhibition developed by the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands. In addition to utilizing common immersive technologies, *Meet Vincent van Gogh* provides visitors with separate versions of the audio guide for adults and children, recognizing the differences in their ability to receive and comprehend exhibition information at different ages.

According to Margo Ngawa Neale (2022), the lead Indigenous curator at the National Museum, Aboriginal culture is primarily transmitted through performance, representing an embodied knowledge system. The *Connection* exhibition aligns closely with this notion, incorporating performative and cinematic elements. As immersive museum exhibitions gain prominence, the digital representation of Australian First Nations art presents a new challenge that prompts us to consider innovative design strategies. These strategies may involve virtual Aboriginal art and the incorporation of visitors' multisensory experiences within a multi-channel virtual space. The goal is to explore ways of effectively conveying the historical, cultural, and economic values of Aboriginal art to a broader community.

The arrangement of immersive elements within physical museum spaces, as well as virtual environments, requires innovative design practices. Recent discussions on designing immersive museum exhibits emphasize the creation of engaging experiences and the presentation of dynamic artworks (Lewi et al. 2020). While the digital representation of Australian Aboriginal painting art has achieved success, further research is needed to explore which immersive technologies can enhance greater connectivity, accessibility, and visibility (Geismar 2018) for other forms of Aboriginal art, including crafts. Additionally, there is a need to consider how the process of designing immersive exhibitions can be conducted within the cultural framework of Australian Aboriginal communities, ensuring the production of specific digital representations of Aboriginal art in the museum context.

4. Grande Experiences: Focusing on Visitors' Immersive Engagement

4.1. Grande Experiences' Related Works

Connection: Songlines from Australia's First Peoples represents the 250th immersive experience brought to life by Grande Experiences. As the owners and operators of THE LUME Melbourne and a renowned touring company behind successful exhibitions such as Van Gogh Alive, Monet and Friends, and Da Vinci Alive, the Grande Experiences company has been captivating audiences worldwide since its establishment in 2006. With a remarkable track record, they have provided unforgettable experiences to over 23 million visitors across the globe. In 2020, the company underwent a name change, transitioning from Grande Exhibitions to Grande Experiences. This new name reflects their evolving focus, which extends beyond enhancing the presentation of art, culture, and science, to fully integrating innovative narratives, digital technology, interactive elements, and immersive sensory experiences. This change also underscores the company's renewed guiding principles, which prioritize audience-centric on-site experiences while bridging the realms of art and entertainment.

Pan (2021) categorizes three types of curatorial approaches that the Grande Experiences company has conducted in few different exhibition activities (see Table 1).

The Grande Experiences company's high-tech display systems can be installed efficiently to adapt to various spatial conditions, making their digitized immersive environment distinctive and highly competitive in the commercial realm (Pan 2021). Technology-driven multisensory design has emerged as an innovative approach to delivering narrative content through immersive experiences (Dal Falco and Vassos 2017). According to Collin-Lachaud and Passebois (2008), immersive technologies play a significant role in visitor participation in museum activities. By allowing visitors to choose their own path through an exhibition, immersive technologies enable greater independence and the creation of personalized learning experiences. Within immersive museum exhibitions, visitors engage in a captivating and multisensory experience that stimulates various channels of the human brain (Pascual-Leone and Hamilton 2001). Sensory engagement in museums typically involves touch, sound, smell, and taste as visitors interact with the collections. Dudley (2011) expanded our understanding of museum artifacts by emphasizing the importance of aesthetics in shaping the sensory experiences and cognitive engagement of visitors. Pallasmaa (2014) demonstrated that exhibition design can influence visitors' perceptions and emotions towards museum collections. Immersive exhibitions leverage digital technology to deliver synthetic immersion and novel experiences to visitors in virtual spaces, using multiple devices to interpret signals and recreate the original exhibits (Kim et al. 2022). Through technology, exhibition elements are interconnected in a cyclical structure, providing expanded and intensified sensory experiences for visitors (Lee et al. 2021). In immersive exhibitions, visitors become integrated with the artwork, experiencing a given worldview through real imitations and metaphorical image formation within a liberated environment (Lee et al. 2019).

Table 1. Three types of Grande Experiences' curatorial approaches and examples.

Grande Experiences' Curatorial Approaches	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Descriptions	The display utilizes artifact-based interactive elements complemented by immersive multimedia presentations.	On-site interactive activities enhanced by immersive multimedia displays.	The display is entirely multimedia-based, designed to stimulate heightened multisensory and immersive experiences.
Examples	Leonardo da Vinci Collection (Italy, 2020)	Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Global, 2016–)	Van Gogh Alive (Global, 2014–)
Details	Using SENSORY4 technology, the system integrates 360° large screens, high-definition projectors, and Dolby surround sound to showcase multi-channel moving images and video footage. It is accompanied by cinema-quality audio narration and music, creating a digitally immersive and multisensory space. Inviting audiences to touch and interact with the restored models.	The entire exhibition encompasses 37 projectors, 29 separate screens, 54 m of blended projection, and 3 distinct PA systems. All these elements operate in full synchronization, running on a 60-min automated loop. The experience immerses visitors in a super large format multimedia environment, taking them on a journey alongside Alice as she embarks on her adventures in Wonderland. It offers an immersive storytelling experience.	The immersive experience relies on advanced digital technologies, including multichannel display screens, all-surface projection, and digitally controlled surround sounds. These elements work together to create an immersive environment that stimulates a collective sense of space, presence, movement, sight, hearing, smell, and touch.

Immersive technologies place a strong emphasis on the body, incorporating body motion into the functionality of devices (Grammatikopoulou 2017). By observing how visitors interact with artworks in immersive environments, we can observe the adoption of new roles that are more playful, active, and open to communication within museum settings (Grammatikopoulou 2017). Falk et al. (2004) use the term "whole body" to describe immersive replicas of objects or phenomena that are larger than life, allowing visitors to physically enter and engage with the replicas, resulting in a multisensory and kinesthetic experience (Dancstep et al. 2015). Immersive art exhibitions, by encouraging visitors to engage in an experiential process of physical exploration and discovery, can be seen as an extension of the real-world experience of observing artworks in physical spaces. By presenting artworks in an immersive space that requires physical movement or poses a challenge to visitors' physical abilities, the digital experience embodies visitors' core cognition in perceiving the value of artworks. Visitors have diverse needs, and even the same individual can experience the same exhibition multiple times, each with a different approach and varying expectations. The most satisfying exhibitions for visitors are those that resonate with their experiences and provide information in ways that validate and enhance their worldview (Doering and Pekarik 1996). According to Kelly (2003), visitors enter exhibitions with their own agenda and perspectives, particularly if the subject matter is current and significant. Some individuals seek affirmation of their existing views, while others are more open to exploring different perspectives and reconsidering their opinions. However, it is essential to acknowledge that visitors maintain control over their viewpoints and the willingness to change, rather than placing that responsibility on the museum.

One of the intriguing discussions in immersive virtual museum exhibitions revolves around striking a balance between visitor entertainment and educational experiences. Museums must effectively utilize their collections to both educate and entertain their audiences, recognizing that entertainment can be a means to facilitate education (Beeho and Prentice 1995). Much of the literature exploring education and entertainment within

the museum context emphasizes the differing perspectives of adult museum visitors regarding learning, education, and entertainment (Kelly 2003; Roppola 2012). Visitors possess the autonomy to freely choose their learning experiences, selecting and controlling content and learning methods based on their interests and needs (Falk and Dierking 2013). Hall and Bannon (2006) suggest that museum-based exhibitions are characterized by various factors, such as materiality, narration, sociality, activity, and multimodality. Studies have demonstrated that these factors enable visitors to engage with the exhibits while appreciating the provided context and knowledge actively and meaningfully (Perry 2012).

Indeed, visitors' preferences vary when it comes to exploring exhibits from diverse cultural backgrounds. Some individuals enjoy spending extended periods of time delving into specific exhibits, while others prefer a more concise tour, sampling a little bit of everything. It is crucial to consider how to encourage active participation in immersive exhibitions and how to engage visitors on a deeper level than ever experienced before within physical spaces. The philosophy guiding the design of immersive exhibits revolves around understanding visitors' needs and expectations. It is also essential to recognize the evolution of visitors' expectations, transitioning from a static viewing experience to immersive interactions within the context of a museum.

The Grande Experiences company's projects explore the conceptual intersections of art, nature, technology, and human experiences. They offer a prototype that utilizes immersive technologies to push the boundaries of artistic presentations. In turn, this prototype showcases the potential of integrating technology with digitized art, expanding the possibilities for immersive and innovative displays. The Grande Experiences company's projects not only showcase the close connection between artworks and humans but also demonstrate that reciprocal sensory interactions can be achieved without relying solely on immersive technologies. Through unique curatorial designs, the Grande Experiences company explores ways to create immersive experiences where visitors can engage with artworks and their surroundings, fostering a deeper connection and interaction that goes beyond the digital realm. Generally, the Grande Experiences company pioneers a new frontier in virtual museum exhibitions, pushing the boundaries of immersive and multisensory experiences to unprecedented levels. From the logical and conceptual aspects of the creation process to the exhibition of its final form, the Grande Experiences company introduces innovative strategies and models that have served as inspiration for key arguments presented in this study. The groundbreaking work of Grande Experiences redefines the possibilities of art, opening up new spaces for exploration and challenging traditional notions of artistic expression.

4.2. Connections between Grande Experiences and the Immersive Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art

Grande Experiences is one of a few Australian companies specializing in immersive exhibitions, with a proven track record of producing immersive experiences in collaboration with various cultural institutions around the world, including the National Museum of Australia, Kensington Gardens in UK, and Dewey Centre in China.

4.2.1. Contributions of Grande Experiences

Grande Experiences' selection was attributed to their extensive expertise and experience in creating immersive exhibitions of Australian Aboriginal art. Their prior projects and partnerships have showcased their capacity to handle intricate and culturally sensitive materials, establishing them as a reliable partner. Additionally, Grande Experiences' advanced technological capabilities and innovative solutions align well with the National Museum of Australia's vision. Their proficiency in immersive technologies allowed them to provide visitors with a cutting-edge and immersive experience. Furthermore, Grande Experiences have demonstrated a collaborative and consultative approach in their work with Aboriginal communities, artists, and cultural experts in *Connection: Songlines from Australia's First*

Peoples. This approach ensured the direct involvement of Aboriginal communities in the creation process, helping to prevent any misinterpretation of cultural materials.

4.2.2. Risks Aversion

There were risks associated with the immersive exhibition that Grande Experiences might inadvertently sensationalize or misinterpret cultural material. To mitigate the risks, it was imperative to conduct thorough research and engage in collaboration with Aboriginal communities. This ensured that the representations were both respectful and accurate. Moreover, questions pertaining to the ownership and utilization of cultural materials, as well as the fair compensation of Aboriginal artists and communities, should be addressed transparently (Yerkovich 2016).

Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to actively seek critical reviews of the exhibition, especially from Aboriginal communities and cultural experts. This provides valuable insights into whether the immersive experience aligns with their cultural values and expectations. Beyond the launch of the exhibition, the collaboration between the National Museum of Australia and Grande Experiences should be ongoing. This includes the establishment of continuous dialogues and feedback mechanisms to address concerns, implement necessary adjustments, and uphold the long-term integrity of the exhibition (Museums Australia 2005).

While Grande Experiences has a commendable track record, the selection of any company to produce immersive exhibitions of Aboriginal art should be based on a combination of factors, including expertise, technological capabilities, collaborative approaches, and a commitment to cultural sensitivity. It is of paramount importance to consider the potential impact and implications of these exhibitions and engage in ongoing dialogues and critical discussions to ensure the respectful representation of Aboriginal cultures. Critical reviews and feedback from Aboriginal communities and cultural experts play a significant role in this process.

5. Connecting Humans and Aboriginal Art in Digital Realm

Virtual museum exhibitions today have evolved into sophisticated digital renditions of real-life events or objects. Leveraging the capabilities of multimedia and immersive technologies, these digital representations create simulated environments accessible through websites and aim to provide the public with a comparable level of satisfaction as physical exhibitions. Through the integration of immersive technologies such as 360-degree tours and augmented, virtual, mixed, and extended reality, the public is able to explore and engage with objects or entire exhibition spaces from multiple dimensions, regardless of the user's physical location. In this immersive landscape, virtual exhibitions have the potential to expand the visibility of and interactions with virtual exhibits, thus transcending the confines of physical space.

In physical exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art, collaborative curatorial approaches are employed to amplify the significance of the featured objects, in turn facilitating the promotion and preservation of Aboriginal art knowledge. Aboriginal artists are increasingly embracing visual and digital mediums, such as photography, video, blogging, and social media, as platforms to showcase their work, exchange creative and technical ideas, foster communities, and generate business opportunities (Black 2005). By combining a curatorial framework with Aboriginal artists' increased interest in digital technologies, immersive virtual exhibitions centered on Aboriginal art are valuable means to communicate knowledge about and the heritage of the field to the public. In such simulated exhibition environments, immersive technologies play a pivotal role in the digital representation of Aboriginal art, transforming the objects into digital collections within an intricately interconnected and multidimensional space. These virtual settings intertwine diverse information about the pieces and provide the public with an opportunity to engage with a range of virtual Aboriginal art, which can be explored from various angles and perspectives.

A fundamental question emerges concerning the most effective approach to the digital representation of Aboriginal art in immersive virtual exhibition environments. The recommended method, as explored in this study, involves the creation of a three-dimensional model for each object, which, when combined with immersive technologies, allows the public to engage with the object through multiple senses, thereby transcending the scope of mere visual appreciation. In doing so, this investigation underscores the importance of immersive technologies, not only for digitally capturing the geometry and measurements of Aboriginal art, but also for effectively conveying its perceptual qualities and cultural significance.

The emergence and advancement of immersive technologies have revolutionized the possibilities for efficient information exchange and audience interaction in virtual exhibitions. Building upon the analysis presented above, the digital representation of Aboriginal art can be approached from three distinct dimensions: The first pertains to practicality, emphasizing the materials and functional aspects of Aboriginal art. The second explores cognition, encompassing Aboriginal art knowledge and the complex processes of cognitive and analytical thinking associated with it. The third delves into ontology, encapsulating the authenticity of Aboriginal art and its social and cultural significance within human life.

From a practical perspective, immersive virtual exhibitions centered around Aboriginal art focus on digitally representing tangible qualities of artworks, such as the materials and textures, utilizing appropriate technologies. For example, virtual reality (VR) has the potential to grant audiences access to objects that may otherwise be inaccessible (tom Dieck and Jung 2019), while simultaneously offering reflective learning experiences within the realm of cultural heritage (Han et al. 2018). This technology also enables personalized and tailored cultural heritage experiences, providing a unique and customized digital experience for the audience (tom Dieck and Jung 2019). By leveraging the power of immersive technologies, diverse cultural resources and a wealth of Aboriginal art-related information can be seamlessly integrated, enriching the audience's digital experience within a virtual exhibition space.

In terms of cognition, immersive technologies have the capacity to digitally document and contextualize the knowledge, skills, and cognitive systems inherent in Aboriginal art by connecting these intangible elements to virtual objects. The aim of digital representation is to transform these elements into explicit information, enabling immersive storytelling that enhances the audience's digital experience. By designing a digital narrative that encompasses the entirety of Aboriginal art, the public is able to explore and navigate the interconnected realms of this heritage.

From an ontological standpoint, the digital representation of Aboriginal art revolves around the creation of an authentic experience, fostering interactive engagement between the public and the exhibited objects. Immersive technologies facilitate the seamless integration of tangible and intangible elements of Aboriginal art, promoting a profound understanding of its material aspects and cultivating an awareness of its historical and cultural authenticity. To effectively convey the historical and cultural values of Aboriginal art to the broader public, it is essential to explore new approaches to digital representation that incorporate virtual Aboriginal artworks and engage the public's multisensory experience within an immersive virtual exhibition space. Additionally, by acknowledging the social, cultural, and commercial values associated with Aboriginal art, the digital representation of Aboriginal art can emphasize sustainability and the extended production timelines involved (Cantista and Delille 2023), encouraging the public to appreciate the artistic and cultural values intrinsic to Aboriginal art.

One of the distinctive attributes of Aboriginal art lies in its ability to continually redefine the dynamic interplay between Aboriginal artists, Aboriginal artworks, and consumers. By transforming commercial value into authentic value, diverse Aboriginal artworks serve as conduits for transmitting their stories (Cantista and Delille 2023). Immersive technologies play a vital role in enabling the public to engage themselves with the rich history and

culture associated with Aboriginal art. When attempting to represent the intangible aspects of Aboriginal art, designers of immersive virtual exhibitions are encouraged to explore new approaches that encompass idea development, conceptualization, and multisensory design. An immersive virtual exhibition dedicated to Aboriginal art should seek to enhance multisensory access and digital representation of its diverse facets. In general, immersive virtual exhibitions provide unique and promising opportunities to reconstruct and visualize embodied knowledge using digital materials drawn from the realm of Aboriginal art, underscoring the need for further research in this compelling field.

6. Conclusions

An increasing number of Australian museums are dedicated to providing visitors with an unforgettable experience by designing immersive scenarios that immerse them in the captivating stories of Australian Aboriginal art. Digital representation of Aboriginal art emerges as an approach that engages visitors on an emotional and cognitive level, effectively stimulating their senses within the museum's collections. Museum visitors continue to have high expectations of gaining insight into Aboriginal history, culture, and art through the utilization of advanced technology. To meet these expectations, museum curators and exhibition designers are encouraged to embrace new methodologies—from idea development and conceptual creation to storytelling and sensory design—in order to effectively represent the spiritual world of Australian Aboriginal artists. By promoting multisensory access to the rich diversity of Australian Aboriginal art, immersive exhibitions offer a unique opportunity to reconstruct and visualize embodied knowledge using digital materials. This potential requires further exploration in the field.

In conclusion, this study explores the role of immersive technologies in digitally representing Australian Aboriginal art within the museum context, considering its significant historical and cultural value. The focus is on design as an innovative approach that imbues Australian Aboriginal art with meaning in immersive museum exhibitions. However, it is important to acknowledge the existing limitations, particularly the gaps that exist between digital representation, immersive interactions, and the depth of rational design thinking. These gaps highlight the need for further exploration in terms of creating digital experiences that cater to diverse social groups, effectively representing the value of Australian Aboriginal art in immersive museum exhibitions while respecting the multicultural backgrounds of visitors.

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arts

Essay

On Hijacking LED Walls

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Abstract: In recent years, the LED walls originally used in outdoor spaces by advertising companies to extend the consumption of images in our daily life have been appropriated by artists and installed in gallery spaces. When viewed nearby or when walking around them, LED walls become in some way dysfunctional: The images fade, points and color distortions appear, and the spectacle of the machine interruputs our habitual viewing patterns. This article focuses on three recent works which disrupt immersive viewing regimes through what I call "hijacking" advanced LED technology. Lucy Raven (Tucson, AZ, USA), *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)*, 2022. Eija-Liisa Ahtila (Helsinki, Finland), *Potentiality for Love*, 2018. Marco Fusinato (Sidney, Australia), *Desastres*, Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2022. These three artists use the sculptural and spectacular effect of freestanding LED walls to call attention to our habitual capitalist relation to LED technology. Through performative or narrative pieces, these artists deploy poetic and artistic effects to explore the politics of technological immersion in capitalist societies.

Keywords: contemporary art; LED walls; video installation; sound installation; immersion; consumer society; critical effects; display

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To dive into the history of the moving image necessarily involves diving into an archeology of media, from Portapak to HD cameras, from Bolex to I-Phones. Artists have often worked with medium specificities, and especially in the case of the moving image, as art historian René Berger notes in 1977: "The technoculture we have entered is no longer satisfied with traditional explanations; it brings out a type of creativity linked solely to technical transformations"[1]. For example, Franco-Peruvian experimental filmmaker Rose Lowder studied the mechanism of Bolex cameras to create films image by image, intertwining the shots and locations by leaving some images unexposed (*Les Tournesols colorés*, 1983, *Quiproquo*, 1992). She comes back to the unexposed images later, editing within the camera, exposing black parts by way of a very precise and exhausting manipulation of her camera's mechanism. Lowder's poetics of film interconnects with her way of playing with the mechanics of the Bolex, a poetics also visible in the scores-drawings she created at the same time in her notebooks. Another interesting example is *Bridgit* (2018) by Scottish artist Charlotte Prodger, filmed during a year between Glasgow where she lives and different parts of Scotland where she has worked, paying attention to travel and the in-between moments of life. While the I-Phone has duration limitations, the format allows for true spontaneity, which is crucial to this project based on friendship and self-introspection. Her relation to her I-Phone is, of course, part of the narrative.The attention given to media specificities has also been developed in the projection step by playing with monitors and real-time based films in gallery spaces since the 1960s. Monitors have often been displayed, included in sculptural elements, used in a similar way to props, and, in the case of Joan Jonas' environments or Peter Campus' installations, have become clearly part of the plot. A monitor is used to diffuse a film, but its materiality is often taken into account: Displayed, overturned, linked to other elements. As artist Vito Acconci pointed out: "Looked at from the viewpoint of art, furniture is analogous to sculpture. Just as furniture fits into a room and takes up floor space inside a house, sculpture fits into and takes up space in an art-exhibition area"[2]. When moved into an exhibition space, a monitor could express its sculptural dimension, as seen in Nam June Paik or Shigeko Kubota's works. Since the 1990s,

monitors have largely disappeared, substituted by video projectors which, in contrast, are deliberately obscured. Most of them are unnoticed, hung on the ceilings or in the back of gallery spaces to help keep the viewer's focus on the videos and films themselves. New technologies have largely improved the quality of image definition and sound, immersing the viewer who forgets the device, as in the cinema. In recent years, however, this logic of disappearance has been interrupted by the introduction of freestanding LED walls into exhibition spaces and art installations. This artistic repurposing encourages us to think beyond the walls' initial association with advertising, to look at them as technical apparatuses with their own specificities, and to reflect upon the ways we consume images in our daily life. This article focuses on artists who use LED walls to both explore their visual possibilities and to question their effects on viewers' sensibilities. This technology is still quite expensive and difficult to afford for an artist, but the selection we made is very meaningful of this attempt of "hijacking" LED walls. Hijacking is a revolutionary terminology which echoes the historical context of the 1960–70s when artists used video as a way to infiltrate and overthrow the domination of television, to work against it, and to use social struggle strategies, as Anne-Marie Duguet (Duguet 1981) analyses in her book *Video: la mémoire au poing*[3]. Activism is an integral part of early video-art history and continues today in the way artists take ownership of capitalist technologies, such as LED walls and repurpose them into anti-capitalist statements. Facing ambiguity, artists, such as Hito Steyerl, explore military vocabulary to digest and hijack the logics of indoctrination of the society of the spectacle, as famously described by Guy Debord[4]. "Is a Museum as a Battlefield?" (2013), "The War According to ebay" (2010) are examples of Hito Steyerl videos titles which bring anti-capitalist issues through using very sophisticated technologies of images. To hijack LED walls, as we will see, is a way to take the control of these machines and dramatically change their direction, significantly similar to a hijacker that forcefully reroutes a vessel[5].

1. Spectacle of De-Realization

LED wall technology was developed by advertising industries to increase the consumption of images in our daily life, to captivate the passer-by in a mall or on the street. Used for retail, sport, and media events, they offer high brightness, seamless images from any angle, both indoor and outdoor, and even in daylight. The technology was first used only for projections visible from a large distance, due to the large pixel pitch, but the pixels are now smaller and allow for new possibilities for inside use. While the first LED advertisement walls appeared in the 1990s, it took a long time before these displays were introduced in exhibition spaces as LED equipment, in contrast to video projection equipment, cannot be hidden. Another interesting aspect is that LED walls do not provide sound diffusion. When used in an installation, it is necessary to combine LED with a sound system in a specific installation, offering multiple opportunities to play with perception, movements, and sound spatialization.

Each technological device has its own specificities that artists like to explore, opening up unfolded fields, often in opposite directions from the ones developed by companies. If LED screens are usually placed at a distance to enhance their immersive effect, in exhibition spaces they tend instead to be installed in real proximity with the audience, allowing them to move closer and approach the backside of the illusion. In fact, it seems that artists prefer the electronic parts to remain visible, as the technology is almost never hidden. From a close distance, and walking around them, LED walls become in some way dysfunctional: The images fade, points and colour distortions appear, and the hypnotic relation to what is seen is always interrupted by the spectacle of the machine. A representative example is Philippe Parreno's video *No more reality* (1991), which was shown on a monumental curved LED screen at the entrance of his exhibition *Anywhere, Anywhere out of the world* at Palais de Tokyo in 2013. The video inspired by *Twin Peaks* (1991) by David Lynch questions the intertwined relations between fiction and reality, following a group of children in a garden demonstrating against reality. Filmed in low resolution, the video is completely

reinterpreted by the device, de-realizing the presence of the children, making it increasingly spectral, while the viewer passes the screen to continue through the exhibition. Parreno has used LED screens quite often, exploring their ability to offer intermittently immersion and distancing, such as at Fondation Pinault in Paris (2022), where he brought back to life the character of Ann Lee on a monumental LED wall, playing with its effects of magical appearance and disappearance with flickering lights. The vertical screen was welcoming the visage of Ann Lee, directly addressing the viewer in a deeply moving way before disappearing. However, rather than leaving the space empty, such as when a projection switches off, here the machine remained in the centre of the room, exposed as a sculptural element. The melancholic atmosphere of this project also reaches the machine, which is no longer a brilliant new technology, but a relic of a consumption-based world of thrown away images, voices, and technics.

In a similar way, Lucy Raven uses very precise visual effects and LED technology to revisit the American landscape, its labours and myths, and to explore our human conditions of perception and de-realization. She combines research on cinema's prehistory of projection with advanced technologies, examining how those technological developments shape our perception of reality. She has experimented a considerable amount with the optical dimension of vision, for example, by separating the eyes in *Curtains* and coming back to the first historical 3D technology: The stereoscope. Dividing vision rather than joining the efforts of our optical potentialities breaks the rules that we are used to by opening up the visual field and diminishing our attentive concentration. The images are seen in a complex situation which places the viewer at a distance. Her recent work *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)* (2022) (see Figures 1 and 2) continues this approach but with a totally different use of technology.

Figure 1. Lucy Raven *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2),* 2022. Color video, quadrophonic sound, freestanding LED screen, and aluminum seating structure. 15:31 min looped. Installed at WIELS Forest, Belgium *Another Dull Day*.

Figure 2. Lucy Raven *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)*, 2022. Color video, quadrophonic sound, freestanding LED screen, and aluminum seating structure. 15:31 min looped. Installed at WIELS Forest, Belgium *Another Dull Day*.

Entering the space at WIELS Art Centre in Brussels, the viewer is immersed in a concrete and invasive soundscape (composed by Deantoni Parks), facing an aluminium bleacher installed in front of a freestanding LED wall. Short sequences are diffused, each beginning with a quiet view on a desert landscape in New Mexico. Next, sound and flashing light interrupts the stillness, and the detonation of explosives at a ballistics range extends its tremor to the exhibition space. The LED walls explode in a myriad of points, opening up the field of vision by using the LED's pointillism as well as high speed camera revealing what human perception cannot see. Seventy thousand images per second were used to record the intensity and complexity of an explosion, and are then slowed down, offering an unseen perception of reality and inverting black and light. If the image is first interpreted as visual effect, we then discover that it is not. Nevertheless, revealing what is unseen does not bring us closer to the real, but rather makes the human construction of reality visible. Coming back to its technical trajectory grounds the perception of *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)* in a non-human experience of nature. On both sides, shooting and projection, Lucy Raven uses image technologies to affect us through an orchestration of sensory effects. The pressure felt by the earth during an explosion extends its waves to our own inner bodies. Stoked by the sound and by the explosion of image, we feel the distress of a devastated land, which tragically fails its original name, "Socorro". Meaning "aid" or "help", this name was given in the 16th century by Spanish colonizers as a token of gratitude: As the Spaniards emerged from a very barren stretch of desert, native Piro Indians offered them food and water. Nowadays, this land is used for atomic bomb testings and hypersonic weapon research.

Lucy Raven graduated in sculpture and not in film studies, and even if she was influenced a considerable amount by films, such as "Blade Runner" and artist pioneers in experimental video, such as Joan Jonas, James Benning or Michael Snow, her ambition was to work within real space, in a post-medium condition where film and sculpture are rendered fluid, but also mixed with scenographic issues. Exhibiting her films is taking part of the construction of the narrative, and thinking and designing how and where the public will sit to look at it is part of the work itself. If receiving image and sound is today as normal as accessing water and electricity, as Lucy Raven notes in a conversation with Barbara London[6], by interrupting it, the artist tries to trouble habitual passive viewing. Since the beginning of video art, the issue of making the viewer more active by creating environments

has been prominent. For example, in her analysis of Michael Snow's installation *Two Sides to Every Story*, Kate Mondloch argues that the show *Projected Images* in Minneapolis Walker Art Gallery in 1974 offered an experimental site for installations problematizing relations between screen and space. Regina Cornwell argues in a similar direction that further supports our analysis of Lucy Raven's work: "Environmental or installation media work, by calling attention to the 'projective situation', automatically rendered their spectators engaged participants and, just as proposed by the European theorists associated with *Film as Film*, she assumed that this condition is necessarily a progressive critical intervention"[7]. The use of LED walls contributes to this critical strategy as it brings a consumerist model of receiving images inside an art space, troubling the frontiers between two worlds which are normally completely discrete, and offering the viewer a possibility to have a distance with his own way of seeing. *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)* is a very immersive film, with spectacular images and sounds, but seen from this LED wall, it keeps the viewer awake, making him/her wonder about the origins of what is perceived, on their ambiguous fascination for the sublime and for buried levels of understanding images: Stories about appropriation of lands, domination of man over nature, etc. It associates a process of abstraction from the real, questioning what is perceived, what is blurred, and what is left from human consumption of lands, but the installation also activates a considerable amount of sensations and emotions by troubling vision and influencing viewers' bodies in the space. Far away from the myth of an outside and virgin land, *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)* shares a contrasted reality of a desert which bears the trace of multiples stories, even if the most recent ones threaten to erase the others.

2. Overwhelmed

The omnipresence of screens in our everyday life, from private homes to public spaces, provokes a visual hypertension and general exhaustion. Entering the Australian pavilion in Venice in 2022 by Marco Fusinato offered a shock, but also a kind of logical continuity of our urban perceptions (see Figure 3). A giant freestanding floor-to-ceiling LED wall was standing in the space, showing images of disaster, and a wall of amplifiers (six 100-watt full stacks) continuously diffused an electronic noise performed by the artist, sited in a corner, alone with his guitar. He had spent hours and hours during the very long Australian lockdown sourcing them on the internet via a stream of words, selecting them by looking for ambiguity and tension in the associations. Then, he shared this personal relationship with the audience every day by the coming of the biennale to improvise in front of the images with an experimental noise. The atmosphere was dark, excessive, violent, but also hypnotic and alive, which is important for the artist who tries to activate the audience by sharing a pulse and scale. In this endless parade of dark images of history, gestures of anger and revolt mingle with expressions of suffering, giving free rein to the re-appropriation and interpretation of an archive that is placed back into play every day by the presence of visitors invited to share a sound and visual intensity with the artist. The LED was precisely chosen by Marco Fusinato as an "industry standard for stadium acts", and "opposed to, say, using a video projector or a screen"[8]. Working between experimental music and visual art, both on stage and in galleries, Marco Fusinato is quite considerably concerned with the hierarchies existing between different spheres of art, and often mixes art history into his experimental pieces. DESASTRES directly quotes Goya's famous prints, and many other references which we see occasionally full-frame, but often in a mist produced by the juxtaposition of images, fragmentation, and the technical qualities of the LED screen. We are overlooked by the dispositif, bombarded by images, struck by nearly unbearable slabs of noise, in a dramatic tension that evokes the intimidation and mental coercion provoked through the huge LED screens used in the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, as recently occurred in China. The industry is developing these huge technical devices to enhance psychologic manipulation, from individual desires to political propaganda. Fusinato's use of LED screens is not neutral; it is a deliberate choice to install ambiguity, to allow the viewer not only to be overwhelmed by the situation, but also to feel free to

move, to question one's perceptions, and to avoid being manipulated. A document at the exit of the pavilion implies that this strategy worked well: On a handwritten note, the artist answered questions received everyday from the visitors. Present in the performance but without communicating, immersed in a visual and sonic trance that is between ordeal and ecstasy, Fusinato, nevertheless, felt the need to have a direct relationship with the wide audience of the Venice Biennale by offering these answers. Indeed, after feeling deeply moved by DESASTRES, the viewer usually wants to move closer to the artist's motivations, to approach him playing guitar, to look at the oil painting hung on a wall, to observe others' immersion, and to understand the relation between the projected images and the sound performance. While the monumental projection first imposed a distanced and passive viewing relation, the viewer eventually emerges from the state of overwhelm and feels free to move, to question, and to express his/her emotions.

Figure 3. Marco Fusinato, DESASTRES, Australia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Photo Mathide Roman.

3. An Ecology of Proximity

Since the 1990s, Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila has developed multiple screen installations, initially inspired by street billboards in the United States, which moved her to think about expanding forms of moving image display. The anecdote is interesting here since it communicates something about the fertile dialogue of artists with electronic devices and commercial display techniques, questioning the way we perceive images in our daily life, from intimate relations with domestic screens to passive consumption in public spaces. By manipulating immersive technologies, and by working with space to create environments, artists engage these issues. Eija-Liisa Ahtila usually writes scripts, collaborating with actors and film production crews, but the films themselves are exhibition based: They include the gallery spaces in their mise-en-scène, use screens, walls, windows, rails, including what is between images, to produce a specific atmosphere for each work. Her films clearly reject the domination of human perception and try to re-orchestrate the diversity of living and non-living realities. By welcoming coincidences and natural light, Ahtila takes an interest in mirroring where and how images come from, while encouraging the viewer to find his/her own path within the narrative's expansive possibilities. Time is also a main issue

of Ahtila's work, influenced by Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll thinking on human and non-human *umwelt*[9], and she explores multi-screen installations as a philosophical and political device to express parallel words.

Her most recent works explore human perception, rejecting situations which imply domination over nature. Examples range from *Ecology of Drama*, an immersive four-screen installation with a voice-over, which inspires the viewer to consider his/her relationship to the images and to his/her own position, to *Horizontal*, an eight-projector installation, made entirely without language. Eija-Liisa Ahtila's earlier works tended to have a strong narrative and to play precisely with words. In *Horizontal* and *Potentiality for Love*, both of which focus on the necessity of a paradigm shift to dispose of anthropocentrism, she decided not to use language, which has served humans as a tool of domination. *Potentiality for Love*[10] is composed of two tables with attached "monitor/mirrors," a vertical single channel projection, and an angular video sculpture of twenty-two DIP LED modules (see Figures 4 and 5). This complex environment, deeply influenced by eco-feminism, questions how humans relate to feeling, personal identity, and the animal realm. Inspired by her reading of Elisabeth de Fontenay, Eija-Liisa Ahtila creates tricks that play with our expectations: A standing chimpanzee is filmed from the back, turning around from time to time but never as a reaction to our presence. On the research tables, which invite the viewer to take part as in an interactive piece, the chimpanzee arm engages the viewer to move accordingly, to feel the connection between human and animal. Troubled by this relation of sharing with a non-human, he/she is then attracted by a freestanding LED wall, composing a fragmented image with different elements. We are projected in outer space, far away from the planet Earth and its gravity, in an infinite sky. From this infinity of obscurity and stars, a body enters our vision, comes closer, reaching us with a smiley face and a t-shirt with a "LOVE" message. Looking frankly at us and making us a sign, the women comes into our space as she was in presence. However, even as she resembles us, she is also foreign to us, belonging to another dimension, even more distant than the one where the chimpanzee stands. This scene may be a dream or an omen; the atmosphere incorporates some science fiction elements, and sticks strongly in the mind. The "Love" message, smiling face, and welcoming sign are engaging and do not directly suggest anything negative. Nevertheless, we feel troubled and alone in *Potentiality for Love,* more distanced than ever from others.

The woman's body levitates in a decontextualized space, emerging out of the LED walls while moving closer, in a fragmented atmosphere. Similar to the inaugural scene of *Persona* from Bergman, when the boy tries to reach his mother, a famous actress, and is rejected by the screen of her projected image, in *Potentiality for Love* the presence is leading to disappearance and leaves us in a state of loneliness. The love message floats with no physical contact, no hug, no caress, in a disembodied world. The LED lights reinforce this effect as the images become more pixilated as we move closer, reinforcing the frustration. Eija-Liisa Ahtila had experienced LED walls in a previous exhibition and knew precisely their effects. She arranged two benches in the gallery space to offer two visions, one from afar, and one from close, where we see "this huge electric body formed by the LED machinery-the image would be gone and replaced by electric modules forming the LED sculpture"[11]. The LED wall assemblage also gives the impression that some parts of the image are missing, that we are left behind, similar to the time when we try to return to older memories. The starting point of this film is a personal memory of the artist, an engram (memory trace) which brings back a resurgence of an infantile scene of her mother taking her in her arm and disappearing as an image. The goal was then to create an artwork metamorphosing "a rendering of a memory image to a moving image sculpture". In the construction of the personal identity, this engram refers to the Lacanian mirror stage, in which the baby progressively feels the difference between his own body and her/his mother's. This act of separation, central to the occidental conception of subjectivity, is the foundation to our forms of living and knowledge, leading to the dominating understanding that what we look at from a distance is not us. However, in this moment of personal construction, the possibility for love also occurs: Possibility for

the love of others, for care, for empathy. Being separated is how we can learn to feel from the outside, to collaborate with other modes of sensibility, to create relations without domination. Facing our differences and specificities, we can explore the fascinating paths that move from ourselves to others, from human conditions of perception to non-human modes of being in presence. When the mother moves closer to the camera, she opens her arms and lap, and "her inviting gesture is what the children reacts on". The mise-en-scene clearly points to the responsibility from the already present human to engage with new ones in a love mode in order to make them feel in return. Occasions of being moved by others, human and non-human, are quite rare today, and very precious, which is why they tend to be engraved in our memories. Even if memory is often mixed with a feeling of loss, of absence, in a similar way to in this engram, it also suggests how we can be connected to other temporalities and livings. Returning to them and exploring how this potentiality is inscribed in everyone is a very encouraging reflexive gesture.

Figure 4. Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Potentiality for Love, M Museum, Louvain, 2018.

As we move closer to the LED wall, we are struck by the machine, by the technological location where the image comes from, but also dazzled by the luminescent dots. We are troubled, as when the chimpanzee looks at us, as it asks us to return to these inaugural memories. There is some similarity with Rosa Barba's installations where she disrupts cinema technologies by playing with fragmentation and expansion between cameras, projectors, and screens. In both cases, working with the technologies of the image, whether older or newer ones, serves as a way to interrupt ways of looking and living. Rosa Barba notes: "The significance of these interventions in the operation of the machines is that they may break the grip of utilitarian and functional definitions of the world and introduce new possibilities and shades of meaning and experience" (Barba 2021). Accordingly, Eija-Liisa Ahtila distorts the utilitarian relation to LED walls, removing them from their capitalist uses and desires and re-appropriating them to create an ecology of proximity. *Potentiality for Love* engages the viewer to reckon with the instrumentalization of emotions that the t-shirt emphasizes, and to explore his/her capacity to experience the world by being both separated and bound. To move closer to the LED, one loses the image to achieve the physical experience of lights and colours, and then moves forward, in an

hypnotic movement. Projecting in a mental space full of desires and questions without the reassurance of a clear narrative, this installation is attractive and immersive, but also full of frustration. This double movement is very common in Ahtlia's works, using spatialization to create this both mental and physical situation, as well described by Mieke Bal: "We sit or stand, physically unable to remain abstract and distant. Whatever our critical reflections this dispositif intimates and makes us experience, we cannot disentangle ourselves from what we critique"[12] (Bal 2013).

Figure 5. Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Potentiality for Love, M Museum, Louvain, 2018.

4. Hijacking and Emancipating the Machine

Talking about immersion, one thinks immediately of augmented reality, 3D, or using virtual reality headsets, such as those we see increasingly often in exhibitions. LED walls have an important advantage over these technological devices as they are not individual: Immersion is collectively addressed, and visual effects are noticeable from different points of view. Perhaps unsurprisingly, LED walls are very popular and mostly unnoticed in urban environments, malls, and stadiums. Deciding to use LED walls in an artistic project is not easy, as the technology is thoroughly imbricated in this capitalist relation to images. As we have seen in the examples of Lucy Raven's *Demolition of a Wall (Album 2)*, Eija-Liisa Ahtila's *Potentiality for Love*, and Marco Fusinato's *Desastres*, one recurrent way that artists work with and disrupt LED walls is to show the device and its technology, keeping the space around the walls open and the electric wires visible, even if covered by dust or plaster from the gallery walls[13]. To expose a device when using it often seems a good way to help the viewer to become an active agent of his/her perception, to be conscious of how easy it is to manipulate one's desires, emotions, ways of seeing and thinking through immersive technologies. However, distancing may also occur in immersion, in a back and forth movement associating feeling and reasoning. Experiencing an artwork engages different senses, triggers multiple reactions, and a vast range of desires. As we have seen in the series of works explored above, but also in many others, LED walls may be hijacked and brought in an artistic sphere, where meanings become open, consciousness emancipated from normative consumption models, and narrative built through complexity, poetics, and ambiguity. This important artistic gesture provides a way of emancipating the machine from its origin, building a new relation to LED walls by giving them high visual and conceptual abilities imaginatively freed from simplicity and dogmatism, consumption and domination. By using LED walls, artists completely reverse our relation to this technology, and, in the process, extend the porosity between aesthetic emotions and everyday life.

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Notes

1 «The musketeers of the invisible: Video-art in Switzerland», *Cinema*, Lausanne, 1977, no. 4, reproduced in *René Berger L'art vidéo*, JRP ringier and Les Presses du Réel, 2014, p. 86. Translation from french by the author.

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3 *Video: Memory in the fist*, 1981, Hachette, Paris, non-translated into english.

4 *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord, french edition by Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

5 Working on this article, the film *Dial H-i-s-t-o-r-y* (1997) by artist Johan Grimonprez, which explores the history of airplane hijacking and political revolutions as portrayed by mainstream television media and question media responsibility, was a source of inspiration.

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8 Marco Fusinato and Alexie Glass-Kantor in conversation, booklet, Australia Pavilion, 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia.

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Article

Contemplating Light: Experiencing Victor Moscoso's Psychedelic Lithographs in the Museum

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Abstract: Beginning in 1966, Victor Moscoso designed many of his psychedelic posters for the stroboscopic light shows of the San Francisco dance halls. Moscoso innovated a new mode of print that depended on its environment—kinetic lithography, a product of creative experimentation. He developed multiple iterations of this medium; however, installing it outside of its original context of the psychedelic dance hall continues to pose a unique challenge for preparators and curators alike. Today, museum display of his works relies upon experimental settings to activate his site-specific design. This article considers how immersive displays and antistatic artworks demand a new kind of relationship between visitor and artwork by decentering the museum's longstanding emphasis on the optical, a regime that has long served to frame posters and ephemera in contexts of display rather than as active objects. By analyzing two recent exhibitions displaying Moscoso's kinetic lithographs (The Summer of Love Experience, 2017, and Moscoso Cosmos, 2021), this article considers the mechanics of the print itself, curatorial decisions, and visitor engagement to assess the site-specific demands of a genre-bending medium.

Keywords: psychedelia; print; lithography; ephemera; San Francisco; exhibition; curation; museum; immersive exhibition; light; animation

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Victor Moscoso's (b. 1936) psychedelic posters have captivated collectors, musicians, and historians alike for decades. Like many of the poster designers working in San Francisco's hazy heyday of the late 1960s, Moscoso's cavalier approach to design protocols and printing techniques resulted in an avant-garde mode of site-specific image making. In particular, Moscoso's freeform innovation brought forth a new type of print that blurred the line between static image and moving picture—now coined as his "moving posters", or his kinetic lithographs. These posters, though few in number, present a broader question for curators who must contend with the quandary of installing a shapeshifting medium that refutes standards for works on paper and media art alike.

It is important to note that these posters do not actually have moving parts in the literal sense, like flaps or spinning dials. Instead, they *appear* to move—a significant distinction given the history of print's expansive lineage of interactive printed materials dating as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[1] However, unlike volvelles or other human-mediated moving elements, Moscoso's prints can only be animated by their environment—an optical illusion initiated by external factors rather than the human brain. Moscoso developed his kinetic lithographs to engage with the immersive space of the psychedelic dance hall, which offered colorful light projections, olfactory surprises of sweet, spice-scented air, pulsing subwoofers, and a specific kind of fogginess that diffused everything into a dreamscape. When immersed in the fluid light shows of the dance halls, the lithograph's central subject would move in a synchronized fashion, taking cues from each changing hue. So particular in their original context, Moscoso's kinetic lithographs come with an implied set of stipulations for museums to fully activate their potential. But how does one replicate this kind of all-consuming sensory environment in a museum setting? Or, rather, is it even necessary?

Drawing from a larger study of San Francisco's postwar psychedelic visual and material culture, this essay analyzes two recent exhibitions that include Victor Moscoso's

kinetic lithographs to consider what affordances and limitations these genre-bending artworks offer when placed in a museum setting.[2] This essay examines exhibitions at the de Young Museum in San Francisco and the Fundación Luis Seoane in A Coruña, Spain, in 2017 and 2021, respectively, to reflect on a museum's obligation to careful contemplation. As an object that directly dismisses the tenets of a standard museum installation designed for gazing in extended duration, such as stable white light and a frame to distinguish an artwork as an object of focus, Moscoso's kinetic lithographs are a well-suited case study to explore the ever-changing demands of immersive artwork.

1. Tangible Dreamscapes

Amidst the stroboscopic hues of San Francisco's emerging music scene in the 1960s, San Francisco became a hot spot for eclecticism and progressive thinking, owing much of this widespread popularity to the Human Be-In and Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. Frequent live music performances at local venues drew an enormous crowd of young people to the Bay Area, which reached its height in the summer of 1967—the Summer of Love. And though psychedelic rock was the San Francisco Sound's most prominent genre, blues, folk, and jazz musicians shared the spotlight to create unexpected mash-ups at local establishments like the Fillmore Auditorium, the Avalon Ballroom, and the Matrix. In the late 1960s, many of San Francisco's existing performance venues shifted into dance halls to accommodate this trending sensation and paved the way for a new visual and material culture to emerge. Club promoters and music producers needed to fill their auditoriums and looked to local artists to get the job done.

Psychedelic poster artists eagerly accepted the task at hand and began exploring the printed surface through photo-offset lithography, a primarily commercial method that rose to popularity in the late nineteenth century. This process began with a mechanical, or "paste up", which consisted of a preliminary drawing on which artists indicated color selections, positive and negative areas, and any other important details necessary to inform print shops of the intended outcome. Artists would deliver mechanicals to local print shops such as West Coast Lithograph Co., Bindweed Press, Double-H Press, and Tea Lautrec Lithography, among others. Seasoned print technicians then brought the poster artists' visions to life with large printing apparatuses. At times, this process was collaborative. Technicians would offer small tweaks to better suit the overall composition informed by the process's distinctive traits. Often, technicians would even mix inks with artists present to ensure a good match. Photo-offset lithography was the ideal medium for dance hall posters because it allowed room for modification and experimentation while also allowing for the production of multicolor designs at an affordable rate. In each case, technicians carefully adapted the initial drawing to ensure clarity and vibrancy in the final image. Crisp plate-making processes ensured that each plate lined up just right so that after the final pass, the image blended into a uniform design.

Aligned with the technical turn in art historical scholarship, as exemplified by the work of such scholars as Francesca Bewer, Caroline Fowler, and Pamela Smith, my discussion of psychedelia's experimental approach to print is rooted in the materials and techniques used by artists to achieve the final effect.[3] Though often relegated to the periphery of conversations surrounding the posters themselves, a closer look at their development helps to reveal the material reality of a visual style marked by immaterial signifiers—mind-expanding drug experiences, dreamy atmospheres, and fantasy imagery. For instance, both in part due to the expedited timeline of dance hall posters and an affection for nostalgia, psychedelic artists often employed repurposed imagery in their paste ups. Decades-old postcards, photographs, advertisements, and other cast-off items one might find in a thrift shop found new life in psychedelia's rapidly growing visual culture. Once cut out, copied, and placed in the final design, artists would then hand-letter information such as the musician's name and performance dates around the image before submitting the design to the printers. Therefore, these artists (and occasionally the promoters who commissioned the designs) were equally curators of found images and aficionados of hand lettering. My

intention is not to construct a binary between psychedelia's intangible history and material artifacts but to bring their deeply embedded relationship into focus by integrating the physical and embodied elements of the studio setting with the visual outcome, a point to which I will soon return.

2. The First Moving Poster

In the spring of 1967, San Francisco transplant Victor Moscoso designed a poster to advertise an upcoming performance by the Doors and the Sparrow at the Avalon Ballroom (see Figure 1), located on Sutter Street in the city's Polk Gulch neighborhood. Commissioned by local music production company Family Dog Productions, Moscoso's poster followed the visual expectations of a psychedelic poster—a style quickly codified through rapid iterations after its inception in the winter of 1965—illegible lettering, imagery curated from a vintage source, and electric hues married into a single vertically oriented poster to be pasted all around the Bay Area. However, this poster departed from the status quo in a significant way. In an effort to try something new, Moscoso ignored conventional approaches to printing, which take care in precise registration for each layer, and instead asked print technicians to stack incongruous subject matter atop one another to yield a muddled mess of color, or so it seemed.

Figure 1. Victor Moscoso, "Butterfly Lady", The Doors, The Sparrow, 12–13 May, Avalon Ballroom, 1967, published by Family Dog Productions, Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2005.445), photo-offset lithograph, 20 × 14 inches. Photo taken by author.

Cribbing imagery from stolen library books, vintage postcards, and other decades-old ephemera was a central tenet of a psychedelic artist's process. Other psychedelic artists like Wes Wilson, Alton Kelley, and Rick Griffin often turned to images from the past to define a budding zeitgeist founded on a material culture of nostalgia and eclecticism.[4] Introduced in 1959, the Xerox machine became an affordable device for image reproduction, especially for creatives. Like many psychedelic artists, Moscoso stumbled upon inspiration for the poster inside a book, likely housed at the San Francisco Public Library, a frequent haunt and source of inspiration for psychedelic artists operating on quick timelines and meager budgets (Moscoso 2005). In the case of this particular design for the Doors, film stills from *Annabelle Butterfly Dance*, an 1894 film directed by Edison Lab innovator William K. L. Dickson, caught Moscoso's attention. Rather than drafting original artwork, Moscoso used dancer Annabelle Whitford's captivating performance reproduced in the book's pages as the poster's central image. Taking the book and flattening it on the photocopier bed, Moscoso duplicated selected film stills into black-and-white versions to be cut up and pasted on the poster mechanical. To give poster viewers a better sense of the overall

performance, Moscoso selected three different stills showing Whitford and her billowing dress sleeves in various positions.

The Xerox photocopier was an unusual but exciting medium to explore, with immediate results and public access. Nearly anything could be made two-dimensional and reproduced endlessly, so long as it fit on the copier bed. In fact, and perhaps most obvious in a later collaboration with writer Richard Brautigan and actor Jack Thibeau, Moscoso's appreciation for the technical innovation of the Xerox machine is most evident. Together, they developed a "magazine" titled *The San Francisco Public Library: A Publishing House* in 1968, which featured the following description on its front cover: "This magazine was created and Xeroxed at the Main Library in the Civic Center using their ten cent Xerox machine", drawing attention to the quotidian nature of the process itself when, in reality, the outcome was highly experimental and anything but ordinary. Inside, copies of Thibeau's stomach, newspaper advertisements, and even a reproduction of a friend's Siamese cat grace its pages (Hjortsberg 2012). By calling the library a "publishing house", Moscoso and his peers staked the claim that the library now held the same power as large publishing companies. With this highly democratic medium, anyone with a dime could become their own publisher without edits, endorsement, or censorship.

Once Moscoso selected the desired film stills, he needed to create transparency between each image in order to print each still atop one another (and keep each layer visible). Conveniently, the halftone dots from the book's commercial reproduction provided the perfect opportunity to create visual space while keeping the image intact at the same time. Moscoso used the Xerox machine to enlarge each copy until the halftone dots were big enough that he felt confident they would not dissolve into a single form during the final editioning process.[5] As a result, the poster's central image bears witness not only to its original format as a film still but also to its secondary iteration as Moscoso found it. The negative space in the figure allowed transparency between each layer, so that viewers could observe all three positions of the dancer at once.

Presented in a triad palette of cerulean, yellow, and tomato red, the dancer's body becomes distorted as the halftone dots from each position coalesce to create a pointillist array of color. However, the dancer's wings stand out on their own, each in different stages of "flight". Moscoso cited his source directly in the image with the words "Annabelle" to the left of the dancer's ankles and "Butterfly Dance" to the right. And while it remains uncertain whether Moscoso was familiar with the hand-tinted version of the film, with its many colors shifting across Whitford (See Figure 2), for those familiar with the later version of the film, the resemblance is impossible to miss. Along with the enlargement of the halftone dots, color serves as the key mechanism to create visual clarity amidst Whitford's fanciful dancing, which would otherwise be reduced to an indeterminate outline, akin to the aftermath of a snow angel in fresh snow.

Figure 2. Hand-tinted film stills from *Serpentine Dance/Annabelle Butterfly Dance*, performed by Annabelle Whitford, directed by William K.L. Dickson and William Heise, 1895 (Wikimedia Commons).

In his self-authored book, *Sex, Rock & Optical Illusions*, Moscoso reflected on the Doors poster, which at the time was simply another job to complete and another opportunity to experiment with a new idea. It was not until radio host and friend Howard Hesseman directed Moscoso's attention to the poster's unique feature that he realized what he had made in this explorative design:

> Howard Hesseman, who introduced me to my wife Gail (thanks, Howard), had his hallway all papered with posters and lit by blinking Christmas lights. He said to me, "Victor, that poster you did for the Doors, the lady flies". The moment he said it, I knew what I had done; it was only an accident the first time. (Moscoso 2005)

It was only an accident the first time. Moscoso's quick reclamation of this happenstance awakening to the mechanics at play in the Doors poster emphasizes the experimental nature of the psychedelic poster scene. Required to churn out new posters weekly, Bay Area artists mobilized this commission-based format as an incubator for design experimentation, testing the limitations of two-dimensional surfaces on the dime of local production companies. When good ideas struck, they stuck. Initially, the Doors poster was simply another attempt to reinterpret a found image in a new way, using color and hand lettering to find a fresh look. But when placed in just the right context, a new, more exciting development appeared. Hesseman's observation underscores the crucial factor of site specificity embedded in kinetic lithographs. With each alternating hue of the Christmas lights, the poster became something new—a time-based medium dependent on the duration of each light's glow. With this en*light*ening experience, formally trained Moscoso could easily dissect the technical reason his design worked in that specific way once he focused on it; however, he may not have ever recognized the design's potential without the twinkle of red and green and a kind friend guiding him there—a bit of kismet rooted in the medium.

When viewed in stable white light, the imagery in kinetic lithographs appears as double (or triple) exposure photography. Dizzying at first glance, the composition is only clarified by flashing lights of the same hues, whether the poster is witness to a psychedelic light show at a dance hall or staged in a museum context. Each layer of the print dissolves one by one as light of the same hue washes out the ink on the page. Red ink vanishes in red light, only to reappear as blue light strikes the poster's surface seconds later. In effect, the dance hall becomes the organizing mechanism, but only for a moment or two. Despite promoters' small printing budgets, this inventive mode of making enabled Moscoso to participate in the burgeoning media art landscape of the 1960s by looking backwards to the nineteenth century via subject matter, process, and cinema.

Through iterative experimentation, Moscoso continued to test the limits of photo-offset lithography to make use of the existing dance hall surroundings–no outlets or bulky video projection equipment required on his end. Instead of plugging in a projector, he could simply hang a lithograph on the wall, wait for the show to begin, and watch the lights shift the composition throughout the night. Of course, the psychedelic light shows themselves required electricity—but in terms of the print itself, it simply had to find its light. Consequently, this strategy highlights the inherent reflexivity of psychedelic ephemera and its surrounding built environment. Unlike a ribbon of film, which links each frame together in a linear fashion, the stacked registration of a kinetic lithograph compresses the "scene" into a single moment, creating a visual cacophony of storytelling until placed in the dance hall's embrace. The legibility of the poster is entirely dependent on its environment, destabilized in conventional viewing settings.

Along with Moscoso's autobiography, curators and collectors alike have concentrated on his formal training in biographical essays, placing a strong emphasis on his knowledge base as a key factor in his success as a poster artist. A common refrain of Moscoso's is, "The better you know the rules, the better you can break the rules" (Moscoso 2005). However, in the instance of his kinetic lithographs, though his formal training may have led him near innovation, his surroundings solidified the breakthrough. In other words, Moscoso's talents are often exclusively attributed to his storied pedigree but fail to acknowledge the

magic of the psychedelic print—the iterative, collaborative, and occasionally miraculous spontaneity of art and design fueled by a relentless schedule of performances that landed San Francisco a spot on the international music scene.

In part, this gap in scholarship is due to art historical convention, which favors single-artist narratives and the quandary posed by an incomplete archive, obscuring much of the nebulous network implicit in psychedelic poster production. Film historian Gregory Zinman shares in this frustration from a different vantage point, describing scholarship surrounding the psychedelic light show as disappointing. He writes:

> Light shows also featured collaborative work among artists operating in a variety of mediums, and thus scholars who are more comfortable dealing with works by a single author or artist find them hard to analyze. The collective memory of the light show, which was poorly understood and scarcely documented, retains the shorthand of shallow classic-rock spectacle or countercultural kitsch. (Zinman 2020)

Similar can be said of Moscoso's posters and those of his peers. Although these posters are simultaneously admired and sought after by collectors, art historians have rarely dug deep into their complex histories. To call either the kinetic lithograph or the psychedelic light show "kitschy" would be to ignore its tremendous impact on society. As media scholar Fred Turner has argued, countercultural media had transformational properties within community settings. He states, "Their makers shared an understanding that media should be used to create environments", continuing, "that such spaces could produce individual psychological changes, and that altered audiences could ultimately change the world" (Turner 2013). In other words, the immersive realm of the dance hall was more than a spectacle; it set the tone for a new way of connecting with each other—a crucial ontology for San Francisco's counterculture community.

3. A 50th Anniversary Spotlight

In 2017, multiple exhibitions popped up to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Summer of Love.[6] In San Francisco, the de Young Museum curated an immersive overview of the legendary summer of 1967. The Summer of Love Experience: Art, Fashion, and Rock + Roll opened April 8 and ran through August 20, 2017. The exhibition was curated by Jill D'Alessandro and Colleen Terry, along with Victoria Binder, Dennis McNally, Joel Selvin, and Ben Van Meter (D'Alessandro and Terry 2017). Kicking off in a chronological fashion, visitors were greeted with elements of the Trips Festival, a three-day event in January 1966 that has become nearly synonymous with the start of the hippie boom. Afterward, the exhibition shifted into different realms of the memorable era, including fashion, photography, and, of course, ephemera, particularly posters.

Of particular relevance, the final segment of the exhibition, titled "Making Posters That Rock" and curated by conservator Victoria Binder, featured Moscoso's kinetic lithographs (See Figure 3). This area of the gallery centered on the materials utilized by artists and printers alike to develop the vibrant visual culture of San Francisco's psychedelic age. Binder directed a film with printer David Lance Goines to illustrate the process of photo-offset lithography and help visitors get their bearings on this technical aspect of the show. "Though the posters are recognized around the world", Binder remarked in her catalog essay, "few people know the story and process of how they were made" (D'Alessandro and Terry 2017). The pieces shown in display cases and on the walls helped unfurl the hidden layers of experimentation and skill represented by each poster. Lithographic plates, acetate sheets, film negatives, and other tools of the trade paired with didactics demystified commonly held misconceptions—especially the misguided notion that San Francisco's poster artists relied on Day-Glo ink for their vivid compositions.[7]

But the most captivating element for visitors, without a doubt, was Moscoso's kinetic lithographs, and understandably so. On a bright-red wall bisecting the room, several circular portals beckoned visitors to peer inside. Gazing inward, viewers were met with an otherworldly dimension of animation. As lights flashed, the posters' subjects appeared

to fly, dance, wave, talk, and even explode! Above the portals, framed originals of each poster hung on the wall. Isolated in dark frames, the largest posters hung in the center, with smaller posters on the edges. In effect, the five framed posters appeared as film posters advertising the cinematic surprises below. Out of the five selected, the Doors poster was included, as well as the Youngbloods poster—Moscoso's first *intentional* moving poster. The installation of the original kinetic lithographs above the portals allowed viewers to carefully contemplate the still images and then experience them in action seconds later, enabling them to oscillate between each presentation. Further, the decision to frame the kinetic lithographs individually signaled that they were clear outliers from the other posters in the exhibition. In an effort to ditch the frame, preparators sandwiched the rest of the posters between layers of plexiglass attached to the wall, using standoff hardware to make it appear as though the posters were papering hallways, dance hall walls, and other local venues, just as one would have experienced them in their original context.

Figure 3. Installation view of the "Making Posters That Rock" portion of The Summer of Love Experience: Art, Fashion, and Rock + Roll at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, California, 8 April–20 August 2017 (Artsy).

But the framed moving posters served an important role. They seemed to act almost as a pause button to ponder and better make sense of the chaos of the miniature light shows' effect, a foil to the portals' disorientation. But they also enabled visitors to connect what they had learned regarding the process of making posters to finished versions by looking closely. Certainly, Moscoso's kinetic lithographs are no less disorienting under stable light—a true paradox. With incongruent layers stacked atop one another, yielding a jumbled composition, the framed posters performed better as didactic tools than visual resolutions. This contemplative portion of The Summer of Love Experience permitted visitors to stand in the shoes of both artist and viewer. Equipped with a crash course on inks, matrices, and editioning, visitors could observe the poster's mechanisms in action and then stand back seconds later to identify the artistic choices that contributed to the overall effect. Perhaps, rather than a pause button, a better comparison is a light switch. Moving from portal to frame, one could see the poster turned *on* and *off*—emphasizing the integral role of the dance hall to the poster's full effect.

Furthermore, the portals were not only engaging but also practical. The museum's installation timeline and other demands of the exhibition made it difficult to complete a full risk assessment regarding the flashing lights and their impact on these fragile works on paper. Therefore, to prevent any potential damage, de Young Museum conservation

staff suggested the use of facsimiles in the portals to avoid the potential ramifications of long-term illumination from the colorful lights (Gupta and Binder 2017). Because kinetic lithographs rely on color and form to make the posters "work" under the lights, not specific inks or papers, the reproductions did not impact viewers' experience with the artworks.

4. A Homecoming Celebration

In 2021, an exhibition in Moscoso's hometown—A Coruña, Spain—also featured his kinetic lithographs in an isolated context within the broader exhibition, further underlining their eccentricity as a medium. Moscoso Cosmos: the Visual Universe of Victor Moscoso was a retrospective exhibition focused exclusively on the work of Victor Moscoso that ran from 14 April through 10 October 2021 (after significant delays due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic). Filling two rooms of the Fundación Luis Seoane, the exhibition displayed the largest public collection of Moscoso artworks in Europe, belonging to the Concello da Coruña. The exhibition was co-organized by the Fundación Luis Seoane, A Coruña; MUSAC (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León); and Centro Niemeyer, Avilés, with the collaboration of AC/E—Acción Cultural Española. Curator David Carballal worked with Moscoso, who managed the art direction himself, to bring together a lifetime of work including psychedelic posters, underground comics, illustrations, album covers, and animations.

Though not his first solo exhibition, Moscoso Cosmos was an especially exciting project for Moscoso, allowing the artist to revel in his successes in his hometown. In 1936, approximately two weeks after the start of the Spanish Civil War, Moscoso was born in A Coruña, the most northwestern province of Spain. Less than four years later, he moved with his mother to Brooklyn, New York, following the war's end. His father, born to immigrant parents in New Jersey, held dual citizenship with Spain and the United States and awaited their arrival on the East Coast of the United States after departing Spain earlier to avoid military conflict (Carballal 2021). As he grew up, Moscoso attended the Industrial Art Institute in Manhattan and Cooper Union, where he trained under Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline.

However, after graduation, Moscoso was disappointed in the opportunities available to him as a commercial artist, so he enrolled in graduate school at Yale University with then-girlfriend Eva Hesse. After completing his studies in New Haven, the Beat movement captured Moscoso's interest as a musician and artist, leading him to Berkeley in 1959 following graduation. Upon arrival in the Bay Area, Moscoso returned to school, this time for postgraduate studies at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) to avoid being drafted into military service (Carballal 2021). After two years, he became an instructor of stone lithography for the college for about a year. His musical interests quickly pulled him into the Bay Area's underground scene. Eager to participate and make connections, he worked as a window dresser to make ends meet in the meantime. Only a few years later, Moscoso made his first psychedelic poster, and the rest is history, or at least is included in the retrospective exhibition.

Importantly, the exhibition highlighted posters that Moscoso made not only for San Francisco promoters but also under his own company, Neon Rose. In December 1966, Moscoso started Neon Rose to find more freedom and creative license in the poster-making process. Neon Rose had an exclusive partnership with another dance hall located on Fillmore Street, the Matrix. It had a smaller budget than other dance halls in the area, so Moscoso cut a deal with the venue, offering 200 free posters in exchange for unlimited printing rights and all the poster profits.[8] Neon Rose also completed jobs for bands, poets, and other creatives in the area. A businessman at his core, Moscoso wanted to be in full control of his creative enterprises, protected from club promoters' whims and other design mandates. Under his own company, Moscoso continued to experiment with kinetic imagery. One of the first moving posters to come out of Neon Rose was a custom holiday mailer for a longtime friend, the Cuban film-title designer Pablo Ferro, who attended the Industrial Art Institute alongside him in his younger years.

As visitors moved through the exhibition, they happened upon a small, glowing room with a cartoonish opening. Designed to house the kinetic lithographs in the exhibition, Carballal created a semienclosed space to better experience them. Tube lights hung around the ceiling's perimeter and radiated varying hues, including red and green (see Figures 4 and 5). Since Moscoso did not make a lot of kinetic lithographs, there were multiple versions of the same posters tacked up on the room's three walls. A few other experimental posters also shared the space. The room featured a mixture of posters created for Family Dog Productions and Neon Rose. The Family Dog Productions posters (like the Doors poster) are smaller, often measuring 14 by 20 inches, whereas the Neon Rose posters are larger, typically measuring at 22 × 28 inches. The space also held later works, including a poster created for an American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) lecture and an exhibition poster made for Moscoso Cosmos, which uses elements from an unpublished poster, "Two Ton Mustard Seed". It is not clear whether the posters in this portion of the gallery are facsimiles, but the effects remain the same regardless.

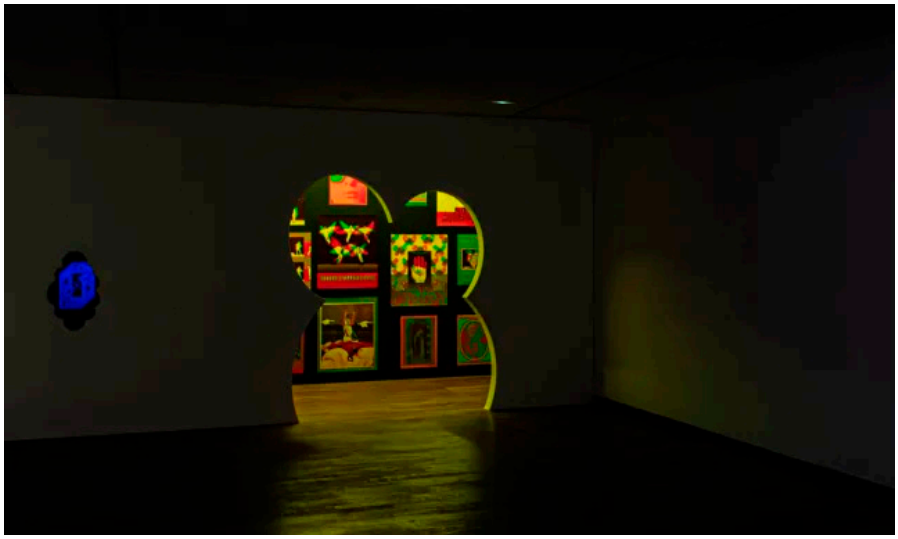

Figure 4. Installation views of the immersive poster display in Moscoso Cosmos at the Fundación Luis Seoane in A Coruña, Spain, 14 April–10 October 2021 (Source: Steven Heller, *PRINT* magazine).

Figure 5. Installation views of the immersive poster display in Moscoso Cosmos at the Fundación Luis Seoane in A Coruña, Spain, 14 April–10 October 2021 (Source: Steven Heller, *PRINT* magazine).

Unlike the portals at the de Young Museum, visitors could enter the dynamic room and shift under the colorful hues alongside the posters' cast of characters, including a hovering

set of lips and floating butterflies. Looking down at one's hands, glancing across the room at someone else's face, staring at one's shoes—the impact was universal (see Figure 6). The shifting lights above stood in the way of a museum's conventional aims. Changing constantly and skewed by their environment, the lighting eliminated visual stability. As the posters oscillated between the categories of print and animation, beholden to the lights' steady flash, the ritual of the museum's concentrated gaze was substituted for the ritual of the psychedelic dance hall, one centered on communal engagement and embodied participation. As Carol Duncan explained in her seminal 1995 essay, the sacredness of the modern museum is deeply tied to its uncluttered and individually lit displays that isolate objects, subsequently elevating them to an otherworldly level through aesthetic choices (Duncan 1995). However, although Carballal's installation of the kinetic lithographs could not be further from the white cube world Duncan refers to, I argue it functioned in a similar manner and created a ritual of its own: still an entirely different mode of being but one without the baggage of poised expectations and revelatory observations—one could simply *be*. In its original context, the light show "provided a means of deemphasizing the individual in favor of collectivity", and the same is true of the communal experience of museum goers (Zinman 2020). Regardless of identity, the lights cast a uniform glow onto everyone in the room, projecting a new, heavily saturated existence that allowed visitors to step outside of themselves.

Figure 6. Visitor in immersive poster display, Moscoso Cosmos, at the Fundación Luis Seoane in A Coruña, Spain, 14 April–10 October 2021 (Source: Steven Heller, *PRINT* magazine).

5. Psychedelia's Liminal Materiality

Without the trappings of a pseudopsychedelic dance hall, particularly the flashing lights, the kinetic lithographs lose their boundlessness and become inert in the museum—similar to how art historian Bissera Pentcheva describes the Byzantine icon which "performed through its materiality". Describing the flicker of candle flames, swirling incense smoke, and noisy auditory environment, she asserts that "in saturating the material and sensorial to excess, the experience of the icon led to a transcendence of this very materiality and gave access to the intangible, invisible, and noetic" (Pentcheva 2006). However, when situated in a "glass-cage" in the museum, the icon's life is stripped away completely. Importantly, the key culprit for this lifeless display is "uniform and steady electric lighting", and Moscoso's posters are no different. As mentioned earlier, the manipulation of the offset-photo lithography process is precisely what enabled Moscoso to transform this printed ephemera into a time-based medium—its materiality makes the intangible nature of its movement possible. The technical process employed by the artist and printers facilitates the experience, the ink's imperfect registration and handpicked palette unleashing a portal into a phantasmic presence—but only if placed under the right conditions.

Under the flashing lights in both the portal displays at the de Young Museum and the room installation at the Fundación Luis Seoane, the lithographs are especially peculiar objects as animated scenes without screens, their closest analogue perhaps being a flip book—but even for these, the experience is mediated by one's own hand. Kinetic lithographs are a more autonomous medium, like a film, in that they keep moving regardless of one's interaction with them. As Kate Mondloch writes, screens in the conventional sense function simultaneously as immaterial and material entities: "The screen's objecthood, however, is typically overlooked in daily life: the conventional propensity is to look *through* media screens and not *at* them" (Mondloch 2010). In this unique instance, the posters serve as the screens by which a visitor views the animations. However, since the animation's various frames are forever locked onto the surface, it becomes nearly impossible for viewers to look past the poster's surface and forget the material reality before them. Without the flashing lights, looking at one of Moscoso's moving posters is like seeing a film all at once. Carballal's immersive room allows the posters to transcend their material realities by way of their environment—it makes looking *through* them possible in a way that a conventional installation would make difficult.

Recent scholarship surrounding psychedelia has most predominately emerged in fields like communication, film, media studies, and musicology rather than art historical inquiries, as psychedelia's printed history is eclipsed by the flashing lights and sonic drone of the psychedelic dance hall. Further, art historian David Joselit has argued that the "visual culture of psychedelia was devoted to dissolving objects into optical pulsation", equating its visual tactics to Nam June Paik's media art, such as "Magnet TV" from 1965, for its scramble of lines and dissolving forms, or, more succinctly, a "dancing pattern" that reflected much of Aldous Huxley's description of a psychedelic trip (Joselit 2007; Huxley 2009). Joselit's comparison to Paik is important; it highlights a connection between mid-twentieth century media and psychedelic ephemera as highly recursive media. For Paik, distorting the television's signal threw open a door to enormous potential in terms of technology manipulation. The same is true for Moscoso, who eschewed standard plate preparations and printing practices to uncover a way to bring print into a time-based category. However, if we take the charge of "dissolving objects" too seriously, we stand to lose much of psychedelic ephemera's rich visual and material culture, founded upon cut-and-pasted photocopies. Joselit's statement is not unusual; it echoes common sentiments regarding psychedelia, for example, that it is a tool to aid in a druglike experience or a portal to expand consciousness, even, and this is true. But it is also only part of the story.

Beginning as tangible ephemera, such as a postcard, magazine page, or book plate, psychedelic posters are the result of exploring the potential of print and its many iterations. Stepping away from close looking as the central method of analysis and looking to technical art history, oral histories, and other archival sources allows for the acknowledgement of psychedelia as a highly social realm, demanding an awareness of its tactile qualities and circulation to fully comprehend its context and function. By doing so, through immersive displays and detailed technical lessons, museums can restore the broader network of designers, printers, promoters, and other crucial roles involved in their production. Exhibitions like those at the de Young Museum and the Fundación Luis Seoane offer ideal opportunities to have these conversations, giving visitors a chance to witness this extremely visceral medium.

6. A Postwar Kinetoscope

The poster itself as a medium is an element of nostalgia, a mode of communication that had faded in the wake of radio and television during the mid-twentieth century. Art historian Elizabeth Guffey notes that the poster aligned with San Francisco hippies' overall obsessions with the past, "apparent in the cast-off Edwardian frock coats and stove-pipe hats" throughout the city, particularly the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. Guffey implores us to recognize the value of understanding "retro" as a "non-historical way of knowing the past", a relationship to objects that requires a sense of detachment to create space

for new meaning (Guffey 2006). I argue that Moscoso's kinetic lithographs embody this notion explicitly. While Guffey is referring more to items and motifs, exhibitions like those discussed in this essay expand this concept into technical processes, such as the iterative experiments which enabled poster artists to reimagine a century-old mode of printing. By refuting standard practices of offset-photo lithography, Moscoso mobilized the past for an updated way of communicating that suited psychedelic sentiments of escape and imagination. Though his kinetic work allowed him to dabble in the burgeoning media art landscape of the 1960s, his subject matter allowed him to stay connected to the past.

When Moscoso developed his first (accidental) moving poster, he started with film stills intended for a kinetoscope (See Figure 7), an early motion picture device that allowed one person at a time to view a film through a small peephole. It, too, like the kinetic lithograph, was an illusion that relied upon a bright, shifting light in order to appear in motion. A simulation for one, the experience of using a kinetoscope reflects the portals at the de Young exhibition, as one can peek at a spectacle that is otherwise enclosed and separated from our environment. On the other side of the spectrum, in the case of the Fundación Luis Seoane, expanding the light's cast to the entire room allows the museum to shift into the dance hall's original context—an updated, large-scale collective kinetoscope made possible by fluctuating lights.

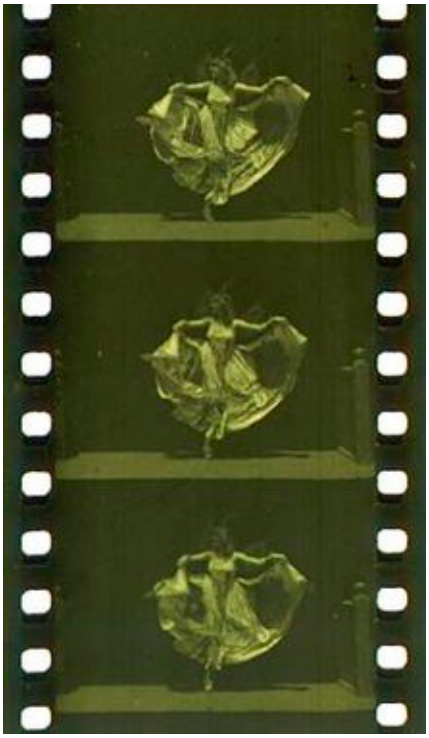

Figure 7. 35 mm film strip from *Annabelle Butterfly Dance*, 1895 (Wikimedia Commons).

Maybe the most important distinction between the portal installation and the immersive room is the role of an embodied perspective. The escapism of the posters was twofold; the colors and patterns created an otherworldly sensation, while the citations of the past via the source imagery acted as something of a time machine. As Jean Baudrillard reveals in *The System of Objects*, an antique can serve as a "mythological object" which allows the user or owner to gain a "projective myth" of its origins. "The antique object no longer has any practical application", Baudrillard explains, "its role being merely to signify" (Baudrillard 1968). Though the posters did originally have a practical application—advertising the dance hall—they slowly became something more, signifiers of a new sociality within the Bay Area, and embedded in that way of being is the transportive, ritualistic space of the dance hall.

This social significance remains intact, even now, as these moving posters enter the museum, long detached from their original dance hall context. The posters construct a time warp that oscillates between the past and the future, while the viewer remains planted in the present. Constant reconfigurations of media and space in light shows (even when reproduced in a museum setting), due to "the tinkering with, the manipulation of, and the literal and metaphorical rewiring of technologies", open individuals' minds to a "radical new sociality" (Zinman 2020). Given the social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, this claim undoubtedly also carries political weight. When conceived as an element of social engagement, the installation of Moscoso's kinetic lithographs raises larger questions about how visitors are meant to engage with museums and their offerings.

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Notes

1 Most recently, an exhibition at the Newberry in Chicago titled "Pop Up Books through the Ages" has highlighted these moving prints, predominately from the early modern period. Scholars such as Suzanne Karr Schmidt have been very influential in regard to scholarship in this category. For more information, see *Altered and Adorned: Using Renaissance Prints in Daily Life* published by the Art Institute of Chicago in 2011 (Schmidt and Nichols 2011).

2 This research is related to my doctoral disseration "'Your Eyes Are Limited': Psychedelic Aesthetics in the Post-War Age, 1966–1970". This project is under the supervision of Dr. Jenn Marshall at the University of Minnesota.

3 For more, please see *A Laboratory for Art* by Francesca Bewer (2010), "Technical Art History as Method" in *The Art Bulletin* 101, No. 4 by Caroline Fowler (2019), and *Ways of Making and Knowing* edited by Smith et al. (2014).

4 Selected for its visual appeal and with limited attention to its original context, some imagery utilized by psychedelic artists upholds white settler notions of identity and other problematic subject matter from the past. For example, Wes Wilson frequently used the ethnographic work of Edward Curtis in his compositions derived from the book, *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (Josephy 1961).

5 Moscoso frequently utilized the San Francisco Public Library as hub, exemplified by the legal-sized "magazine" he created with Richard Brautigan and Jack Thibeau titled *The San Francisco Library: A Publishing House* in 1968. Stanford University holds a copy in their archives (Felton Collection) and collectors fawn over this piece of Moscoso ephemera as few original copies (about 20) still exist.

6 Anniversary shows are common for this subject matter. For example, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston held an exhibition titled "Summer of Love: Photography and Graphic Design" from 6 July through 6 December 2017. Additionally, The Block Museum of Art (Evanston, IL) ran an exhibition titled "William Blake and the Age of Aquarius" from 23 September 2017 to 11 March 2018. See also the Whitney Museum of American Art's "Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era" on view from 24 May to 26 September 2007 in honor of the Summer of Love's 40th anniversary.

7 Conservation staff analyzed every poster under normal illumination and long-wavelength ultraviolet radiation, only one poster contained DayGlo ink: Stanley Mouse's "Keep California Green" poster, published by Family Dog Productions.

8 By starting Neon Rose, Moscoso retained rights to his artwork. Promotors for clubs like the Fillmore Auditorium (Bill Graham) and the Avalon Ballroom (Chet Helms) registered the poster artists' artwork under their own names, limiting the artists' access to their own artwork and resulting income.

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Article

Old Is the New: Immersive Explorations in Another Beautiful Country—Moving Images by Chinese American Artists

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Abstract: This article explores how diasporic Chinese video artists present familial histories and tales of cross-cultural exchange in the context of an exhibition I am curating, *Another Beautiful Country: Moving Images by Chinese American Artists*, at the University of Southern California (USC) Pacific Asia Museum. I discuss projects by featured artists Richard Fung and Patty Chang. These artists' experimental documentaries and performative videos foster deep personal discoveries that defy the late-capitalist obsession with *the new* as defined by youth, novelty, and the next trend, providing revelatory insights through recuperative engagements with what has come before. In analyzing artworks by Fung and Chang, I also reference related texts by/about artists and historical figures including Walter Benjamin, Anna May Wong, and Zhang Ailing, who emigrated from the People's Republic of China to the United States in the 1950s and whose special collections in the USC Libraries helped inform the exhibition's programming. I also interweave my own related familial histories and share some (not-so-new) curatorial ideas for immersing audiences in intercultural art and reflection.

Keywords: Chinese American art; contemporary art; curatorial studies; cross-cultural studies; experimental documentary; immersive exhibitions; video art

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1. Starting Conversations

The first interview I conducted was with my grandmother, Shu-in Lin, who we called Nini. It was 1993 and I was in sixth grade, completing a course assignment by interviewing an older relative. I still have the VHS tape (newish media then) of our interview, in which Nini gleefully describes growing up in Wenzhou, a southeastern Chinese city. She also discusses her fateful move to Taiwan in 1947, coincidentally, two years before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takeover of mainland China. My grandparents' move to Taiwan allowed them to escape ensuing hardships including a massive famine and tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Simultaneously, my grandparents became unexpectedly, devastatingly separated from their relatives for half a century. Amidst the CCP's victory and establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Nationalist Party fled to Taiwan, creating unrest on the island previously under Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945). Many Taiwanese locals, including indigenous islanders and immigrants from mainland China whose families had settled there long ago, resented the arrival of the Nationalists, along with so many civilians, from mainland China. As Nini explained in our interview, she spent some of her childhood in Xiamen, a mainland Chinese city across the strait from Taiwan, which shared with the island a nearly indistinguishable dialect. Having acquired the dialect, Nini, as the only member of her local community of Wenzhounese transplants who could communicate in Taiwanese, ran everyone's errands. Others, including my grandfather and father, then just a baby, remained hidden in attics and backrooms, fearing conflicts accompanying the wave of migration. At the time of my sixth-grade interview, I spoke little *putong hua* (Mandarin Chinese) and no Wenzhounese, the famously indecipherable dialect my grandparents spoke with each other. Nini, who had immigrated to the United States (US) as an adult following my father's arrival to pursue graduate study in the late 1960s, spoke only basic English. My dad translated our interview

and can be heard off-screen. Despite interpretative delays, my interview with Nini was full of smiles and laughter—our appreciation of the chance to share stories shining. Our conversation inspired me to begin studying *putong hua* so I could better communicate with my grandparents. Language barriers are common among immigrant families, and every family faces generational distances. While we can never wholly pass on lived experiences across generations, such efforts—through interviewing, documenting, reenacting, tracing haunts, learning each other's languages, or sharing moments of closeness—strengthen our connections while leading to new discoveries.

Over the past several years, I have been exploring how diasporic Chinese artists present familial histories and tales of migration and cross-cultural exchange through video art and cinematic installations for an exhibition I am curating: *Another Beautiful Country: Moving Images by Chinese American Artists*, scheduled to take place at the University of Southern California (USC) Pacific Asia Museum in 2024. Drawing its title from the Chinese word for America (*Meiguo*, literally, *beautiful country*) and the popular abbreviation for American-born Chinese (ABC), *Another Beautiful Country* foregrounds shifting ideas of nationhood explored by artists who identify, however partially or conflictedly, as do I, as Chinese American. Like me, many of the exhibition's artists were born in the US, though some were born elsewhere, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, Trinidad, and Tobago. Offering expansive views of cultures and identities, *Another Beautiful Country* foregrounds moving images (filmic, as well as emotionally evocative and migration-related) by artists confronting subject positions of being both, while perhaps neither enough, Chinese and (nor) American. The featured artworks provide alternatives to official histories of nation formation by exploring how immigrants and their offspring define, critique, and imagine home. I hope visitors will become immersed in the exhibited works and continue contemplating intercultural exchanges. The kind of immersion I endeavor is akin to old-fashioned language immersion, by which people steeped in a foreign language gradually learn to speak with their own accents, cadences, and idiosyncrasies. This type of immersion differs from the flashy experiences promoted in current "new media" exhibitions, whereby visitors feel submerged in artworks (e.g., via all-encompassing video projections, sonic installations, engulfing performances, and/or VR headsets). I seek a more subtle, slower immersion, one which has long been present in museums, in which viewers concentrate before a work of art, closely looking, watching, listening, and feeling. Such concentration invites in artists' perspectives, in the case of *Another Beautiful Country*, of being between China and America, enhancing cross-cultural understanding.

This article discusses projects by two of the artists featured in *Another Beautiful* Country: Richard Fung (b. 1954) and Patty Chang (b. 1972). Both artists utilize video art for intimate portrayals of older family members and/or historical figures. I argue that Fung and Chang's representations of familial relations and overlooked histories share elder wisdom and multilayered transnational experiences. These artists' experimental documentaries and performative videos foster deep personal discoveries that defy the late-capitalist obsession with *the new* defined by youth, novelty, and the next trend, providing revelatory insights through recuperative engagements with what has come before. In discussing artworks by Fung and Chang, I also reference related texts by/about artists and historical figures including German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940); the first Chinese American movie star, Anna May Wong (1905–1961), whose interview with Benjamin inspired an artwork by Patty Chang; and Zhang Ailing/Eileen Chang (1920–1955), who emigrated from the PRC to the US in the 1950s, and whose special collections in the USC Libraries helped inform the exhibition's programming. I also interweave my own related familial histories and finally share some (not-so-new) curatorial ideas for immersing audiences in cross-cultural art and reflection.

2. Experimental Documentaries by Richard Fung

Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and currently based in Toronto, Canada, artist Richard Fung began making video art in the 1980s amidst a striking dearth of representation of

Asians and Asian Americans in Western art and popular culture. The artist's pivotal essay, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn" (Fung 1991), discusses the lack of Asian characters in the context of gay pornography, while scrutinizing widely held beliefs, perpetuated in mainstream media, that Asians constitute the most sexually restrained race. Fung cites a controversial study by psychologist Philippe Rushton which "posits that degree of 'sexuality'—interpreted as penis and vagina size, frequency of intercourse, buttock and lip size—correlates positively with criminality and sociopathic behavior and inversely with intelligence, health, and longevity" (Fung 1991, p. 145). The artist writes the following:

> Rushton sees race as the determining factor and places East Asians (Rushton uses the word Orientals) on one end of the spectrum and blacks on the other. Since whites fall squarely in the middle, the position of perfect balance, there is no need for analysis, and they remain free of scrutiny. Notwithstanding its profound scientific shortcomings, Rushton's work serves as an excellent articulation of a dominant discourse on race and sexuality in Western society—a system of ideas and reciprocal practices that originated in Europe simultaneously with (some argue as a conscious justification for) colonial expansion and slavery. In the nineteenth century these ideas took on a scientific gloss with social Darwinism and eugenics. Now they reappear, somewhat altered, in psychology journals from the likes of Rushton. It is important to add that these ideas have also permeated the global popular consciousness. Anyone who has been exposed to Western television or advertising images, which is much of the world, will have absorbed this particular constellation of stereotyping and racial hierarchy. In Trinidad in the 1960s, on the outer reaches of the empire, everyone in my schoolyard was thoroughly versed in these "truths" about the races. (Fung 1991, p. 145)

Here, Fung observes how pernicious pseudoscientific studies seep into the collective consciousness, describing the international absorption of racist stereotyping through popular media.

Fung's notion of absorption is akin to German philosopher Walter Benjamin's in "The Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin [1935] 1969). Published in 1935 amidst the rise of fascism and on the precipice of World War II, and still highly resonant today, Benjamin's essay discusses the emergence of reproductive technologies and the corresponding diminishing of the "aura" of the original work of art. Benjamin draws a distinction between (1) art/entertainment, absorbed with apperception, that distracts the masses, and (2) art that absorbs, and in so doing, heightens perception and may enlighten viewers. Architecture and Hollywood movies, Benjamin argues, tend to be absorbed in a state of distraction. In contrast, he cites a Chinese legend in which an artist becomes absorbed by his painting:

> Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. (Benjamin [1935] 1969, p. 239)

Benjamin's reference to art outside Western traditions, and specifically to Chinese painting, to illustrate the principle of being absorbed, exemplifies how people in the West have long looked to Asian practices and philosophies—yoga, meditation, and Buddhism—to heighten perception, attention, and presentness. Technology has developed exponentially since Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", and our world is full of absorbing media. Today, contemporary life in the PRC is as, if not more, impacted by distracting media, technological developments, and speed, as is life in the US. As Fung notes, through television and advertising (and to this, we can now add the Internet, social media, video games, apps, and so on), people of all backgrounds around

the globe absorb misinformation in states of distraction and apperception, leading to the perpetuation of racist and misogynistic beliefs and actions.

Fung originally presented "Looking for my Penis" at "How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video", a 1989 conference organized by the editorial group Bad Object-Choices and held at New York's Anthology Film Archives. The conference aimed to address gay and lesbian media theory, and presenters and audience participants including Fung, Kobena Mercer, and Isaac Julien raised issues of race in addition to sexuality, fostering an intersectional dialogue prior to the coining of the term intersectionality.[1] Bad Object-Choices encouraged participants to transform their presentations into essays for publication but faced difficulty publishing the volume.[2] Douglas Crimp, one of the conference organizers, also planned to publish essay versions of the presentations in a 1990 issue of the art journal, *October*, but those essays, including Fung's, were rejected, and Crimp was ousted from *October*'s editorial board, presumably for being too activist- and identity-politics-oriented.[3] Fung's critique of white supremacist narratives thus extends to the field of art history, as the artist's writing and videos pose critical challenges to narrow definitions of art, formalist interpretations, and the Western-European-centricity of art historical canon formation.

Since the 1980s, Fung has challenged the lack of Asian representation in gay pornography, film, and art, creating multiple video artworks centering queer Asian as well as diasporic Chinese subjects. Three of Fung's experimental documentaries focus on older relatives: his father in *The Way to My Father's Village* (38 min, 1988), the artist's mother in *My Mother's Place* (49 min, 1990), and his cousin who was ninety years old at the time of Fung's filming of *Nang by Nang* (40 min, 2018). These single-channel videos utilize documentary film methods, while subverting any pretense of detached, objective reporting by, for example, the artist appearing in front of the camera or letting his voice be heard out of frame. The videos tell personal histories and share quiet moments of reflection that resist nationalist bombast.

The Way to My Father's Village (Figure 1) opens with shaky footage centered on a stone road, followed by a man's voice answering questions, presumably posed by an immigration officer played by a woman who types his (Fung's father's) responses: *Name: Eugene Arthur Fung; Occupation: Businessman; Marital Status: Married; Place and Date of Birth: China, 1 August 1909*. A gong and traditional Chinese music sounds and *1279 A.D.* appears. The narrator states the following:

> 700 years ago, the Mongols invaded northern China. Many of the original Chinese inhabitants fled south. The Hakka, as these people came to be known, lived apart from the other Han Chinese on the porous land, all that was available. Today in Kwangtung/Canton, the Hakka maintain their own villages, their own customs, their own language. The word Hakka means guest family. (Fung 1988)

Computer graphics of traditional Chinese art, footage of natural landscapes (including, presumably, those of Fung's father's home village), and hands flipping through a Great World Atlas accompany this historical overview. The narration then shifts, describing the microhistory of Fung's father: his birth in a little Hakka village to an apothecary and farmer and first migration from a small village in southern China's Guangdong Province to Trinidad via Hong Kong and Canada; marriage; establishment of a prosperous business; eight children; a second migration in 1976 to Toronto, Canada; and death, following his second stroke, in 1986. Varied footage of landscapes, modes of transport, photographs, and government documents fade in and out, before blank screens with *HISTORY*, and then *HISTORY and memory* appear. *The Way to My Father's Village* questions HISTORY (in all capitals, or grand historical narratives), as well as individual memories, privileging the latter, albeit with ambivalence. The video then switches to first-person narration with Fung describing his own life experiences and relationship with and memories of his father as he looks through old family photographs and his father's papers and passports, which, he notes, do not reveal much: "These government documents are all my father left behind, but I find it hard to see my father's ghost in these statistics" (Fung 1988). Throughout the video,

Fung contrasts his own interest in Chinese culture with his dad's seeming disinterest and repression as he assimilated as a converted Catholic in Trinidad:

> Dad never returned to China in the almost sixty years since he left his village and he never wanted us to. Though he talked a lot about being Chinese, he was proud of his Catholicism and his ability to use a knife and fork. He never taught us his language. There's a real finality in that. So learning about China was almost an act of rebellion, an invasion of privacy. . .The past my father tried to escape becomes for me a means of self-definition. (Fung 1988)

Figure 1. Richard Fung, still from *The Way to My Father's Village*, 1988. Image courtesy of artist.

Fung then interviews his cousins, Tony and Dorothy, whose father was the artist's dad's older brother. Tony and Dorothy recall their early childhood in Jamaica, being sent back to Hong Kong to study in Jesuit schools, and harrowing escapes from China in the 1930s during the Sino–Japanese War. The video also chronicles the artist's first trip to China, in 1986, and to his father's village, which his aunt discouraged him from visiting, saying "There's nothing to see there" (Fung 1988). An air of disappointment surrounds Fung's descriptions of the trip. He describes feeling like a perpetual outsider and having difficulties communicating (his English had to be translated into Cantonese by his mother, which was then translated into Hakka by his aunt). He struggles to imagine the scenes relayed to him by his father and cousins and does not find much. Resignedly, Fung states, "Memory of the real and memory of the imagined become indistinguishable" (Fung 1988). His camera fixates on the face of an elderly woman. She shares his last name, and he says with uncertainty that she is the oldest Fung in the village. The footage and narration of Fung's trip to China are interwoven with texts about China by foreigners, including, as labeled, *Marco Polo/explorer, trader. Venice 1298 A.D.*, speaking about bustling markets, and *Matteo Ricci/missionary, diplomat. Macerata 1552–1610*, commenting on the "abomination" of eunuchs and "public streets of boys cut up like prostitutes" (Fung 1988). Fung's accounts of his travels both relate to and depart from these legendary, moralistic, and imperialistic tales. Recognizing his outsider status, Fung strives to learn more about his Chinese roots, ruminating on cross-cultural legacies. Revealing the multilayered identities of his father, cousins, and himself, informed by multiple migrations and fluctuating perceptions, Fung's *The Way to My Father's Village* crystallizes diasporic subjects' inability to fully identify with a single nationality. Simultaneously, the video illuminates varied ways emigres and their children regard home and reminds us of how much can be sought on a journey.

While *The Way to My Father's Village* was created after the death of Fung's father, offering a lament on distance in life and in death, *My Mother's Place* (Figure 2) centers on recorded interviews and conversations in Canada and Trinidad between the artist and his mother, Rita, uplifting her presence and survival amidst hardship. The video integrates theoretical musings on feminism, identity politics, and the legacies of colonialism, opening with four friends of the artist—female intellectuals, activists, and artists—discussing the importance of representation. Following the heading "Reading Instructions", Indian Canadian sociologist and philosopher Himani Banerji describes how she sees her task as an author of color: "Just to write about how we live with each other. . .what goes on. . . without even remembering there is a white audience. . .I have to ask myself, 'Who is this for?'. . . I think what is necessary is to remember what we know ourselves" (Fung 1990). As Indo-Trinidadian writer Ramabai Espinet states, "One of the major tasks is to facilitate the emergence of women as doers, as producers of their own culture. . .Another task is really raising the awareness of men. . .in the society about the problem of violence against women and children. . .Violence is a fact of life in the Caribbean. . .it's part of the legacy from slavery and indentureship" (Fung 1990). British-born Canadian ethnographer Dorothy Smith recalls how areas in the Caribbean were first presented to her in an atlas with pink areas that were *ours*, the British Empire, and the need to consider how colonialism and power relations are circulated and perpetuated amongst ordinary people through flattened texts and modes of representation with "the absence of dimension, the absence of others, the absence of speaking back" (Fung 1990). Black Canadian filmmaker Glace Lawrence adds, "I would like to just see more images, more faces because I think if people don't see you, it's almost as if you don't exist. . .and you don't experience these things and you don't feel these things. So that's why I want to make films. . . I want to make sure that the experiences and. . .the history has been documented visually" (Fung 1990).

Figure 2. Richard Fung, still from *My Mother's Place*, 1990. Image courtesy of artist.

The video then focuses on Rita and her life stories, as Fung brings theory into artistic action, foregrounding a very personal story of his mother. We see Rita and her relative visiting family members' graves in Princes Town Cemetery and footage from her childhood village in Moruga in southern Trinidad, a place, Fung notes, that he thought he had visited as a child but realized he just imagined based on his mother's stories. We see Rita speaking about her family, childhood, education reflective of colonialism (she recalls having to learn the names of British cities), a grandfatherly family friend smoking opium, carnival, race, and class relations in colonial Trinidad and Tobago. She speaks sitting in front of a window

in her Canadian home or on a bed with a mirror behind her, in which we see the artist's reflection. At other times, Rita's narration is paired with footage of Trinidadian flora, fauna, and people celebrating on the streets during carnival, with the colors of feathers and fabric of costumes graphically enhanced. Throughout the video, Fung contrasts Canada's suburban landscape (snowy, tree-filled, and lowly populated) with that of Trinidad (wet, warm, lush, and filled with people). Fung also integrates family photographs and home movie footage showing him dancing with the title *One day Mom caught me in one of her dresses and threatened to put me out in the street. . .I was scared but it didn't stop me*. Fung recalls memories, positive and negative, and considers how home videos reflect the family's aspirations more than realities. Rita describes her fraught relationship with her father. Despite living in Trinidad for decades, her father maintained that his children, especially his son in China, were far superior to his children born in Trinidad. He insisted Rita and her siblings only befriend children of Chinese descent, but they secretly made friends of all races and backgrounds. *My Mother's Place* speaks to the conflicts but also the importance of familial relations: "When I look at her [my mother]. . .I know who I am" (Fung 1990). The artist concludes by describing a disagreement he had with his mom over whether an oak tree in her backyard should be cut down. The artist felt it should stay, but his mother, who had grown up on the edge of a forest and did not find trees romantic, felt it hampered her tomatoes. When the artist returned to Canada, the tree had been cut and beautiful tomatoes abounded. The final shot of *My Mother's Place* shows tomatoes dropped into a salad bowl, with overlaid text: *I once read an article by Dorothy Smith in which she said that the answers the subject gives are much less notable than the questions the sociologist asks*.

Fung sees his most recent experimental documentary, *Nang by Nang* (Figure 3), as a continuation of his autoethnographic explorations into members of his Chinese Caribbean family. Fung met his first cousin, Nang, known by many names throughout her life (e.g., Anang, Dorothy, and Mavis) for the first time when he began making the video. He films Nang in her Rio Rancho, New Mexico home and later, the cousins travel together to their hometown in Trinidad. Throughout the video, Nang speaks about her past experiences: growing up as a mixed-race illegitimate child; being raised by her grandparents; various moves around the world including from Trinidad to Venezuela and later to the US; her illustrious dancing career; and several relationships, some abusive, some loving, including five marriages. Out of each of the three videos focusing on the artist's family members, *Nang by Nang* features Fung most prominently. He is often seen on camera, as is his partner, Tim, who Fung notes he brings along as his assistant. After their initial meeting, Fung invites Nang to travel with him to Port of Spain, where both cousins grew up. The trip feels joyous and fruitful as Nang visits old haunts and meets friends she has not seen in years. Fung narrates and asks Nang questions throughout *Nang by Nang*, and toward the conclusion, he shares that Nang now calls him regularly to remind him and Tim to take their daily vitamins. Small acts of care abound in *Nang by Nang*, and viewers sense this project formed a new, treasured relationship between the artist and his elder cousin.

Upon first watching *Nang by Nang*, I immediately thought of my grandmother, Nini. I wrote to Fung the following: Your cousin was such a radiant person and you illuminate her beauty, warmth, and electrifying energy, as well as that of the varied landscapes she inhabited. She reminds me of my grandmother, who passed away a couple years ago at 97. Nini was born in Wenzhou, then moved to Taiwan and later to the US. Both women shared a wonderful combination of elegance and edginess, and, even amidst past hardships, exuded joy.

Figure 3. Richard Fung, still from *Nang by Nang*, 2018. Image courtesy of artist.

3. Intimate Relations in Patty Chang's Performative Videos

San Francisco Bay Area-born, Los Angeles-based, Chinese American artist Patty Chang became well known in the 1990s for her bold performances and video artworks addressing love, family, death, and bodily functions. Chang frequently twists conventions of feminine beauty and defies stereotypes of Asian women as passive subjects. In her 1998 performance video, *Melons (At a Loss)* (Figure 4), Chang stares into the camera and tells stories related to a commemorative plate, bearing a photo of her smiling aunt, which she received following her aunt's death:

> When my aunt died, I got a plate. It was the kind of plate with a color photo printed on it in a poisonous ink that you couldn't eat or else you'd die too. The original, which was made in a fine porcelain, was made back when my aunt and uncle got married, back in the days when black and white meant photos and color meant paint. When she died, extras were ordered from Thrifty's photo department. $10.99 for saucer, $29.99 for dinner. I was given a saucer and told it was because I was smaller and more petite than everyone else, not because it was cheaper. (Chang 1998)

While talking, Chang balances a plate atop her head and slices through her bra with a large kitchen knife to reveal a melon, which she then seeds, scoops, and eats, placing excess stringy melon and seeds atop the plate. In a tone that is simultaneously authoritative, straightforward, and droll, Chang continues speaking about the plate and the irreverent ways she used it: "Whenever I was punished for doing something I wasn't supposed to do, I would take that plate off of its redwood display stand. And lick that puppy until her smile was erased", she finishes, removing the plate from her head and smashing it on the ground (Chang 1998).

In other works, Chang enacts intergenerational intimacies, as in *In Love* (2001), a video portraying the artist in kissing-like contact with her parents. The two-channel video shows the artist eating a raw onion, shared between mouths, with her father in one video and her mother in the other. Played in reverse, the onion seems to emerge whole from their mouths, and tears stream up their faces and into closed eyes. Chang's more recent video art installation, *The Wandering Lake* (2009–2017) (Figure 5), departs from Swedish explorer Sven Hedin's 1938 book of the same title chronicling his travels to a migrating body of water in the western Chinese desert region of Xinjiang. *The Wandering Lake* includes documents of Chang's own research on and travels throughout the region. The installation

integrates footage of the artist urinating through funnel devices into bottles (and delicate glass reconstructions of those bottles); washing a deceased beached whale; and conversing with members of the Uighur minority group. In one video segment, Chang appears singing to and rocking her newborn baby beside her dying father, who lies nearly motionless on a bed—a tender reminder of life's cruel and beautiful cycles.

Figure 4. Patty Chang, still from *Melons (At a Loss)*, 1998. Image courtesy of artist.

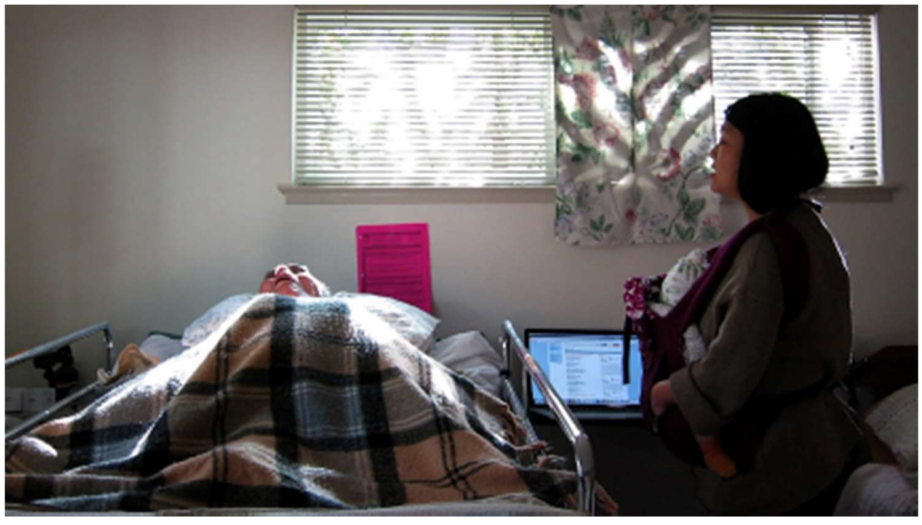

Figure 5. Patty Chang, still from *The Wandering Lake*, 2009–2019. Image courtesy of artist.

Further exploring Chinese American cultural heritage, gender identities, Asian-European exchange, difficulties of translation, and troubling cinematic histories, Chang's 42- minute two-channel video installation *The Product Love—Die Ware Liebe* (2009) (Figure 6) responds to Walter Benjamin's interview of Chinese American actress Anna May Wong.[4] Published in 1928 in *Die Literarische Welt* (*The Literary World*), Benjamin's relatively little-known piece, "Gespräch mit Anne May Wong: Eine Chinoiserie aus dem Alten Westen" ("Interview with Anna May Wong: A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West") discusses his encounter with and

impressions of Wong in Orientalizing and infantilizing language (Benjamin 1928, p. 213). Chang's *The Product Love* responds to Benjamin's exoticizing language and to racism in interwar cultural industries, especially Hollywood, where Wong worked. *The Product Love*'s first video alternates between three translators struggling to articulate Benjamin's text in English, highlighting a particular passage each translator reads differently: in response to Benjamin's question of how Wong would express herself if she were not an actress, Wong replies "Touch would" (written in English in the otherwise German-language article), after which everyone at the meeting knocks on the table. One translator reads Benjamin's "Touch would" as incorrect, hypothesizing Wong meant "Touch wood" and that the knocking enacts the superstition of "knocking on wood" (i.e., *let's hope Wong never has to stop acting*) (Chang 2009). Another translator thinks "Touch would" means Wong would express herself through touch if she were not acting, and that knocking on the table assimilates a German means of expressing satisfaction, like applause, following a performance (Chang 2009). Latching onto these varied interpretations springing from the English cognates "would" and "wood", Chang plays with the sexual implications of "Touch wood" coinciding with Benjamin's apparent desire for Wong (Chang 2009).

Figure 6. Patty Chang, still from *The Product Love*, 2009. Image courtesy of artist.

The second video depicts an all-Chinese cast and crew preparing for and shooting a soft-core pornography film starring actors playing Wong and Benjamin. The video begins with the actors getting made up. Reversing the old cinematic practice of Yellow-face (once ubiquitous, like Black-face) and Hollywood's correlating anti-miscegenation codes aligned with state and federal laws, make-up artists attend to the Chinese male actor playing Benjamin, applying a thick mustache, wig, and cosmetics while referencing a famous portrait, in which the author appears deep in thought, on the cover of *Reflections*. The film's director, who speaks mostly in *putong hua*, shifts to English when he describes Benjamin's feelings for Wong: "He just wants to touch the G-spot of May Wong. And just like culture, he wants to touch the very sensitive place" (Chang 2009). The film unfolds awkwardly as the two actors, stilted, proceed to have sex, Benjamin atop Wong. Brief moments of enjoyment appear, but illusions break quickly as a director enters the frame. Benjamin and Wong appear post-coitus, and Benjamin fans their naked bodies and then turns his backside to the camera in a shot resembling classical reclining nude portraits. Yet unlike so many Orientalist, patriarchal versions of reclining nudes in Western European art history, Chang foregrounds the white (disguised Chinese) male nude. *The Product Love* reveals how exoticization informs both sexual desire and the desire to grasp a foreign culture.

A passage in Benjamin's interview reads: "May Wong turns question-and-answer into a swing set: she lays herself back and flies up, plunges down, flies up, and it seems as though from time to time I give her a push. She laughs, that's it" (Benjamin 1928, p. 213). Benjamin pairs this paternalistic language with Orientalizing references, opening with "May Wong—the name sounds colorfully embroidered, powerful and light as the diminutive chopsticks that constitute it, which unfurl into odorless blossoms like full moons in a bowl of tea" (Benjamin 1928, p. 213). Throughout the text, Benjamin seeks to spotlight Wong's youth and Chineseness, fantasized through flowery language. Yet other descriptions reveal the impossibility of reducing Wong's identity. Following the "Touch would" passage, Benjamin writes of Wong's dress:

> Her dress would not be at all out of place in such playground games: dark blue coat and skirt, light blue blouse with yellow cravat over—it makes you wish you knew a line of Chinese poetry about it. She has always worn this outfit, for she was born not in China but in Chinatown, in Los Angeles. When her roles call for it, though, she readily dons old national attire. Her imagination works more freely in it. (Benjamin 1928, p. 213)

These observations on Wong's fashion show the difficulty of categorizing the actress using any fixed notion of identity. Despite Benjamin's repeated references to Wong's Chineseness, as well as to her child-like qualities, the interview demonstrates the actress's agency in transcending such categories. Benjamin reports Wong's frustration with being typecast as an immature party girl. "I don't want to play flappers forever", she says, "I prefer mothers. Once already at fifteen, I played a mother. Why not? There are so many young mothers" (Benjamin 1928, p. 213). In life, Wong persisted at the intersection of multiple, uncontainable identities: woman, Chinese, American.

In Chang's video, Wong dons a yellow silk qipao (Chinese dress, also referred to by its Cantonese name, cheongsam), more akin to Benjamin's fantasy of her than what she would have worn to their meeting in Berlin. Embracing gender-defying garments, Wong's favorite item of clothing, as described by Benjamin, was a jacket cut from her father's traditional Chinese wedding coat. Indeed, Wong became internationally known for her acting as well as her sartorial sensibility that distinctly combined Chinese and Euro-American fashions. Born to second-generation Chinese American parents near Chinatown in Los Angeles, Wong's humble roots as the daughter of launderers exist far from the glamor she would come to inhabit as Hollywood's, and the world's, first Asian American film star. Yet, Wong's rise—from the child of those who washed others' clothes for a living to a star decked out in cutting-edge cross-cultural fashions—exemplifies the American and Hollywood dreams with their attendant promises and paradoxes. Wong's transformation signals a success story tied to the fashionable multicultural diversity of Los Angeles in the interwar period. Simultaneously, her life and career reveal the exclusionary racism underlying both the American dream and Hollywood's so-called Golden Age. Wong achieved worldwide recognition through her performances, but as scholars have noted, she was frequently typecast in Orientalist and sexist roles, often playing the stereotypical "China Doll" (demure ingénue) or "Dragon Lady" (bewitching femme fatale), and seldom received starring parts.[5] Wong's career hurdles coincided with the rise and aftermath of the US federal Chinese Exclusion Act (passed in 1882 and not repealed until 1943); deep-rooted local anti-Chinese sentiment (in 1879, 98% of voters in Los Angeles County voted against Chinese immigration); and California's anti-miscegenation law prohibiting interracial marriage (passed in 1872 and not repealed until 1948).[6] The anti-miscegenation law posed a major obstacle for Wong, as Hollywood's codes forbade interracial couples from coupling on screen. In 1928, Wong, fed up, sojourned in Europe, where she played leading, sexually liberated roles, breaking free from Hollywood's stereotypes and her family's Confucian values. In 1936, she traveled for the first time to Shanghai, China, emerging as one of the most cosmopolitan figures of her time.

Born fifteen years after Wong, theorist, illustrator, and author Zhang Ailing took a quasi-reverse route from the actress. Zhang emigrated from Shanghai to Los Angeles

via stays in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and New England, and transitioned from the well-off daughter of an elite Chinese family to a writer who struggled to rent various small, bug-ridden apartments in Hollywood. While historically dismissed within mainland China for being less overtly political than her contemporaries, Zhang's stories tackle turbulent sociopolitical conditions—colonial occupation, oppressive patriarchy, and the war-torn cityscapes of Shanghai and Hong Kong—through intimate narratives of love, lust, and familial distress, often set in stifling domestic interiors.

In her illustrated essay, "Chinese Life and Fashions", Zhang reflects on fashion's cross-cultural and sociopolitical implications, posing a nuanced theory of Chinese modernity (Zhang [1943] 1987). Throughout her writings, Zhang defines Chinese modernity as being in fashion, which in her birthplace of Shanghai, meant hybridizing imperial traditions, foreign references, and cosmopolitanism, represented in the cross-cultural spaces her female protagonists inhabit, jewels they adorn, and qipaos they wear. "Chinese Life and Fashions" appeared at the height of World War II, in a 1943 issue of *The XXth Century*, an English language journal published in Shanghai. Sympathetic to the Axis powers, *The XXth Century* primarily features articles about battles and warfare technologies by Japanese, German, and Italian generals. Zhang's article on Chinese fashion, as well as her film review in a later issue, appear as relative anomalies. Within the context of a propagandistic journal, Zhang powerfully illustrates how fashion and film illuminate shifting societal perspectives, and, in some cases, critically recall past conditions. Zhang also considers clothing's ability to offer respite from societal turmoil:

> Come and see the Chinese family on the day when the clothes handed down for generations are given their annual sunning! The dust that has settled over the strife and strain of lives lived long ago is shaken out and set dancing in the yellow sun. If ever memory has a smell, it is the scent of camphor, sweet and cosy like remembered happiness, sweet and forlorn like forgotten sorrow. You walk down the path between the bamboo poles, flanked on each side by the walls of gorgeous silks and satins, an excavated corridor in a long-buried house of fashion. You press your forehead against the gold embroideries, sun-warmed a moment ago but now cold. The sun has gone down on that slow, smooth, gold-embroidered world. (Zhang [1943] 1987, p. 65)

Fashion, like art, can foster intercultural and intergenerational relationships, linking past and present with an appreciation for the passing of time.

In 2020, I organized, together with my colleague, USC Chinese Studies Librarian Tang Li, and a group of student curators, a virtual exhibition showcasing materials from Zhang Ailing's special collections housed in the USC Libraries, as well as related materials drawn from the Hong Kong University Library and USC Pacific Asia Museum.[7] The exhibition, *In a Bronze Mirror: Eileen Chang's Life and Literature*, utilizes the open-source platform, Scalar. Organized around Zhang's life and writings, the exhibition contains a section entitled "Chinese Life and Fashions", which links to Zhang's essay of the same title, photographs of the writer and her relatives in qipaos and other fashionable garments, as well as images of silk qipaos housed in the USC Pacific Asia Museum's collection. Qipaos are traditionally custom-made by a tailor, who precisely fits the garment to a woman's body. Tailored qipaos are very personal objects, but, like so much art and film, come to be through an intricate web of external craftsmanship, economic exchanges, varied designs, and personal relationships. Countless qipaos have traveled across nations and generations and their continued alteration, reproduction, and occasional integration into artworks or exhibitions, connect us to our foremothers, who dreamed of another beautiful country, one based not on greed and nationalism, but on cross-cultural sharing and neighborly kindness.

4. Intercultural Connections and Immersing Audiences

As I discovered in that first interview with my grandmother, because she could speak the local dialect, Nini often shopped for her neighbors in Taiwan upon immigrating there. Even after the masses of people who fled to Taiwan from mainland China came to dominate

the island, gaining greater consumer power and freedom to circulate, Nini, who loved fashion and bargaining, continued shopping with friends. Decades later, I would hear another story of Nini taking her younger neighbor friend, like a daughter to her, to shop. The neighbor, engaged to be married, hoped to purchase one or two colorful wedding dresses, including a qipao. Nini brought the bride-to-be to her favorite market in Taipei. Together they selected silk fabrics—one red, one green. Nini's trusted tailor came to my grandparent's house to take the young woman's measurements and craft two dresses, an elegant red gown and a qipao made of green silk. At her wedding banquet, the woman wore a rented white, Western-style wedding dress, and later changed (as is the custom in Chinese weddings) into the red gown and finally the green qipao. The bride would later give birth to a daughter, who would grow up to become an artist—Patty Chang—a coincidence I would not discover until years following my first encounter with *The Product Love* in a small artist-run space in Beijing and after Chang and I became colleagues in Los Angeles. A couple of years ago, after Nini passed away, Chang's mother called my dad and shared the story of those wedding qipaos. She remembered the experience fondly—the time Nini took her to shop with her, the care she showed in helping her obtain quality silk, the introduction to her tailor, and the opening of her home for fittings. Patty Chang recently told me the red and green qipaos still hang in her mother's closet in the Bay Area, recalling how she used to play dress up in them as a child.

One of my main goals as the curator of the exhibition, *Another Beautiful Country*, is to present intergenerational cross-cultural connections while particularizing Chinese American experiences. Like qipaos, the exhibition's artworks share stories, cultural critiques, and points of view that allow audiences to see beyond grand historical narratives, stereotypes, and myths, such as that of the model minority, and restrictive labels (e.g., the US as equaling American; the PRC as equaling Chinese). Foregrounding artistic representations of intimate transnational experiences and relations, the exhibition seeks to inspire viewers' reflections on their own heretofore marginalized histories.

As many of the artworks in *Another Beautiful Country* are lengthy single-channel videos, they will be shown on monitors in comfortable surroundings, allowing viewers to watch the videos in full. These relatively old modes of display have proven, at least in my experience, to generate new and enduring ideas. I have often found myself alone in the Pacific Asia Museum, and appreciate the solitude afforded by a relatively small university museum. While the impact of museums today is typically measured by the sheer numbers of attendees, popular blockbuster exhibitions, and immersive experiences that are selfie and social-media-post-worthy, I prioritize quality experiences marked by an artwork's ability to absorb and the lasting impact of that absorption.

The exhibition will be accompanied by related programming that encourages engagement with diverse histories of immigration, intercultural experiences, and Asian American identities in a localized context. In addition to public conversations with participating artists, I am organizing an event hosted by the museum together with the USC Libraries: *Visualizing Asian American L.A.: A Workshop on Digitally Exhibiting Art and Archival Materials*. This workshop will encourage participants to bring together materials from their own personal archives and the USC Libraries Special Collections, which include historic photographs of Lunar New Year celebrations and other events in Los Angeles's old and new Chinatowns dating back to the 1920s; documentation of murals and public art projects representing Asian American histories across the city; and as previously mentioned, Zhang Ailing's papers, photographs, and ephemera. Together with artists and the USC faculty and librarians, participants will select, present, and discuss images and documents for inclusion in a virtual exhibition, free and accessible to the public via Scalar, like our exhibition featuring materials from Zhang Ailing's special collections. I hope *Another Beautiful Country* and our virtual exhibition will offer immersive experiences illuminating generations past while sparking new ways of seeing cross-cultural relations that have long surrounded and sustained us. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how globally interconnected we have become, while further fraying tense international relations and stoking "us vs. them"

mentalities, especially amongst the world's primary superpowers. Amidst rising geopolitical tensions between the US and PRC, as well as ubiquitous distractions wrought by new media, we have much to glean from concentrating on artworks, anecdotes, and archival materials that resist spectacular effects and grand nationalist narratives with slow-paced, carefully crafted considerations of cross-cultural relations and intimate histories.

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Notes

1 See writing by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who popularized the term intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). See also Kobena Mercer's (1991) conference presentation/essay and the discussion of Mercer and Fung's contributions in Jennifer Machiorlatti's "Book Review of *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*", in *Journal of Film and Video* 45.2/3 (Machiorlatti 1993, pp. 106–10).

2 Over twenty printers refused to print the book before it was eventually printed in Germany (Machiorlatti 1993).

3 *How Do I Look?*'s centering of personal biographies and cultural backgrounds, especially of queer artists and authors, challenged prevailing critical theory. In reviewing *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, Alexander Doty writes, "It is heartening to see a number of essays (re)considering how and where the cultural autobiographies of spectators/consumers and the cultural biographies of 'authors' might fruitfully come into discussions of queerness and/in film and mass culture. It has always struck me as a strange coincidence that authors died and criticism containing autobiographical elements became gauche just about the time lesbians (and women in general), gays, and people of color were again becoming more visible and vocal about their lives, their histories, and their cultures" (Doty 1992).

4 See my additional analysis of *The Product Love* (Lin 2022).

5 See writings on Anna May Wong (Hodges 2021).

6 These facts are presented in the Historic Timeline, the Chinese American Museum, Los Angeles, visited on 25 January 2019.

7 Access the virtual exhibition here: https://scalar.usc.edu/works/eileen-chang-exhibit/index, accessed on 30 September 2023.

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Article

Expanding Understandings of Curatorial Practice Through Virtual Exhibition Building

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Abstract: This article reflects on the translation of gallery space into a virtually immersive experience in an era of remote access. Curators and scholars such as Mary Nooter Roberts, Susan Vogel, Carol Duncan, Tony Bennet, Stephen Greenblatt, Judith Mastai, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett have discussed the myriad of ways in which the experience of culturally significant objects and sites in person has been critical to the study of art and its history. Focusing on theories of curation and display, I utilize practice-based examples from six virtual reality (VR) exhibitions produced in three different institutional contexts: the International Journal of Digital Art History's online gallery, the European Cultural Center's Performance Art program, and the Digital Humanities program at the University of California, Los Angeles. By documenting and analyzing the extended reality (XR) methods employed and the methodological approaches to the digital curatorial work, I address some of the challenges and opportunities of presenting objects in virtual space, offering comparisons to those faced when building physical exhibitions. I also consider how digital modalities provide a distinctly different paradigm for epistemologies of art and culture that offer greater contextualized understandings and can reshape exhibition documentation and the teaching of curatorial practice and museum studies.

Keywords: digital exhibitions; WebXR; virtual reality; virtual environments; digital curation; virtual galleries; metaverse; 3D; digital art

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1. Introduction

In September of 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, Johanna Drucker, as the featured author for the International Journal for Digital Art History's (DAHJ) fourth issue, turned to science fiction in her article "The Museum Opens." Writing of an imagined future for museums and archives in a digital age, she describes a world in which physical reality and current standard digital information systems (e.g., linked data, visualization, and computational analytics) are seamlessly integrated with virtual synthetic reality interfaces. While she took a skeptical stance out of ethical concern for the "spectacularization of cultural memory experience," she was not envisioning a world in which remote access became the primary source of contact for scholars, students, and visitors alike (Drucker 2019).

In 2021 and 2022, the GLAM[1] sector saw enormous growth in the use of extended reality or XR technology in arts and cultural heritage. If necessity is the mother of invention, many arts institutions and related organizations took the opportunity during the pandemic closures to learn and invest in this arena. While digital methods have long been used for preservation, over the past decade, and particularly in the last several years, they have become essential for offering remote access to cultural objects and spaces. The pandemic shifted the way museums and galleries interacted with the public, escalating their digital engagement beyond simply offering their collection databases online. For example, the Getty Villa produced an immersive digital experience for their exhibition "Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins," which used a combination of video, 3D imaging, and story to virtually share exhibition objects. While the exhibition is now closed, the immersive experience

can still be accessed at https://mesopotamia.getty.edu/ (accessed on 13 October 2024). Although the production of resources such as this can be incredibly time-consuming and expensive, they allow for the educational and exposure work of the exhibition to be extended beyond its designated run time and outside of the museum's physical walls. They also can serve as documentation, something that has often been lacking in terms of the preservation of exhibition work.

In the era of remote access, gallery and exhibition spaces began to explore more deeply how their physical environments can be translated into a virtually immersive experience. Translation—conveying ideas across knowledge systems—has always been a core skill associated with museology and curatorial practice. In her article "Exhibiting Episteme: African Art Exhibitions as Objects of Knowledge," Mary Nooter Roberts writes, "Exhibition making involves 'complex dynamics of access to and translatability of different cultures' thought systems." (Roberts 2008). She stresses the role of narrativity in relation to exhibitions, which has been explored by scholars such as Bruce Ferguson and Mieke Bal, but acknowledges that we might not always have the same reference points (See Ferguson 1996, pp. 175–90; Bal 1996). In Nooter Roberts' case of exhibiting African art, her point about translation was not just about understanding the visual vocabulary and grammar of an exhibition and its objects, but how curators communicate systems of thought to others who might not have the same understandings or points of cultural reference. Susan Vogel and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett have written in detail about how the act of display changes an object (See Vogel 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). The manipulation of symbolic meaning through the control of the exhibition's apparatus of installation and all of the exhibition scaffolding shapes the visitor's experience profoundly.

Referencing her experience as a curator, Susan Vogel writes that "almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them," emphasizing the intervention aspect of museum and curatorial work that brings objects created outside of the institution's walls into an exhibitionary complex (Vogel 1991, p. 191). Grouped together, artifacts take on new meanings. She suggests that "An art exhibition can be construed as an unwitting collaboration between a curator and the artist(s) represented, with the former having by far the most active and influential role," due to the interpretive nature of the curator's job (Ibid). The way in which knowledge is presented is part of the overall power structures that shape societies. Curators often become bridge builders working within hegemonic structures and translating histories for the masses, and their epistemological frameworks have the power to shape ideologies and norms for the general public that wander their halls.

Curators began applying these valuable skills with new urgency to virtual programming, virtual exhibitions, and virtual art markets during the pandemic shutdowns. Online programming, like Virtual MOCA or VMOCA, was produced with families in mind, so that people could still have cultural experiences while maintaining safe distancing practices.[2] Even though MOCA eventually reopened, the Virtual Studio Visits and various lecture series remain accessible through the VMOCA webpage. The digital content remains useful for reaching audiences that may be searching for specific thematic content for research or examples for classrooms. In addition, new forms of curatorial practice and display emerged with the use of WebVR technologies. For example, the German gallery Peer-to-Space has been bringing together curators, artists, and virtual reality builders to produce virtual exhibitions using the Mozilla Hubs platform.[3]

From immersive tours, to webinars, to the rise of non-fungible tokens (NFTs), the interface between art institutions and audiences is more diverse and digital than ever.[4] As a result, curators, scholars, educators, artists, and related staff have had to learn and adapt to a rapidly changing landscape and often unfamiliar terrain. As GLAMs move forward, how much of this experimentation will continue and what have we learned from the process? In this article, I reflect on the translations of gallery space in an era of remote access. The curation, display, and visitation of culturally significant sites has always been critical to the study of art and its history. By sharing recent work, I will address some of

the challenges and opportunities of presenting objects in virtual space based on my own experience building virtual reality exhibitions.

Focusing on theories of curation and display, I will utilize practice-based examples from six virtual reality (VR) exhibitions produced in three different institutional contexts: the International Journal of Digital Art History's online gallery, the European Cultural Center's Performance Art program, and the Digital Humanities program at the University of California, Los Angeles. By documenting and analyzing the extended reality (XR) methods employed and the methodological approaches to the digital curatorial work, I will address some of the challenges and opportunities of presenting objects in virtual space, offering comparisons to those faced when building physical exhibitions. I also consider how digital modalities provide a distinctly different paradigm for epistemologies of art and culture that offer greater contextualized understandings and can reshape exhibition documentation and the teaching of curatorial practice and museum studies.[5]

2. Expanding Epistemological Paradigms in Digital Curatorial Practice

The translation of gallery spaces into virtual environments does more than simply offer a new medium for curatorial practice—it challenges the foundational epistemologies of art and culture. Historically, the curation of art has been grounded in physical space, with the museum or gallery acting as the primary context through which knowledge is organized and disseminated. This physicality is integral to the construction of meaning in art objects, as the placement, lighting, and spatial relationships between works all contribute to the narratives constructed by curators (Ferguson 1996, p. 181). However, with the advent of digital exhibitions, we encounter a distinctly different paradigm of knowledge production that has the potential to radically reshape how art is understood, studied, and taught.

Digital curatorial practices invite us to reconsider the boundaries of art interpretation and historical narratives. This shift aligns with the ideas of cultural theorists like Walter Benjamin, who famously questioned the "aura" of art in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin argued that the aura—the unique presence and authenticity tied to an artwork's original context—diminishes when reproduced (Benjamin [1935] 1969). In the digital age, this notion is tested further, as virtual curations are not mere reproductions but immersive, often reimagined, spaces where context is fluid, and art is no longer bound to physical constraints.

Rather than detracting from the artwork's meaning, digital exhibitions can offer expanded epistemological frameworks that enrich our understanding. For example, in the virtual gallery space, curators can present multiple contexts simultaneously, allowing for a more pluralistic and layered interpretation of artworks (e.g., multiple virtual installations with the same digital objects). This directly challenges the traditional museum model, where curatorial authority and fixed interpretations dominate.[6]

Moreover, digital curations can facilitate more inclusive and expansive epistemological frameworks by integrating diverse perspectives that may be constrained by the logistics of physical exhibitions. This aligns with the work of art historians such as Mary Nooter Roberts, who emphasizes the role of curators as translators between cultures and knowledge systems (Roberts 2008, p. 172). In a digital context, this role of translation becomes even more complex and dynamic. The flexibility of virtual exhibitions and public accessibility of the digital platforms used in creating them allows for different types of curators from various cultural and social backgrounds to participate in the curatorial practice, thereby offering alternative epistemological viewpoints that challenge the hegemonic narratives often perpetuated by traditional institutions.

The epistemological shift brought about by digital curating also has implications for how we understand historical narratives in art. The spatial and temporal fluidity of virtual galleries allows curators to disrupt linear historical progressions, offering instead a more fragmented or rhizomatic approach to storytelling. This resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, where knowledge is seen as non-hierarchical and interrelated across multiple entry and exit points (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987). In a

virtual exhibition, curators can more easily present artworks (if digitized) from different periods, geographies, and media in conversation with one another, breaking down the traditional silos of art history and fostering new interpretations that are more reflective of the interconnectedness of global culture. The practical hurdles that take immense time, effort, and expense (e.g., securing loan agreements and insurance for the works, working with registrars to ensure the safety of the objects in transport and installation) are no longer relevant. Instead, curators need only to consider if the use of the object falls under fair use, a creative commons license, or copyright.

Additionally, digital exhibitions afford curators the opportunity to engage with the inherent variability of digital media. Digital curations are increasingly mutable—they can be updated, reconfigured, or expanded over time, often in much quicker and less costly ways than physical installations. Curators must consider the implications of this flexibility on how art is preserved, interpreted, and understood in the long term. In this sense, digital curations can be seen as living documents, constantly open to reinterpretation and renegotiation. How often and what drives these decisions will become of increasing importance.

Virtual exhibitions and digital curation intersect profoundly with notions of permanence, preservation, history, and memory. In her book *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future*, Abby Smith Rumsey delves into how the digital age is transforming the way we store, access, and interpret knowledge, raising critical questions about the longevity and authenticity of digital memory (Rumsey 2016). Virtual exhibitions, as a form of digital curation, embody these concerns by shifting how cultural artifacts are preserved and experienced. In contrast to traditional museum displays, where objects are subject to time and physical deterioration, digital curation offers the possibility of indefinite preservation through replication and digitization. However, Rumsey argues that digital memory is fragile, as it relies on constantly evolving technologies and platforms that may become obsolete.[7] This directly ties to virtual exhibitions, where questions of preservation, access, and technological dependence come into play—will future generations be able to access these digital spaces in the same way?

In addition, Rumsey's exploration of how digital memory is reshaping our understanding of history and identity aligns with the opportunities and challenges presented by virtual exhibitions. In digital spaces, curators can recontextualize objects, creating dynamic, increasingly multilayered narratives that challenge static, traditional interpretations of cultural heritage. Yet, as Rumsey notes, this abundance of digital information can also lead to a sense of impermanence or overload, where critical historical context might be lost amidst rapidly proliferating digital content. Virtual exhibitions, therefore, are not just a tool for broadening access to art and history, but also a reflection of the larger existential questions about how humanity will archive, recall, and interpret its cultural memory in an increasingly digital future.

2.1. Translation Between Physical and Digital Spaces: Rethinking Spatial and Temporal Dynamics in Digital Exhibitions

The translation of art from physical to digital spaces involves far more than mere replication of objects in a virtual environment—it calls for a fundamental rethinking of how space and time are configured in exhibitions. Traditionally, the physical gallery space has played a pivotal role in framing the viewer's experience of art. As emphasized by curator and cultural theorist Bruce W. Ferguson, the materiality of walls, the architectural flow of rooms, the placement of objects, and the physical proximity of the viewer to the artwork all shape the curatorial narrative (Ferguson 1996, p. 181). However, in digital exhibitions, these spatial dynamics are dramatically altered, giving rise to new opportunities and challenges for curators.

In the digital realm, the concept of space itself takes on a fluid and often boundless quality. Where physical galleries are constrained by walls, floor plans, and finite room dimensions, virtual exhibitions operate within what appears to be an infinite space. This capacity for endless expansion presents both liberating possibilities and curatorial dilemmas.

For instance, digital spaces allow for the arrangement of artworks without concerns for physical limitations like crowd control, building codes, or even gravity. In Mozilla Hubs, for example, curators can arrange objects floating in mid-air, alter the scale of artworks in ways that would be impossible in real life, or create multiple pathways through an exhibition, inviting visitors to explore a non-linear narrative. This flexibility opens up a realm of creative possibilities that allow curators to experiment with innovative exhibition designs that might challenge traditional notions of curation.

The shift from physical to digital space also has significant implications for the visitor's spatial experience. The virtual gallery can simulate an immersive environment, but it is not bound by the limitations of physical perception or bodily movement. Visitors can "fly" through spaces, teleport between rooms, or zoom in on artworks in ways that transform their interaction with the material. This dynamic alters the role of the body in experiencing art. In a physical gallery, the body's navigation through space, the time it takes to walk between objects, and the effort required to examine details of a piece all contribute to the experience. In contrast, the digital environment compresses these physical limitations, allowing viewers to move rapidly, instantaneously altering their position and perspective. As cultural theorist Michel Foucault notes in his concept of "heterotopias", spaces can be "other" in that they juxtapose multiple, often contradictory, realities (Foucault 1984). The digital space becomes a heterotopia par excellence, where art, time, and space are continually reconfigured, offering a kind of disembodied experience that challenges traditional curatorial strategies centered on the embodied visitor.

Furthermore, the digital translation of art opens up possibilities for curators to challenge the notion of liveness. In physical exhibitions, the concept of "liveness" refers to the immediacy of the viewer's presence in the same space as the artwork, especially in performance art or time-based media. Scholars like Brian O'Doherty, Peggy Phelan, Jon McKenzie, and Diana Taylor examine artists who are exploring their own sets of questions about art and unspoken assumptions about how art is made, shown, or experienced (O'Doherty 1996; Phelan 1993; McKenzie 2001; Taylor 2003). As these scholars suggest, the experience of art in a physical space can emphasize the ephemeral and fleeting nature of certain works, heightening the viewer's awareness of time and place.

In virtual exhibitions, liveness is reinterpreted. Live elements, such as real-time interactions with avatars or streaming performances, create a sense of presence, but the viewer's experience of liveness is mediated through screens and digital interfaces. The digital environment allows curators to experiment with delayed or looping presentations, blending live elements with pre-recorded material, which raises questions about the authenticity of the experience. In digital curations, liveness becomes a construct, one that can be manipulated to offer new forms of engagement while simultaneously problematizing traditional notions of presence and immediacy.

The translation from physical to digital space also raises important questions about the meaning of site-specificity. Many artworks are created with a particular physical context in mind, where the site itself—whether it be a gallery, an urban space, or a natural environment—contributes to the work's meaning. In translating these works to a digital format, curators must grapple with how to preserve or reinterpret site-specificity in a virtual context. While some artworks may lose a significant portion of their meaning when divorced from their intended site, others may gain new meanings when recontextualized in a digital space. For example, the artwork's relationship to the digital architecture, the interactions it allows with virtual visitors, and the environmental simulations within the virtual space all contribute to new layers of interpretation. Here, we can reference Henri Lefebvre's theories of the *production of space*, where space is seen not as a neutral backdrop but as something actively produced and shaped by social, cultural, and political forces (Stanek 2011). In digital curation, space is indeed a product of design and code, and its meaning is continuously negotiated between the curatorial intent and the viewer's experience.

2.2. Artifacts Gaining New Meaning in Digital Spaces: Recontextualization, Curatorial Authority, and User Experience

One of the most profound transformations that occurs when artifacts are presented in both digital and physical spaces is the way they take on new meanings. Curators are working within an art market or system of art. Scholar and museum professional Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes about how the perception of objects changes as they are moved through this process and make their way into an exhibition display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). The authoritative act of selection by a curator for this purpose of display bestows a higher level of significance on objects. In what ways is meaning-making of objects being shaped by digital spaces, and how might it differ from the traditional curatorial process in physical exhibition spaces, particularly in terms of accessibility, audience interaction, and the mediation of cultural or historical narratives?

In a physical gallery, curators carefully orchestrate the arrangement, lighting, and proximity of objects, creating a controlled environment that influences how viewers interpret the works. Like physical museum and gallery spaces, the digital space is not simply a neutral vessel for the display of objects; rather, it is an active participant in the recontextualization of artworks, shifting how they are perceived and understood. The digital environment, however, alters the curatorial framework in ways that allow for even greater manipulation of meaning.

In traditional curatorial theory, the context in which an artifact is displayed is central to its meaning. Susan Vogel, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Mieke Bal, for example, have written extensively about how objects in museums often undergo a transformation when removed from their original context and placed in an exhibition space (Vogel 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; Bal 1996). This phenomenon is amplified in the digital realm, where the artifact is not just removed from its original setting but is often reconstructed, resized, or reimagined entirely. In a virtual exhibition, curators have the freedom to alter the scale of objects, change their placement within the virtual environment, or even animate them, allowing the artifact to be experienced in ways that would be impossible in physical space. These digital manipulations can imbue the artifact with new symbolic meanings or increase its aesthetic effects, as its relationship to the surrounding digital architecture and other exhibited works becomes more fluid.

For example, a sculpture that might be confined to a plinth in a physical gallery can float in mid-air in a digital exhibition or be viewed from angles that would be impossible in a real-world setting. This recontextualization shifts the viewer's perception of the object, creating a new interpretive framework that alters the artifact's historical, cultural, or symbolic meaning. The virtual space thus acts as a kind of palimpsest, where layers of meaning can be added or erased, depending on the curatorial choices. This opens up new possibilities for engaging with artifacts, but it also complicates the interpretive process, as the original meaning of the artifact may be obscured or overshadowed by the curatorial interventions.

Finally, the digital environment's potential for variability introduces a new layer of meaning to artifacts. Unlike physical exhibitions, which are static and fixed in time, digital exhibitions can be continuously updated, reconfigured, or expanded. This fluidity allows curators to experiment with new interpretations over time, adding or removing elements as the exhibition evolves. As a result, the meaning of the artifact is not fixed but dynamic, subject to ongoing reinterpretation as new contexts, technologies, and narratives emerge. This variability aligns with Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, where meaning is always deferred and never fully realized (Derrida 1982). In the digital space, artifacts are always in a state of becoming, with their meaning continually shaped and reshaped by curatorial choices, technological advancements, and viewer interactions.

The inherent fluidity of digital exhibitions also allows for an unprecedented degree of adaptability. Curators can respond to new developments in the art world, add new works to the exhibition, or adjust the narrative in response to user feedback. This adaptability introduces a dynamic aspect to curatorial practice that is not typical in traditional exhibitions.

In this sense, digital exhibitions are never truly complete; they are living, evolving spaces that can grow and change over time.

This flexibility in both user experience and narrative structure introduces new opportunities for curators to explore themes of variability, impermanence, and change. In digital exhibitions, curators can embrace the ephemerality of the medium, acknowledging that the narrative is not fixed but constantly in flux. This dynamic approach to curation challenges the traditional museum's emphasis on permanence and stability, offering a more fluid and experimental way of engaging with art.

At the same time, curators must remain mindful of the potential risks that come with this variability. The open-ended nature of digital exhibitions can make it more difficult to maintain a coherent narrative or ensure that visitors take away key messages. Without careful design and thoughtful use of interactive elements, the narrative can become too diffuse, leaving visitors feeling lost or overwhelmed by the multiplicity of options. Therefore, curators must strike a balance between offering freedom and maintaining a level of guidance that ensures a meaningful and cohesive experience.

By embracing the unique affordances of digital platforms—such as multi-user interaction, spatial navigation, and real-time updates—curators can create exhibitions that are more dynamic, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving landscape of art and culture. The variability inherent in these platforms offers curators new ways to think about narrative structure and user engagement, pushing the boundaries of what exhibitions can achieve. Ultimately, digital exhibitions provide fertile ground for experimentation, where curators and visitors alike can explore new forms of interaction and meaning-making in the ever-changing landscape of virtual space.

In the following case studies, I will examine how these affordances have been utilized in specific virtual exhibitions I have created, focusing on the ways in which I have been able to use digital tools to create immersive, interactive, and accessible experiences. Each case will illustrate the distinct possibilities and challenges of digital curation, from rethinking spatial dynamics to fostering global participation, highlighting the potential of virtual exhibitions to reshape the future of art and cultural engagement.

3. DAHJ Gallery and ECC Performance Art Virtual Exhibitions

As the Director of the Digital Art History Journal Gallery (DAHJ Gallery), I implemented the use of the same technology as Peer-to-Space, which is the Mozilla Hubs WebXR platform, for our online gallery space.[8] The DAHJ Gallery launched its first two VR exhibitions in 2021. In addition, I have lectured on the use of extended reality technologies for performance for the Performance Art branch of the European Cultural Center and we have opened three VR exhibitions to showcase student work from all the performance art classes. The following shares some key aspects of what I have learned while conducting this virtual exhibition work and how I have translated it into a capstone course for my digital humanities students at UCLA. I argue that not only can this methodological approach to exhibition-making help connect curatorial work with additional audiences, but it can also change the way we educate students on issues and methods of display.

3.1. Absurdist Electronics: Wearable Coping Mechanisms, Techno-Anxiety and Thoughts on Dada

"Absurdist Electronics: Wearable Coping Mechanisms, Techno-Anxiety and Thoughts on Dada" was the DAHJ's first virtual exhibition and the largest retrospective of Kathleen McDermott's work to date.[9] The exhibition focused on McDermott's work with wearables, a medium which is especially well-suited to an absurdist response because the body in relation to technology has historically been subject to conflicting narratives, often limited to the utopia/dystopia binary. Taking inspiration from Dada tactics of using absurdity to blur boundaries and redirect attention, McDermott seeks to promote a more liminal conversation around the future of wearables, subverting principles of control and rationalism, which dominate commercial wearable design.

I worked closely with McDermott, who is also a professor at NYU, over several months to produce a 3D installation space which complimented the work and its ethos (Figure 1). A virtual exhibition method is well-suited for the retrospective format. Retrospectives usually involve a large number of artworks, and we could design the space to easily accommodate the over sixty works we virtually installed.

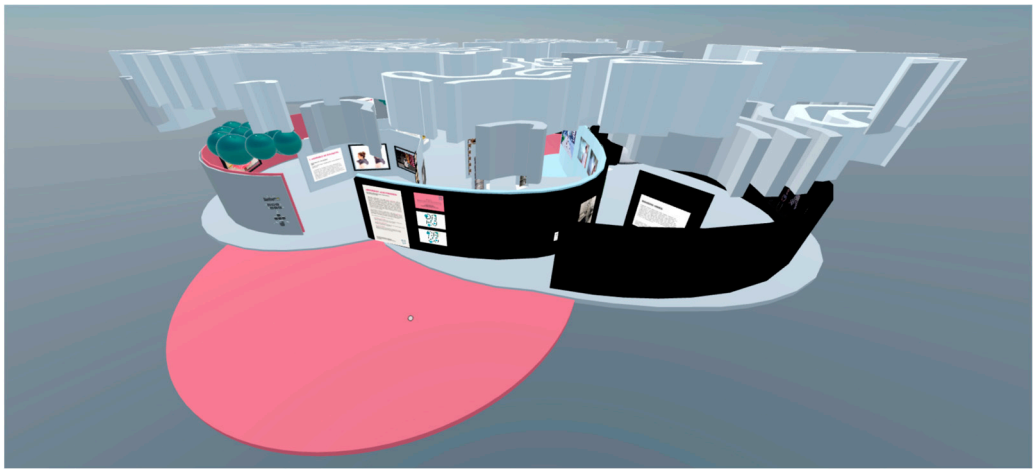


Figure 1. Exhibition installation from an above angle.

In addition, the virtual environment made it possible to display works in a way that may have been cost-prohibitive in a physical space (e.g., GIF and video works fill the walls, which would have required monitors to hang in a typical gallery, or in another section of the installation, photographs repeated on columns in a mechanical manner, which would have been a large print order, if it were being installed in a physical space. See Figure 2).

Figure 2. View of the repeating column installation.

We also experimented with the placement of wall labels, didactic elements, and artworks. Some wall labels were placed on the floor, and we reused a stamp from a Dadaist Manuscript of a pointing hand to direct visitors to the referred work (Figure 3).

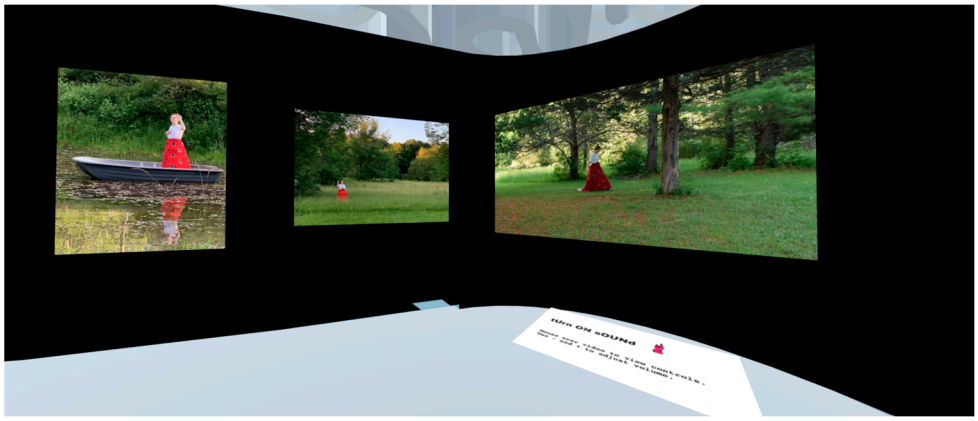
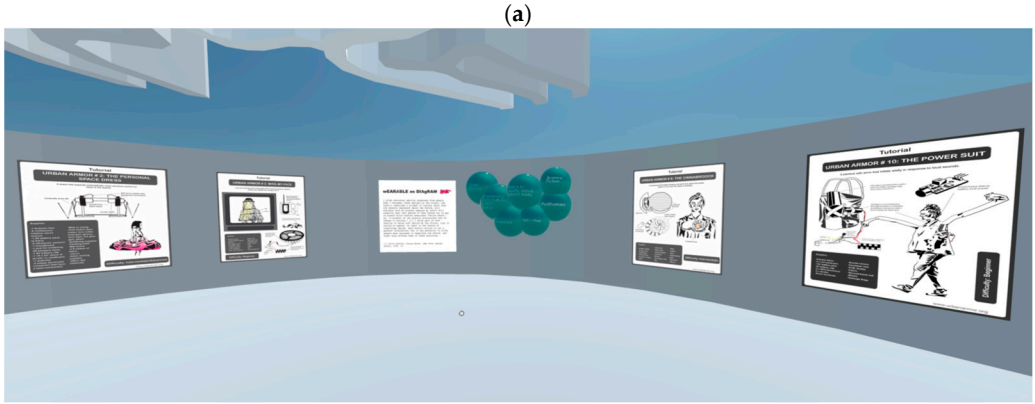


Figure 3. View of the exhibition object label placed on the floor.

I turned diagrams of McDermott's into globe structures, which hung above visitors in one area and emerged from the wall in another (Figures 3 and 4).

(**a**)



(**b**)

Figure 4. These images show the installation of the dimensional diagrams. The first view (**a**) shows how one was hung near the ceiling. The second (**b**) shows the diagram emerging from the wall.

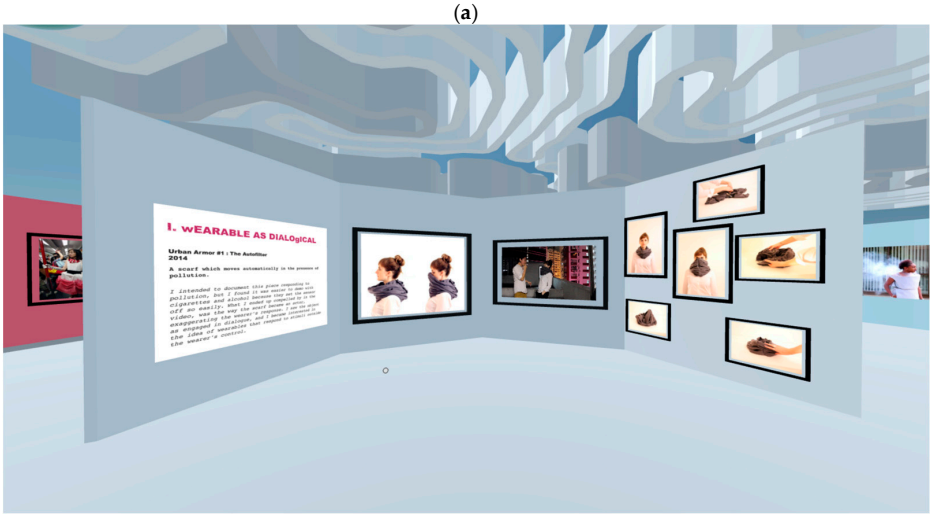
We placed one of her works on the floor in one section, echoing the subject figure of the work, who is lying on the floor (Figure 5).

Figure 5. In one of the works in the GIF series "I thought it would be funny (an epitaph, an apology)" the artist Kathleen McDermott is lying on the floor. In the installation, that GIF file was placed on the floor of the installation space for that series.

While none of these installation methods would be new to a physical installation, they may offer more of a challenge, both in terms of cost and execution, than they presented for us within the virtual space.

That is not to say there weren't challenges. McDermott's designs have many circular aspects to them, which I chose to reflect within the layout. In addition, when bringing dimension to the blueprint, I added an area with a sunken floor and a floating ceiling (Figure 6).

(**a**)



(**b**)

Figure 6. These images show a view of: (**a**) the level change in the floor of the installation space and (**b**) the floating ceiling that was placed above.

The resulting cloud-like shape presented a challenge for installation with its curved walls and different floor levels (Figure 7).

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 7. These installation views demonstrate the difficulty of placing flat file displays along curved walls. In the first image (**a**), the installation space designed to display "Urban Armor #6: The Cinnabrooch" mimicked the curvature of the mechanical brooch in the piece. The acute curve required some of the works to float further away from the walls. That challenge is less apparent in the installation of "Urban Armor #3: Miss-My-Face" in the second image (**b**), where the curve of the wall was not as severe.

Aligning digital assets with curved walls is much more difficult, making it a highly tedious process.[10]

Another critical element to the digital installation process is collaboration. Digital methods can allow for collaboration that might not have been able to happen otherwise or on such equal footing. Curating a physical exhibition remotely presents challenges in terms of thoroughly relaying details of the installation work (e.g., the location may not have accessible WiFi or a strong internet connection for video conferencing, the camera offers limited views, and the CAD drawing does not accurately match the current layout.) While working on this virtual exhibition, McDermott and I were able to meet biweekly over zoom for several months, and since our exhibition space was entirely virtual, we were able to review it simultaneously—examining how certain design choices looked in real time and rearrange as we needed. In this experience, collaboration could be detail-oriented when it came to installation, despite our remote status and virtually mediated exchanges.

As discussed by digital art theorists like Christiane Paul, this mode of collaboration not only democratizes the curatorial process but also enhances the fluidity and immediacy of artistic production (Paul 2015). The ability to review, revise, and adjust design elements instantly—without the physical limitations of traditional exhibition spaces—enabled a much more iterative and creative curatorial process. As Beryl Graham, Sarah Cook, and Steve Dietz note in their examination of curating new media art, the fluidity of digital environments can give rise to experimental methods of display, where artworks can be recontextualized or reimagined in ways that are less feasible in a physical gallery setting (Graham et al. 2010).

Furthermore, the digital installation was utilized to conduct an avatar artist interview within the virtual exhibition (Figure 8).[11] The life of an exhibition extends beyond the placement of artworks within a designed space but encompasses the public programs that frame the key themes and central concepts to visitors. Scholars and practitioners like Mary Nooter Roberts, Judith Mastai, Janna Graham, and Shadya Yasin have highlighted the need to have community and artist involvement within the curatorial process and exhibition programming (Roberts 1994, pp. 52–54; Mastai 2008; Graham and Yasin 2008, pp. 157–72). While many have kept engagement alive through Zoom (e.g., UCLA's ArtSci webinars[12] and the MIT Open Documentary Lab lecture series[13]), the avatar artist interview allowed for a discussion to happen in situ.

Figure 8. View of the virtual avatars of Francesca Albrezzi and Kathleen McDermott in the exhibition "Absurdist Electronics: Wearable Coping Mechanisms, Techno-Anxiety and Thoughts on Dada" to conduct an interview with the artist about her works.

We also simulated this feeling of sharing the exhibition space with other visitors through gallery opening events. The WebXR platform used for the exhibition—Mozilla Hubs—allows for many avatars to occupy this space at once (Figure 9).[14]

Users can enable their mic to talk with other avatars in the space, and sound is spatially aware in the virtual platform. This means if a user is closer to an avatar that is talking or a video work with sound, it will be louder and if that user moves away from that object or avatar, it will sound softer and harder to hear. While users have to bring their own beverages and snacks, these virtual gatherings do provide a similar level of excitement, fun, and connection to others that would be typical for attending an in-person exhibition launch (Kenderdine and Yip 2018, p. 275).

Those involved in the making of the exhibition are able to give opening speeches to mark the occasion, and visitors are able to navigate around the space, and talk with others about the work they are viewing. These digital gatherings facilitate real-time conversations and exchanges, enabling curators to gather direct feedback from audiences, further enriching the collaborative nature of the exhibition process. The integration of spatial audio, real-time chat, and avatar interactions represents a rethinking of the role of the curator—not only as a mediator of objects but as a facilitator of dialogue and engagement

within a digital ecosystem, where "authenticity vested in objects is not always solely located in their materiality."[15]

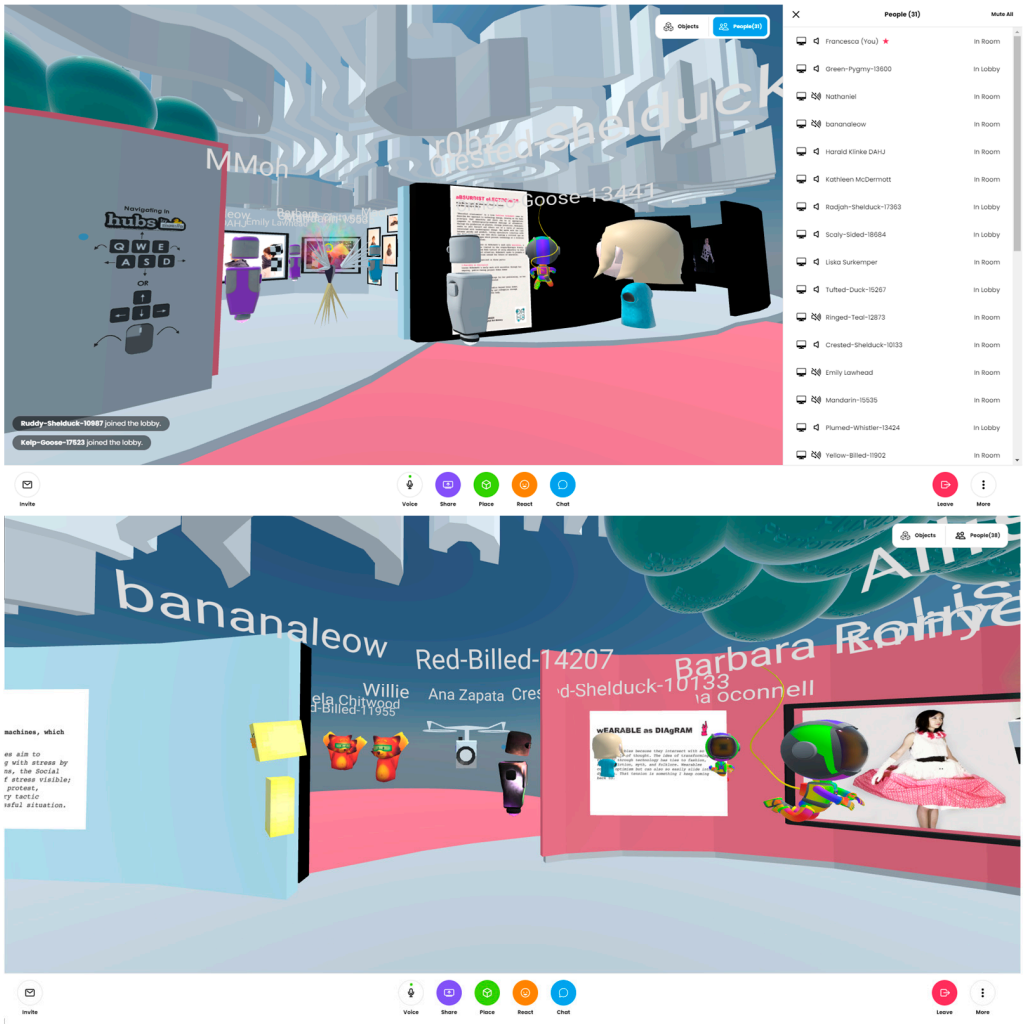
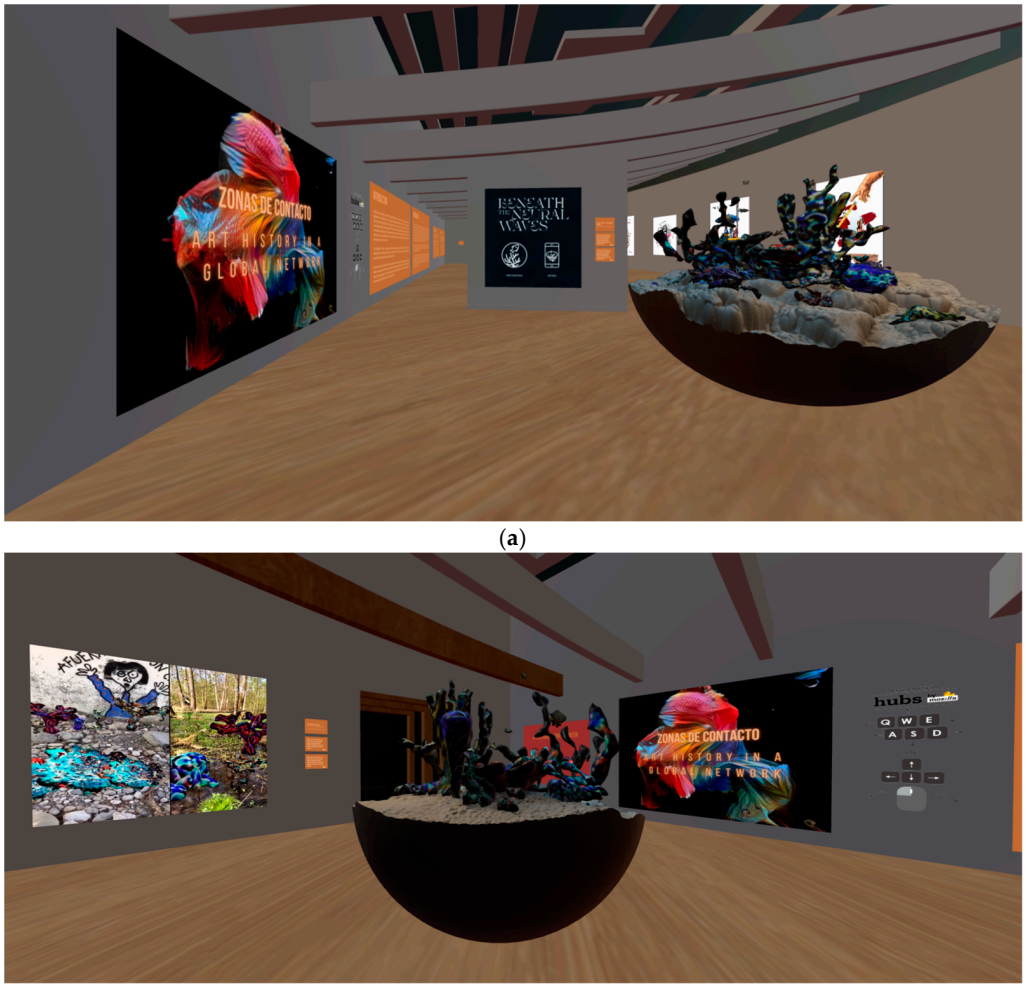


Figure 9. These images are from the opening reception of the exhibition "Absurdist Electronics: Wearable Coping Mechanisms, Techno-Anxiety and Thoughts on Dada" held on 24 June 2021.

3.2. Zonas de Contacto: Art History in a Global Network?

The second DAHJ VR exhibition was "Zonas de Contacto: Art History in a Global Network?" (Figure 10)[16] The year 2021 marked twenty years since Mary Louise Pratt, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures, proposed the notion of a "contact zone" as a place where culture is negotiated and challenged. The anniversary became the thematic anchor for the exhibition, while acknowledging that art can bridge or destabilize disciplines and methods in ways that reframe histories and bring new insights. Still, on a global scale, there are many issues of inequality in terms of access to technology. Therefore, the exhibition's central question was: What do these contact zones look like today? Born out of and opened in conjunction with a collaborative journal issue between H-ART[17] (a trilingual journal based in Bogotá, Colombia) and the DAHJ, the exhibition addresses themes of digital art of the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world broadly defined, including colonial histories and frontier technologies, imagined futures, post-colonial realities and networks, ongoing global or historical inequities, Latinx challenges and barriers (be they linguistic, sociological, or infrastructural), and artifacts as data or data as object. Operating as a form of praxis, the VR exhibition expands the journals' discussions into areas of artistic production.



(**a**)

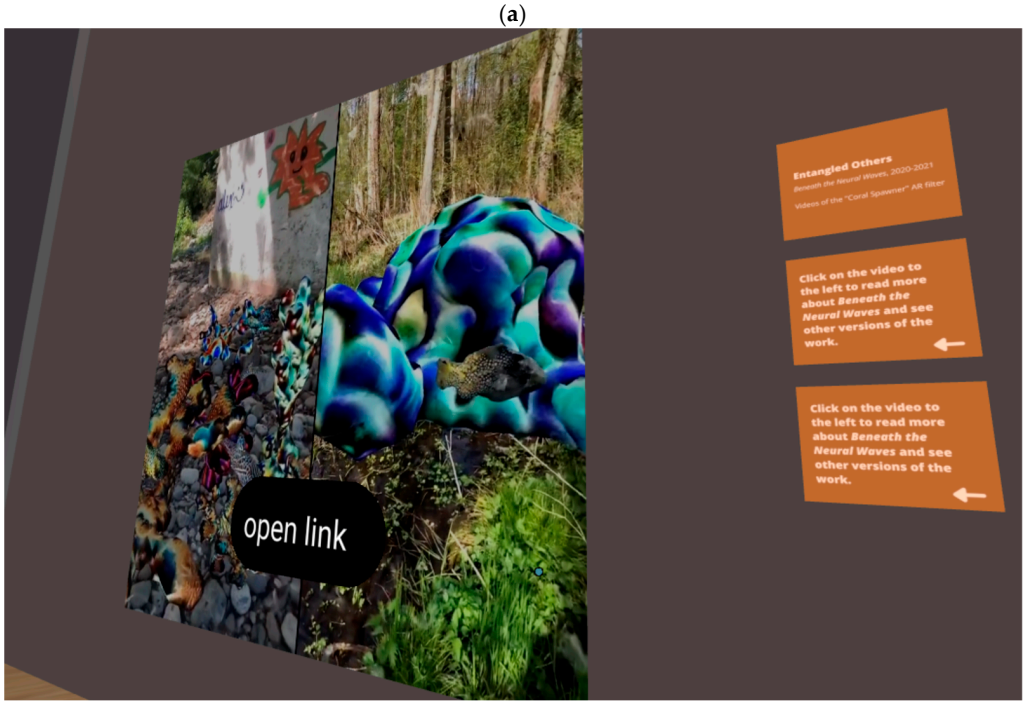
(**b**)

Figure 10. These images are of "Zonas de Contacto: Art History in a Global Network?" The first (**a**) is the view from the spawn point of the exhibition. The second (**b**) is a view of the entrance area where visitors spawn into the virtual environment.

Moreover, the focus on Latinx artists and themes that challenge colonial histories reflects the broader discourse in curatorial practice about decolonization and inclusivity. Scholars such as Irit Rogoff and Mieke Bal have long argued that exhibitions have the power to reframe histories by placing marginalized voices and narratives at the center of cultural discourse (Rogoff 2006; Bal 1996). In the case of "Zonas de Contacto", the curatorial team applied this framework by foregrounding works that engage with issues of identity, diaspora, and colonial legacies. This aligns with contemporary curatorial strategies that aim to disrupt hegemonic narratives and offer counter-hegemonic representations through exhibition themes and design (Corrin 1994).

Because of the close collaboration between the two journals, everything in the exhibition was bilingual (Figure 11). Although this requires double the work, having labels in two languages greatly increased accessibility, helped us to foster inclusivity, and acknowledged the lived experience of the artists included. In curating Zonas de Contacto, the decision to embrace bilingualism was not merely a practical choice but a deliberate curatorial intervention rooted in the theory of "contact zones" as proposed by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1991). This curatorial decision not only provided linguistic access but also symbolically bridged cultural and geographic divides, reinforcing the exhibition's theme of cultural negotiation within a global network.

(**a**)



(**b**)

Figure 11. These images show how labels were duplicated in the environment to provide both Spanish and English access to content. In the first image (**a**), the exhibition introduction is in view. The second image (**b**) provides an example of how the bilingual labels were offered near the works. In each case, the design of the label remained the same.

Producing a bilingual exhibition was only possible thanks to my co-curator Ana María Zapata and Bárbara Romero Ferrón, who also worked on the translations. Other DAHJ staff participated as well: Emily Lawhead assisted with the creation of wall label descriptions, Justin Underhill helped with the shaping of the call for papers and the call for artists, and Harald Klinke and Liska Surkemper, the co-founders of the DAHJ, provided supportive feedback. The critical takeaway evidenced here is that the production of the exhibition was a true team effort in the same fashion as any physical exhibition.[18] In terms of our process, we used Canva, a free web-based design tool, for most of our wall label designs, allowing us to quickly duplicate and keep our text looking consistent.[19]

By leveraging digital tools, the exhibition also sought to address issues of accessibility in ways that physical exhibitions might not be able to. As Claire Bishop notes, the digital realm offers unique opportunities for democratizing access to art, particularly for global

and underrepresented communities (Bishop 2022). However, this democratization is not without its challenges. As scholars like Tara McPherson have discussed in their work on digital divides, access to the necessary technology is often uneven, particularly across socioeconomic and geographic lines, which can exacerbate existing inequalities in access to art and cultural experiences (McPherson 2012). While digital platforms can transcend geographic limitations, they also require technological literacy and access to high-speed internet—resources that are not equally available in all regions. Thus, while the exhibition aimed to create a "contact zone" through its inclusive curatorial approach, it also highlighted the ongoing challenges of digital equity, echoing broader discussions in the field about the limitations of digital spaces for truly inclusive participation (Graham and Yasin 2008, pp. 157–72). It is worth noting that only one person at a time can be logged in to Spoke, the Mozilla Hubs environment building platform, to make changes in the environment.[20] For this reason, it was logical to leave the digital installation work to one person, with regular reviews of that progress to receive feedback.

In terms of the design choices, there are some key differences from the "Absurdist" Electronics exhibition described above. The "Zonas De Contacto" exhibition scene is set at twilight instead of midday, which gives the exhibition an entirely different tone and echoes the theme of liminality that is present in the exhibition's framing (Figure 12). This transitional space symbolizes a departure from conventional understandings of art and culture, inviting visitors to confront colonial histories and the complexities of post-colonial realities. Within this liminal environment, the exhibition becomes a contact zone where diverse narratives intersect. Visitors engage with works that reflect ongoing global inequities, Latinx challenges, and the tension between technological advancements and sociological barriers. The twilight ambiance encourages a reflective exploration of imagined futures, prompting discussions about identity and belonging in a digitally connected world.

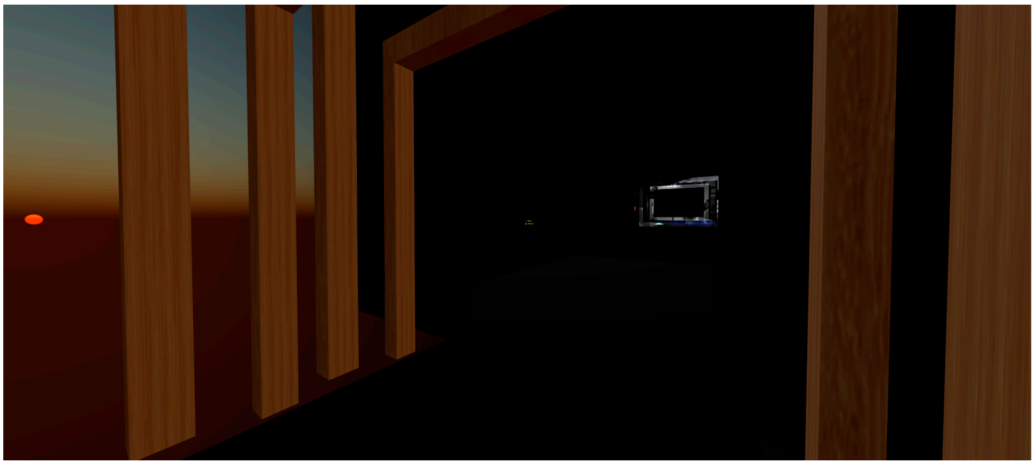
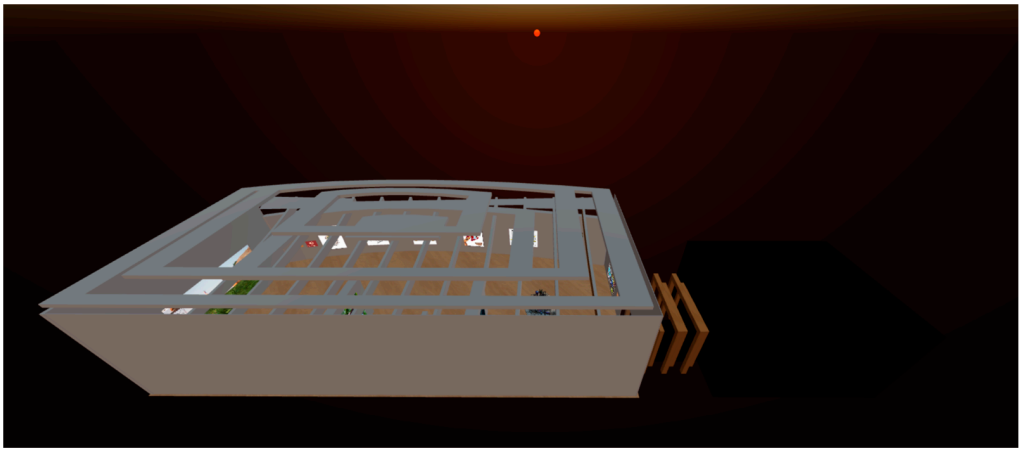


Figure 12. A view from the "outdoor" walkway in the "Zonas de Contacto: Art History in a Global Network?" exhibition environment that shows the twilight environmental setting. The main exhibition space is covered by a floating, open ceiling, which allows for the darkened sky to be visible.

As in theater or film, staging can change the effect of an exhibition. Adjusting light takes on a whole new dimension in the virtual space, where you are also world-building.[21] In virtual reality, curators can and should consider how these environmental settings will affect the reception of the work. As visitors move through this space, they not only experience transformation but also engage with artifacts that blur the lines between data and object. This interplay emphasizes the role of digital art in addressing historical narratives and envisioning new possibilities. Ultimately, the exhibition's liminality fosters a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these themes, inviting visitors to emerge with a more nuanced perspective on their own identities and the global landscape.

World-building has always been part of exhibition making, whether it is in the physical or virtual world. Exhibitions such as "Art/Artifact" by Susan Vogel and Mary Nooter Roberts at the Center for African Art in New York and "Mining the Museum" by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society situated the semiotics of display as a central concept[22]. Installation artists in particular are cued into the whole environment as a medium for their work. In "Zonas De Contacto", we included a work by Annabel Castro called "Outside in: exile at home," which was originally conceived as an installation of projected real time edited video within an entirely darkened room (Castro 2020). The virtual installation attempted to recreate those conditions as closely as possible by building a separate black box room for the video works (Figure 13).

Our collaborative conversations explored the possibility of programming the work so that visitors would start at a different point within the video work any time they entered; however, when loaded, the environment will start all the video-based works at the same time and there is not a way to script or code to change aspects of the space using the backend editor interface, Spoke. Instead, we were able to loop the videos and because it is set apart from the rest of the works, visitors will enter the space after the work has already started to play and the variety as to when they choose to enter that space closely mimicked the randomized start points of the original work. As exhibition work continues to expand across the reality-virtuality continuum, it will remain essential to critically examine the semiotics of display that are at play with in-person installations and consider how best to translate these works across the digital spectrum (Milgram and Kishino 1994).



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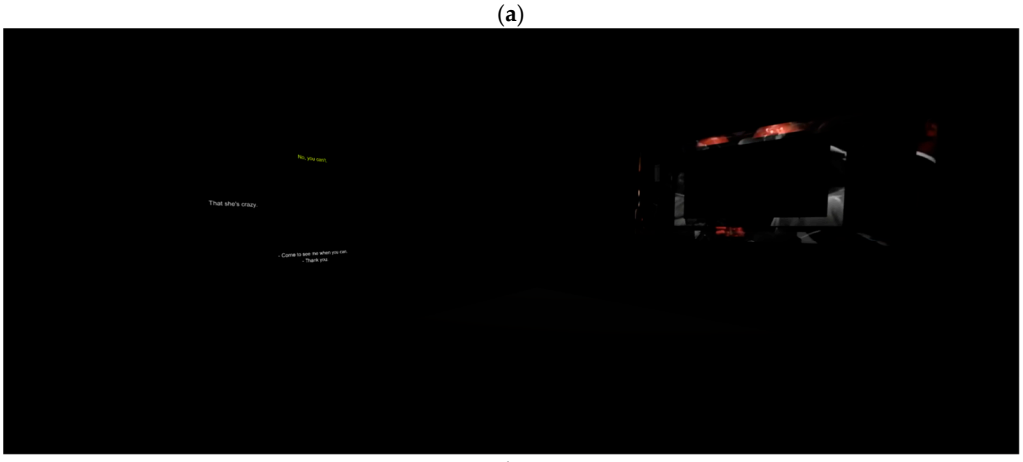
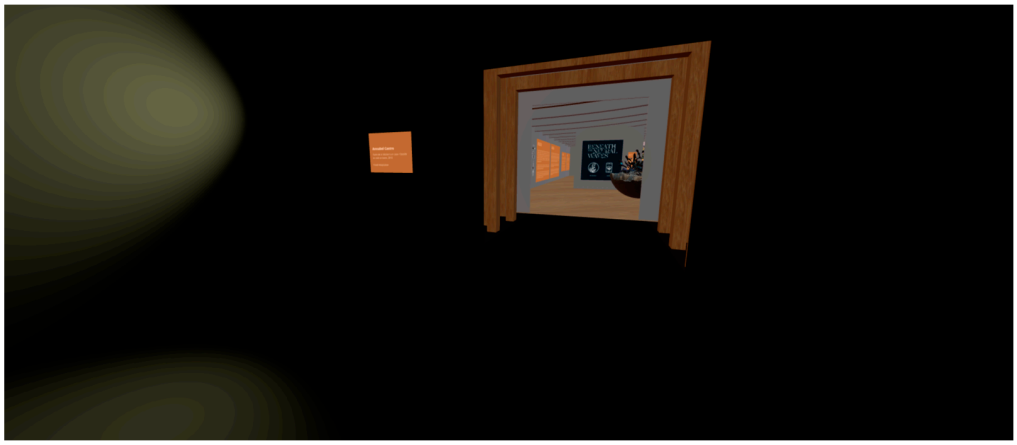
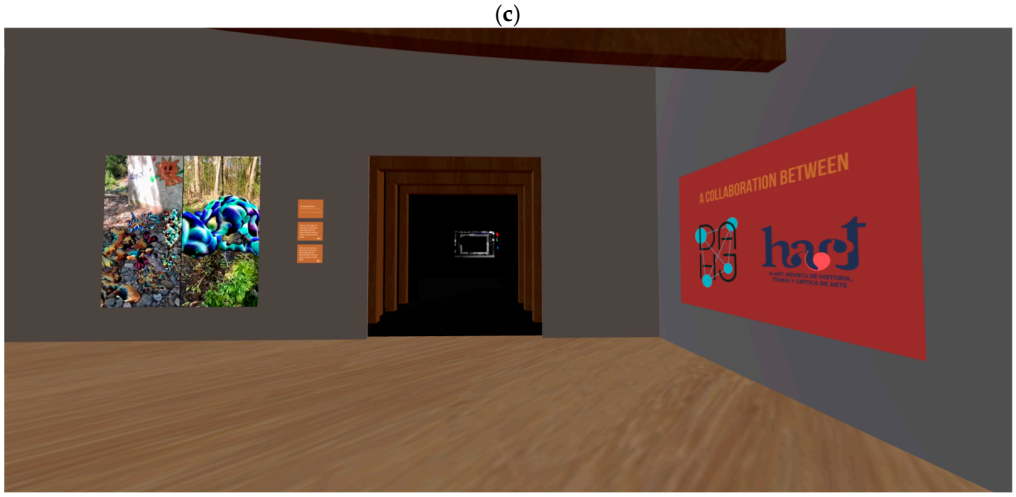


(**b**)

Figure 13. *Cont.*



(**c**)



(**d**)

Figure 13. These images detail how the auxiliary room for Annabel Castro Meagher's video installation "Outside in: exile at home" was incorporated into the exhibition space. The first image (**a**) provides a view from above, showing how the walkway extends out to the right and bridges the black box space with the rest of the exhibition. The second image (**b**) is a view of the two video works installed on two separate walls in the dark environment. Images (**c**,**d**) provide views from either side of the walkway to show how visitors would enter and exit the space.

3.3. ECC Performance Art VR Exhibitions

There is something to be said for not designing a custom space for every exhibition, especially for organizations that plan on showing new work fairly frequently. Such was the case for the design of a digital space for the European Cultural Center's (ECC) online Performance Art program. Running year-round classes in which students are producing and sharing work through video conferencing, the question became: how can an online institute repeatedly showcase student work with an aspect of liveness, echoing the performance work itself? The WebXR environment provided their community with a virtual gathering space to interact in real time with the performance works and other gallery visitors.

ECC Performance Art opted for a design that was spacious and simple enough that it could be reused over and over again (Figure 14).

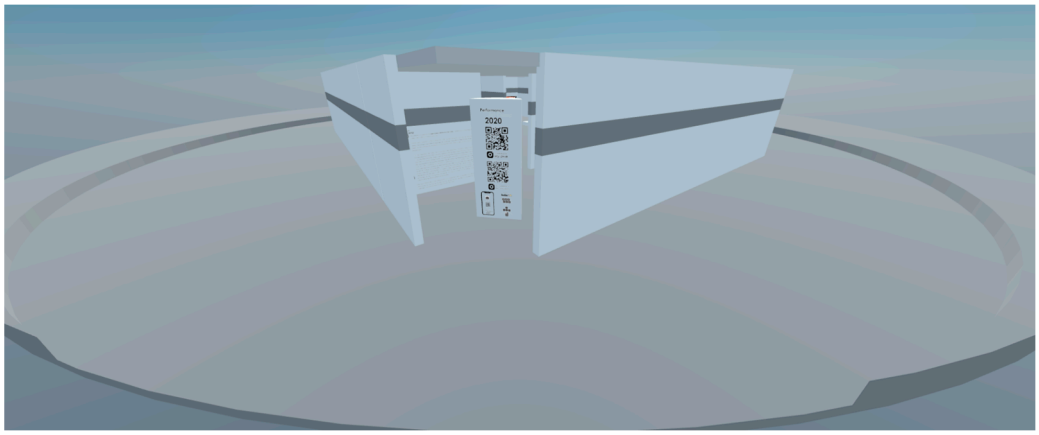


Figure 14. View of the ECC Performance Art exhibition gallery space from the outside.

This approach is both cost- and time-efficient. After the initial investment, small walls or installation pedestals are added as needed to tailor the space to new work, which is not dissimilar from how many commercial and educational gallery spaces operate (Figure 15).

Figure 15. This image is of the installation from 2021. The red arrows indicate where an additional partial wall and display platform were added, making minor adjustments to the space for this particular installation.

An added benefit is that after artworks have been installed in the virtual space once, the general coordinates for the position, rotation, and scale of virtual objects can be reused to cut down on the installation time of the replacement objects.[23] The fourth installation in the space launched in January of 2024 with a new virtual exhibition of student performance art works, and is currently being migrated to a new platform due to the sunsetting of the Mozilla Hubs platform.

4. Lessons Learned

Virtual installations provide artists and organizations an opportunity to reach wider audiences. Digital audiences can be situated globally, but occupy the same virtual environment, providing a shared experience and live and long-term access. The crucial limitations to working in WebVR involve data rates and general familiarity with the technology. Despite substantial and rapid WebXR developments, there are several key elements to note for providing an ideal experience. While Mozilla Hubs is a platform that can be loaded in

a headset or on a desktop, many people do not own headsets, so they are limited to the desktop experience. When operating in the desktop experience, it can be difficult to adapt to the navigation methods that are required to move about the space. Thus, it is helpful to place navigation directions on the website prior to visitors entering the virtual exhibition, as well as a graphic in the space that reminds people which keys they need to use with their mouse to move around (Figure 16). The graphic should always be placed within the sight line of the spawn point, or the point of arrival in the space, so people can easily see how to navigate immediately upon entrance.[24]

Figure 16. Taken from the exhibition's spawn point, this image of the ECC Performance Art exhibition gallery shows the navigation graphic outlined in red to indicate the design and placement of it. The arrows indicate the 3D graphics that appear when assets are loading in the WebXR Mozilla environment.

On the creator side, the platform only allows for assets to be loaded if they are under 128 MB. This usually means that videos will have to be compressed before they are ingested. Additionally, the more assets you have within an environment, the more likely you are to have issues with loading assets. While you can embed video and image assets from outside sources via a link, this method creates a less stable asset since it is not hosted locally and usually results in an increase of loading issues. Slow loading times result in the audience viewing multicolor boxes until the assets are rendered.

In other cases, videos can sometimes be glitchy or slow to run. Unfortunately, for older computers or users with slow or intermittent internet connections, the experience may be quite poor, if it is an extremely heavy environment—one that is rich with big files that need time and top data speeds to load well.

One solution to minimize the number of assets in the environment is to build a companion website or webpage that allows users to access artist information outside of the exhibition environment (Figure 17). Many exhibitions today have additional resources available for visitors on their institution websites to promote further engagement. Placing a link or QR code in the virtual gallery allows artists' bios, headshots, and social media information to be a click away, but prevents what would be additional assets from weighing down the main virtual exhibition environment.

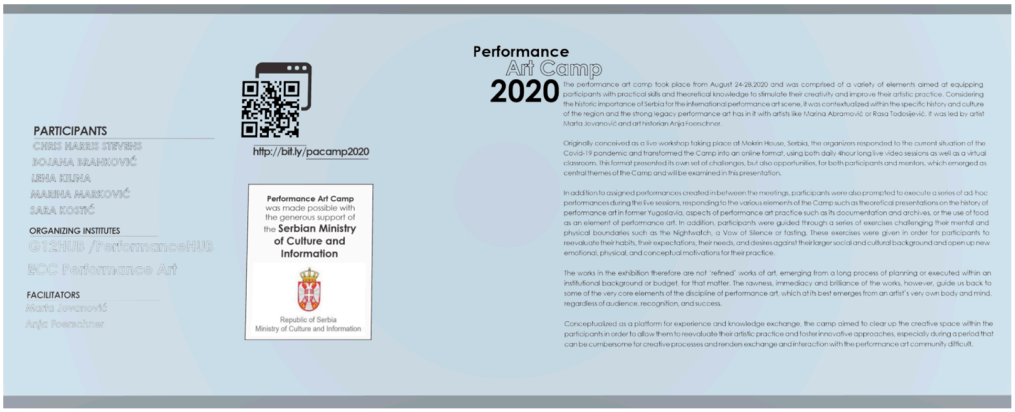


Figure 17. In the exhibition of ECC Performance Art featuring student work from their 2020 camp, a QR code was placed on a wall within the space, encouraging visitors to learn more about the featured artists by visiting the companion website.

5. Changing Exhibition Practice Education

Based on these virtual exhibition experiences and others, I have developed and taught two capstone courses on digital curation for the UCLA Digital Humanities (DH) program.[25] Through the course, students learned the fundamentals of curation. Working with the UCLA Library Digital Collections,[26] students selected the main themes of the exhibition, identified, and sought permission to use related digital artworks and resources, wrote wall labels, and planned a launch event. In addition, students had the opportunity to learn how to build a 3D environment for the works to be displayed and/or make use of 3D models in their virtual exhibition, using Mozilla Hubs and Spoke as a VR platform for exhibition.

In the first iteration, I worked with five students to create an exhibition with the James Arkatov Jazz Photograph Collection.[27] In the second, I worked with three students on separate digital collections-based exhibitions. The small class sizes allowed for project flexibility as the students were introduced to new tools and techniques each week. Since UCLA's digital collections make use of IIIF,[28] students used Mirador as a digital light table to present on possible thematic groupings of works in the collections.[29] Google Jamboard was utilized to sketch various exhibition layouts, and then the final layout was prototyped in 3D using Tinkercad.

In the spring of 2024, I shifted to a lecture/seminar framework for the course, where we simultaneously covered historical and ethical examples relating to display, while building with selected local special collections material. In terms of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), the tools of WebVR and Web3 can change the way we teach exhibition practice to those entering the museum field, providing more hands-on training.[30] Virtual realities—like exhibitions—are negotiated, representative, and carefully curated (Albrezzi 2019, pp. 188–229). Building digital galleries can play a crucial role in how students learn about the methods applied within exhibition-making. Using digital tools will better prepare students for the field through experiential learning and enhance their ability to realize their creative and scholarly potential. A praxis approach with WebXR tools also allows for students to more easily iterate their ideas, which can lead to a faster learning process (Grant 2021).

In terms of more general education, research has demonstrated the productive value of the arts and arts education.[31] Arts education scholar and advocate Ken Robinson argued that the creative skills taught in arts classrooms are invaluable across disciplines and increasingly important within a world that is driven by fast innovation (Robinson 2011). In an increasingly hybrid world, digital literacy is highly valued. Thus, learning how to leverage the human sensorium and a network of cultural contexts to effectively communicate through design with digital tools is a meaningful paradigm shift. In addition,

exhibition-building emphasizes the importance of contextual information, which allows for a bigger picture to be seen and can provide in situ understanding, despite being remote.[32]

6. Conclusions

Whether you see them as "image-texts", in the vein of J. T. Mitchell, or as an act of translation, following the ethos of Walter Benjamin, virtual exhibitions are acts of creation.[33] During the pandemic, growing interest and demand was a catalyst for development of digital exhibition spaces. However, virtual exhibitions are not facsimile experiences in lieu of the real-world versions. WebXR can offer curators and audiences on par displays of digital works. In addition, the digital tools offer hands-on learning opportunities, expanding the reach of practice-based learning for exhibition work.

In the years ahead, digital gallery spaces may become an increasingly integrated part of the metaverse and the growing digital marketplace that is happening with the use of blockchain and cryptocurrencies. Already there are a number of gallery spaces within various metaverse environments (e.g., tzland is a virtual world and marketplace for 3D NFT work that is built with the tezos blockchain).[34] However, the digital art market's rapid growth has not been without challenges. The speculative nature of cryptocurrency markets has introduced volatility, where art is often bought and sold as an asset class rather than for its aesthetic or cultural value. Additionally, the environmental impact of blockchain technology—specifically, the energy consumption required to maintain blockchain networks—has sparked debates about the sustainability of these practices. Concerns about copyright infringement and the potential for art theft in the NFT space have also emerged, leading to calls for better regulation and protection for artists.

Despite these issues, digital galleries and blockchain technologies have democratized access to the art world. Artists from diverse backgrounds now have the opportunity to reach global audiences and profit from their work in ways that were previously limited by geography or institutional gatekeeping. The art market is being reshaped by these digital tools, raising new questions about value, ownership, and the future of artistic production.

For now, digital galleries allow for some of the same interactions that physical exhibitions do and provide us with methods to achieve designs and scholarly arguments that might not be possible in the non-virtual world. In this evolving landscape, virtual exhibitions provide a unique opportunity to reimagine how we curate, teach, and engage with art. These exhibitions offer a living, flexible platform for knowledge production, enabling curators to foster global conversations and explore new narrative structures that reflect the interconnectedness of contemporary culture. As curators continue to experiment with these technologies, they must balance innovation with ethical responsibility, ensuring that virtual exhibitions remain sustainable, inclusive, and critically engaged. As Mary Nooter Roberts stated, "[E]xhibitions are never passive representations, but are themselves "objects of knowledge," and this does not change when the practice involves digital modalities (Roberts 2008, p. 171). Virtual exhibitions are not merely substitutes for physical spaces; they represent a distinct and evolving form of knowledge production that will continue to redefine the future of art curation and education.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 GLAM is an acronym for galleries, libraries, archives, and museums.

2 See: https://www.moca.org/virtual (accessed on 13 October 2024).

3 See: http://www.peertospace.eu/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

4 Artists and art investors finally embraced the blockchain. I say "finally" because I have been talking about these technologies since 2015 when bitcoin and the blockchain were extremely nascent, but stood out as a way of being able to track provenance of digital art and provide artists with royalties. There are still many issues within this new digital market space, but artists are now selling their art digitally through these systems, and it has, for better or worse, transformed the art market on a global scale.

5 I have argued this in my previous work. See (Albrezzi 2019).

6 A notable exception would be a traveling exhibition that shifts slightly to fit each site on the tour. However, the intention is typically to keep the installation close to the original design.

7 Take, for example, the sunsetting of the Mozilla Hubs platform hosted by Mozilla on 31 May 2024. The code is open source, and a community is rallying to support personal installations of the software: https://hubsfoundation.org/. Platforms like MUD Verse by the MUD Foundation allow for Spoke files from Mozilla Hubs to be uploaded: https://www.mud.foundation/mud-verse (accessed on 13 October 2024).

8 The exhibitions are accessible via the platform (https://hubs.mozilla.com/, accessed on 30 May 2024) and are built using the WebXR editor, Spoke (https://hubs.mozilla.com/spoke/, accessed on 30 May 2024). I have provided training on how to use and create with these platforms, which can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWbU6zJILyY (accessed on 13 October 2024).

9 The archived exhibition can be found at: https://dahj.org/galleries#/absurdist-electronics/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

10 Because of this, I consider this a more advanced digital exhibition design and would caution beginners to start with such a layout. I would recommend using hexagonal shapes and working with single-level designs until a strong proficiency is gained. Even at that point, it is important to account for the extra installation time it will take to adjust works for the variation in the wall angles, as opposed to installing on a single flat wall.

11 View the archived interview at: https://vimeo.com/639288271 (accessed on 13 October 2024).

12 See https://artsci.ucla.edu/ and https://vimeo.com/artsci (accessed on 13 October 2024).

13 See http://opendoclab.mit.edu/ and http://opendoclab.mit.edu/lecture-series/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

14 Under Mozilla Hubs' usual service, users are limited to a 50 avatar maximum in the space at once. However, there is no limit to how many users can be in the "lobby" for a Mozilla Hubs room, though the performance "may decrease once there are over one hundred people in the lobby," according to the Mozilla Hubs documentation (see https://hubs.mozilla.com/docs/hubs-faq.html, accessed on 30 May 2024). In the lobby, you can see aspects of the space and hear those in the room who are talking via their avatars.

15 The pleasure of these experiences was measured in the anecdotal positive feedback our team experienced from those who attended. Though we have yet to conduct formal user experience evaluations, the majority of the qualitative responses have indicated that people find the experiences novel and enjoyable. Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt have described how wonder and resonance can work in concert to produce the most impactful exhibition experience—one in which the visitor is both awed by and more deeply informed by an object simply by experiencing it under the right circumstances. See (Greenblatt 1990). In the wider field, we are seeing that virtual engagement can increase attendance dramatically. When the University of Southern California partnered with the Pacific Asia Museum to create a Matterport tour of their exhibition, they saw a significant increase in their web traffic after the virtual facsimile was launched. They also saw that their physical attendance was boosted from 30 to 40 to over 800 visits. Bethany Montagano, the museum's director, said, "It democratized the exhibition and its messages, opened them up to a broader audience and made our important work much more accessible." See https://today.usc.edu/virtual-art-museum-tours-exhibitions-after-covid-pandemic/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

16 The archived exhibition can be found at https://dahj.org/zonas-de-contacto (accessed on 13 October 2024).

17 See https://revistas.uniandes.edu.co/index.php/hart/index (accessed on 13 October 2024).

18 Not every exhibition team operates in the same way. For a useful guiding resource regarding building a functional exhibition team, see (Laurie and Powell 2018).

19 See https://www.canva.com/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

20 For building in Spoke by Mozilla Hubs, it is best to have a designated creator or to create a schedule assigning separate times to work in the environment for each modeler. However, some modeling software does allow for simultaneous collaboration. When teaching the basics of modeling to students, I have used Tinkercad's web interface (https://www.tinkercad.com/, accessed on 13 October 2024), which operates much like Google Docs, in order to allow simultaneous editing of a model in one virtual space.

21 World-building is a concept that professor and production designer Alex McDowell has taken to another level at USC's World Building Media Lab, where it is defined as "an experiential, collaborative and interdisciplinary practice that integrates imagination

and emergent technologies, creating new narratives from inception through iteration and prototyping into multimedia making." See https://worldbuilding.usc.edu/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

22 For more information regarding these exhibitions, see (Vogel 1991; Corrin 1994).

23 To quickly substitute an asset in Spoke, users can, without placing the asset, copy the url from the href property of the new asset. Users can then navigate to the old asset that needs to be replaced, and substitute the new url in the href property section. This will automatically replace the old asset with the new asset, maintaining the same property coordinates and characteristics in the process.

24 See Figure 16.

25 To view a summary and some photos of the student project, visit https://dh.ucla.edu/blog/the-power-of-jazz-undergraduate-capstone-project/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

26 I was more flexible regarding this requirement for the graduate students I worked with, and allowed them to utilize resources related to their research.

27 See the collection at https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/zz001dzc12 (accessed on 13 October 2024).

28 IIIF or the International Image Interoperability Framework is an open standard for sharing high-quality images online. Learn more about it at https://iiif.io/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

29 See https://projectmirador.org/ (accessed on 13 October 2024).

30 I have written previously about the ways most exhibition practitioners receive training through museum or gallery internships, and the issues surrounding the apprenticeship approach to museum education. See "Chapter 7: For Posterity and Pedagogy: Using 3D Models and 360 Capture to Preserve Exhibitions and Teach Museum Studies" in (Albrezzi 2019, pp. 188–229).

31 Some of the most recent publishing in this area includes (Susan and Ross 2023; Carnwaith 2023).

32 See "Chapter 7: For Posterity and Pedagogy: Using 3D Models and 360 Capture to Preserve Exhibitions and Teach Museum Studies" in (Albrezzi 2019, pp. 189–90).

33 For more on image-texts, see (Mitchell 2010). Regarding the application of Benjamin to exhibition practice, see (Roberts 2008).

34 See https://www.tz1and.com/ (accessed on 13 October 2024). On the subject of the metaverse for showcasing art, NFTs have proven that the so-called "10 k series" has been an effective marketing and fund-building tool for artists. However, more boutique-style selling is still hindered by some cultural and technological hurdles, such as the instability of the cryptomarkets and rapidly changing blockchain technological landscape. Nevertheless, this opens up possibilities for the minting of virtual exhibitions themselves, where curators and artists alike could receive commissions and royalties if the exhibition sells on the blockchain. For more on the NFT art market, see (Vilá and Sofia 2023).

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arts

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Article

A Geography of the Screen: Mapmaking as Bridge between Film and Curatorial Production Processes

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Abstract: Both mapping and artist documentary filmmaking offer us subjective translations of reality and strategies to relate to and represent space, sharing analogous methods of production that allow for a useful application of the spatial language of mapmaking to filmmaking. Immersing the film process within the language of mapmaking can then act as a bridge into the spatial practices of the gallery environment, curatorial practice, and exhibition design. This process is defined here as "film-mapping" and is investigated through the development of the work *For the Record* by Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr commissioned by the *transmediale* festival in Berlin (2021), for which the author of the present paper is the film curator. A process for film-mapping is laid out according to three stages: (1) Compose the Territory, (2) Define the Legend, and (3) Set the Modality. Understanding the production of *For the Record* through this mapping terminology enriches the spatial understanding of the work, providing a translation device between filmmaking and curatorial practice and mediating between the disciplines by providing a shared language.

Keywords: curating artists' documentary film; deep mapping; digital arts; exhibition design; exhibition studies

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1. Research Intent

This research is one component of three ongoing investigations into how the spatial language of mapping can act as a bridge or translation device between the disciplines of filmmaking and curatorial practice. It is developed from and anchored within a canon of artist documentary film that engages with themes of landscape and sense of place—one in which the film work itself is the result of the landscape within which it was made (Lefebvre 2007). The ambition of this research is to create an approach: (1) for curators working with artist filmmakers whose work is anchored in concepts of place or space, (2) for filmmakers to consider how spatial themes explored within their work might be translated into the exhibition space (a reciprocal process that also considers how the space and locational context of a gallery may help shape the production of a work), and (3) for exhibition architects working in collaboration with either one or both of the former.

2. Introduction

For the Record is a call-and-response exchange between London-based filmmaker and researcher Rhea Storr and Vancouver-based writer and artist Phanuel Antwi that resonates from opposing ends of the gallery space (Figure 1). Navigating through 150 individual photographs, the two makers reinterpret each other's practice and sense of place, advancing a form of diasporic archive told through the bonds of Black kinship. Commissioned in 2021 as part of my role as a film curator at *transmediale* festival in Berlin, this artist documentary film helped provide a framework around which to develop the process of "film-mapping". *For the Record* emerges from a place of refusal; a powerful rejection of the "fiction of empires and self-creation", the work positions itself "elsewhere to create new centres, foci and spaces" (Antwi and Storr 2021). Mapping is deeply entwined with these ongoing colonial histories, a discipline that continues to be employed to help control spaces and their people.

As a colonial tool, mapping is never representative but is instead productive of power relations (Mason-Deese 2020). Bending, hacking, or subverting the tool of mapping can, however, speak to the refusal manifested within *For the Record*, offering a method to initiate an alternate dialogue with a space. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari draw a distinction between a map and a tracing, arguing that while a tracing replicates power structures that already exist, reinforcing singular ways of looking at the world, mapping can provide a process capable of revealing alternate understandings of space and power. By encouraging us to "make a map, not a tracing", Deleuze and Guattari reanimate mapping as a discipline capable of opening up the new centres and foci *For the Record* points us towards.

Figure 1. Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr, *For the Record* (2021), *transmediale* Studio. Photo © Ben Evans James.

The development of film-mapping draws from the production process of *For the Record* to arrive at three interconnected terms linked to mapmaking: *territory*, *legend*, and *modality*.

1. The *territory* of a map can be understood as the relationship between a defined geographical area and its representation. In filmmaking, the concept allows us to consider the relationships that exist between the filmmaker(s), the subject(s), and place(s).
2. The *legend* of a map is its key. In filmmaking, the *legend* can be understood as a set of codes that navigate the spectator into and through the work.
3. The *modality* of a map determines how its data is visualised. In filmmaking, it considers how diverse film production technologies and processes mediate how the territory of a map is aestheticised and the resulting effect on our understanding of its subject.

These methods are developed from and anchored within a canon of artist documentary film that engages with themes of landscape and sense of place.[1]

3. Rhea Storr and Phanuel Antwi

In the summer of 2020, the closing film work in an online series at the London project space *South Kiosk*, where I am a co-founder and curator, was *Henry* (Storr 2017) by Rhea Storr, a work that interrogates the anonymous image (of her grandfather) as an inquiry into reanimated images that have passed through the body and onto the screen. Storr's practice explores the representation of Black and mixed-race cultures. Carnival as a site of refusal and subversion is an ongoing theme in her work, surfacing in Storr's film works *Here is the Imagination of the Black Radical* (Storr 2020a), *Bragging Rights* (Storr 2019), and *A Protest, A Celebration, A Mixed Message* (Storr 2018). In the last of these, Storr addresses the performative role projected upon Black bodies by onlookers at Leeds Carnival; standing against the backdrop of a pastoral scene at the film's dénouement, the filmmaker's motionless body, in full carnival dress, refuses and defies the expectations of animation placed upon them by the spectator.

Around this time, I also met Phanuel Antwi, Associate Professor of English at the University of British Columbia and Canada Research Chair in Black Arts and Epistemologies. Antwi works with text, dance, and film, intervening in artistic, academic, and public spaces to explore concerns of race, intimacy, and struggle. After our initial conversation, Antwi invited me to watch a working edit of the film he co-directed with artist Lesley Loksi Chan,

Sort Of (2020, development title). Taking the form of an Afro-Asian Futurist work, *Sort Of* features two primary protagonists who land on Earth from a far-off place and time. In the version of the film I viewed, the narrative unfolds through a succession of vignettes in which the protagonists familiarise themselves with their unfamiliar new environment through a series of conversations with prominent Black and Asian scholars, artists, and thinkers.[2] Located between these dialogically driven vignettes, the pair embark on a range of performances that entangle their bodies with the material of their environment in Ontario, Canada. Through gestures and movements expressed in their stillness, Antwi offers a performance of refusal against the "tendency to read performance and Blackness only in terms of hyperness" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021) and of Black bodies represented through a singular mode of broadcast.

Through clear points of connection between their practices, an introduction between Antwi and Storr quickly developed into a discussion around the potential of the artists to produce a collaborative work for *transmediale* as part of the festival's 2021 programming. The analysis below spans the following eight months as the work was imagined, produced, and installed in our respective roles: Antwi and Storr as artists and myself as curator.

The resulting work, *For the Record* was presented at *transmediale* in the festival's new studio space in Berlin between April and June 2021. The work, which unfolds over 48 min, exists somewhere between a film, a performance, and a conversation, which led Antwi to quip, "when we finished the work, we weren't quite sure what we'd done. We were joking saying 'I guess it's a film because it's got images, it's got audio, and it's got dialogue'" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). The images Antwi mentions take the form of black and white still photographs taken in the artist's respective hometowns of Vancouver and London. The dialogue brings together scripted and non-scripted conversations between Antwi and Storr that ebb and flow between the prosaic and poetic. *For the Record* draws from Black scholarship, poetry, and music, including the writing of Christina Sharpe, Dionne Brand, Sylvia Winton, Stuart Hall, Robin Kelley, Édouard Glissant, and Toni Morrison, and the music and dub poetry of Jean "Binta" Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Lillian Allen. While analysis of *For the Record* steps into areas of Black arts and epistemologies, the subject of this text is the application of mapping to curatorial practices, and it therefore only draws on these subjects when relevant to its core focus.

4. Compose the Territory

The *territory* of a map can be understood as the relationship between a defined geographical area and its representation. Transposed onto filmmaking, the territory speaks to relationships that exist between the filmmaker(s), their subject(s), and place(s). There are three stages in this process: *Framing the Territory* by examining the role of image technologies in surveying; *(re)Framing the Territory* by exploring the role of editing technologies in forming the filmmakers' narrative of the territory; and *(re)Locating the Territory* by analysing the conflicts and opportunities that arise when the rendering of a territory through an artwork is relocated to an alternate location as an exhibition.

4.1. Framing the Territory

"Far away is close at hand in images of elsewhere"

—Graffiti, author unknown, Paddington Station, London, 1970s

Located in London and Vancouver, respectively, Storr and Antwi are based in cities undergoing persistent waves of property speculation, development, and gentrification. Equipping these processes, the architectural site survey adopts ever-new technological photographic processes to produce aerial images that distance the built environment of the city from the people who inhabit it (Brackenbury 2022). Drone photography, lidar scans, and satellite imagery capture the expansive, macroscopic view of the city, rendering its materiality through hyper-real images that leave its localised micro-histories buried below, out of sight, and pixelated at the street level. Through fidelity to measurement, these technologies attempt to dematerialise the human body that "constantly contaminates

the possibility of objectivity and precision, ultimately meaning that the ideal democracy from the perspective of metrology is totally devoid of humans" (Litvintseva et al. 2022). In *For the Record*, Antwi and Storr take up this tension between the human and the metric, investigating their subject at the street level using portable cameras that challenge the totalising image perspectives of the site survey: photos produced alongside and in solidarity with local Black communities in their respective cities. The resulting images divulge a space seen from within, a landscape "anchored in human life, not something to look at but to live in" (Lefebvre 2007) These informal photos display the energy and immediacy of the snapshot, capturing "the movement and chaos of modern urban life in visual form" (Fineman 2004) by embracing a photographic style that is sometimes grainy, incorrectly exposed, erratically framed, and with elements out of focus. With the snapshot, Antwi and Storr create an aesthetic form for the territory that brings to the surface a particular set of relationships between the built environment and its inhabitants (Figure 2).

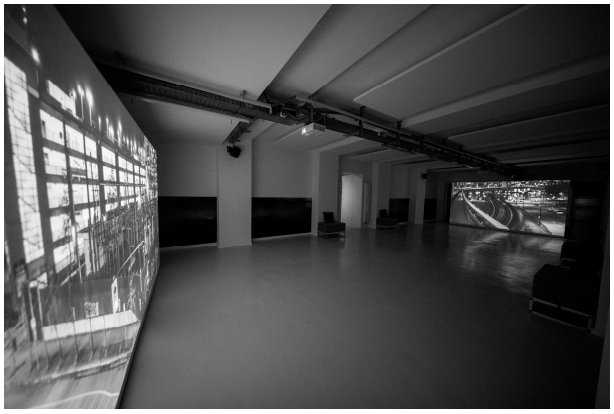


Figure 2. Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr, *For the Record* (2021), *transmediale* Studio. Photo: Ben Evans James.

In London, Storr took photos using a handheld 35 mm film camera; the images capture the dark winter nights punctured by the intense light emitted from streetlights, tube signs, or passing buses. Using a high-speed film (Ilford Delta 3200), the contrast gives a texture and grain to the image that feels like London. These are images in which we cannot always make out what is happening in the shadows of public spaces where people navigate with purpose through the cold winter night. By comparison, Antwi took his images using a contemporary mirrorless digital camera. Aware of the potential aesthetic discrepancy between the output of the cameras, Antwi adopted what he called an "analogue" way of working. Ruling out the use of post-production software such as Photoshop, the artist talks about an embodied process of working while taking photos, a Merleau–Pontian presence of the body as he contorts to locate the composition and frame the territory.[3] Antwi's images reveal a Vancouver I have grown to know, having partially relocated here, one where glass buildings are razed to the ground to build ever higher glass buildings and developer speculation runs rife. When Antwi talks of Vancouver as a loud city, he speaks of his camera in terms of a microphone picking up light. By this definition, Vancouver is a deafening city, its glass and steel leaving few places for tranquillity to take hold.

Taking photos at night was an unfamiliar act for both the artists, the darkness distancing Antwi and Storr, causing them to sense their neighbourhoods in new ways while attuning their focus. These are images that are psychogeographic, pacing out the borders of a territory through a Situationist-like photographic dérive[4]. Unburdened by Roland Barthes' concept of punctum,[5] the snapshots feel of the everyday, of unremarkable spaces that belie the rich strata of Black histories hidden within. The territory gains form through the frame of the lens: a 16:9 aspect ratio of the world whose language stretches back as far as eighteenth-century landscape painters such as Gainsborough and Turner (Lefebvre 2007). In this photographic landscape, the artists never reveal their own bodies, with the

camera separating the experience of the body behind it from those photographed. Storr's works have, in the past, used the camera's field of view to question the visibility of Black bodies in public space; in the production of *For the Record*, Antwi talks about the camera almost as a prop that legitimised the visibility of his own body in public space at night.

Revealing traces of Black history within their home cities, Antwi and Storr map more than the territories' physical attributes. Capturing snatched fragments of life, their images uncover "the various hidden forces that underlie the workings of a given place" (Corner 2011, p. 90). In this sense, it is less a practice of data collection and more one of "relational reasoning" (Corner 2011, p. 89). Demarcating the territory using this method resists processes of erasure by foregrounding markers of Black presence(s) that may not always be immediately visible, "so the archive becomes both official and unofficial, it becomes the space, the space holds the memory" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). Antwi refers here to a territory that is socially produced and owned. The geographer Henri Lefebvre (1991) similarly argued that space is a social product formed at the intersection of the built environment, the associated discourses, and the lived experience of those who interact within the space. The territory then is defined by a set of relationships between that community and the material reality of the city, a practised place of Black histories that may have "been purposefully hidden or narrated in a way which is not easy to access anymore" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). For Antwi, building community relationships with those who can speak of local Black histories can reactivate the site by "keeping track of what the city is trying to get rid of" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021).

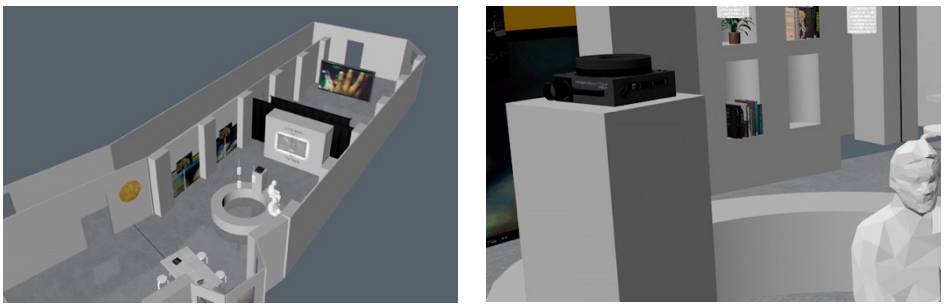
However, where the camera surveys, foregrounding Black histories that need to be told, it can also surveil. As Susan Sontag has reminded us, "cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for the masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)" (Sontag 1977, p. 225). *For the Record* resists both these outcomes but, in doing so, must grapple with the question: "how do you move through (neighbourhoods) in a way which is not going to replicate the thing which you are making work against?" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). This raises matters of relationships and ethics: is the work extractive, or is it made in collaboration with the community it looks to highlight? Or perhaps more pertinent to mapping, what of a territory should be revealed and what should remain hidden? Antwi and Storr's snapshots materialise a territory of multi-scaled relationships between the artists, their cities, and the communities that reside (and resided) within them amid gentrification's erasure of histories and displacing of peoples.

4.2. Framing the Territory: For the Record Design Analysis Part 1

In response to the artists' use of the analogue 35 mm snapshot to frame a territory and its language, the first exhibition plan included a 35 mm slide projector as the primary technology for sharing images (Figure 3a,b). The slide projector came into widespread use in the 1950s as a home entertainment device around which communities could gather. Its use here was intended to invoke both the informality of the snapshot and conviviality, as well as the bringing together of discrete communities through particular shared experiences of the city.

Temporally, the suggestion of a slide projector in the design implies a rhythm to how the work unfolds, one where photographs would proceed at a consistent and uniform speed as they are shuttled through the gate of the projector, the distinct mechanised sound alluding to the firing of a camera shutter. In this first plan, the images and audio would have drifted in and out of sync, their meanings fluctuating depending on the context of display within the conversation. This automated montage was intended to shape an understanding of the territory, a forever-changing, kaleidoscopic representation where each photograph "fragments space, breaks down the setting of the action, and thereby expands it" (Lefebvre 2007). At this early stage of production, the work was considered more dialogical than visual. "We like the idea of single images being an occasional presence in the room," Storr noted at the time (Storr 2020b). These design ideas convey an idea

of the work as a piece of audio-cinematography or "expanded audio discussion" (Antwi 2020), with just a single projection shown against a free-standing wall providing a kind of metronome for the conversation.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 3. (**a**,**b**) The use of 35 mm slide projector in the space. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James.

Spatially, the suggestion of a slide projector created size constraints for the size of the image in the space (Figure 3a). This size was considered primarily in relation to the low lumen count of the beam it emitted and the ambient light of the space. While the attempt to mirror the technology of Storr and Antwi's 35 mm snapshot with a 35 mm projector may have created a kind of fidelity to the analogue medium or processes, this would have been at the expense of the form of the images themselves. The framing of the territory carefully mapped by Antwi and Storr at the human scale would have been diminished in size, disrupting the parity between the artists' own bodies, the subjects, and the spectators.

These first stage designs allowed Antwi, Storr, and I to identify the need to re-mediate the image from an analogue projection to a digital projection. Through this, we might then provide a closer rendering of the form of the territory as defined by the artists' images. The spectator's eye could then be pressed up against the viewfinder, replicating the territory at a 1:1 scale and the specific view of Antwi and Storr when the shutter was pressed.

This ignited a discursive process in which the 3D renderings of space through CAD designs and the 2D renderings of time through the film edit ebbed and flowed between one another as the work developed. It is important to clarify that defining this as a discursive process is, in this case, not the same as defining it as a collaboration. The design work I undertook was always in response to and led by the themes developed in the work by Antwi and Storr.

4.3. (Re)Framing the Territory: The Role of Image-Making Technologies in Forming the Territory

The previous section, *Framing the Territory*, has outlined the decisions taken by Antwi and Storr to give form to the territory and foreground certain relationships. This section, *(re)framing the Territory*, progresses by examining how the selection of certain images and the order in which they appear (an image or film edit) sets up new relations in which alternate readings of the territory can take place. Deleuze and Guattari show us that when defining a territory, we should not present a mirror image of a space but rather a productive translation of it. Drawing a distinction between a map and a tracing, they argue that a tracing replicates power structures that already exist, reinforcing singular ways of looking at the world, while in contrast, mapping sets forth an exploration where alternate meanings can emerge; "what distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated towards an experimentation in contact with the real" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, p. 72). Mapping is "not simply the indiscriminate listing and inventorying conditions as in a tracing" (Corner 2011, p. 95) but a strategic process that can reveal relational structures: an artificial construction based on the subjective experiences of what the mapmaker "sees" (or what they choose to see) that mediates between reality and representation.

In *For the Record*, the territory traced through the lens is mapped through the selection of images that involve at once the administrative categorisation of images and specula-

tive, creative decontextualising of each photograph from the physical film strip or digital memory card. Once detached, photos can be studied, manipulated, and networked with other associations constructed; relationships can be attended to. Akin to sculpting down a block of marble, this process removes excess material to find film form, bringing to mind the popular maxim that documentary films are made in the edit. Bringing photos together disrupts the individual image's operation by introducing temporality and the suggestion of narrative. While the editing of photographic or filmic images might be considered an intimate process (here, we can think of the film editor immersed behind a screen in the darkened editing suite), there is always a silent collaborator wrestling for control of the images and the narrative—the spectator. Within the mode of operation of the work, the filmmaker must consider the agency they wish to grant to the spectator in editing the images within the gallery space and, subsequently, how the physical staging of the space might enable that agency. The question becomes, through exhibition design and staging, is the spectator tracing the territory as defined by the filmmaker, or are they being given the tools to construct their own?

In *For the Record*, Antwi and Storr navigate outwards from their own photographs using the unmarked territory between images as a productive site of inquiry: at one end, Storr's grain-pocked images of London, and at the other, Antwi's digital renderings of Vancouver. The territory between is blank, a non-space or terra incognita. While the decision to shoot at night reduces the distance between the aesthetics of Antwi and Storr, it also acts as a filter that reveals the differences between the artists' respective urban settings. Observing city dwellers walking, phenomenologist Franz Xaver Baier remarked on how it was not possible to see how each individual organised space: "we do not see what is disclosed and closed off to them, what has meaning and what does not" (Baier 2020, p. 95). Through images, Antwi and Storr explore and reveal each other's interior world, or what Baier would call *situational space*, the "state of space which mediates a given, universal reality with our own specific circumstances" (Baier 2020, p. 89). Using an edit of images as a context to a conversation and a negotiation, the artists analyse each other's sense of place as a method to assemble their diasporic archive, "built out of a desire, not always to belong but to work through belonging" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). The territory between the images becomes the scaffolding that holds the diasporic archive, a collaborative, responsive, and pliable space that refuses the physicality of the museum archive and the objectification of the truths it claims to represent.

Through the artists' exchange, the organisational logic (the *legend*) of the archive unfolds. It is then the spectator's task to decode this logic to navigate between the shared photographic images and draw out their own map. By asking the spectator to draw threads, the work places the spectator in the lacuna between the images, the space of productive inquiry from where the work was imagined. Like treading water, the spectator must labour, constantly repositioning themselves among the images and dialogue between Antwi and Storr. The exhibition design sought to provide navigational devices to define the borders of the territory to the spectator, finding material and spatial strategies that could mirror the physical distance between the artists, between London and Vancouver, and the celluloid film and projected digital images that represented them.

4.4. (Re)Framing the Territory: For the Record Design Analysis Part 2

Analysis in *re(Framing) the Territory* has explored how the editing process sets out certain relationships as individual photographs are placed in association with the image(s) before and the image(s) after. Deconstructing this editing process identifies the organisational logic applied to the work by the artists allowing us to question how and where the spectator might be let into the work and what role they might have in helping realise its themes. Is the spectator tracing the territory as defined by Antwi and Storr, or are they being given the agency in the exhibition space to draw out their own map? We return here to the initial floor plans; the centre of the space showed seating in the round with three speakers hung above: one for Antwi's voice, one for Storr's, and one for the underlying

sound design (Figure 4). Separating these tracks within the space begins to consider a sense of spatialisation of the territory, representing the distinct locations of production of the artists in London and Vancouver. The spectator was asked to position their body towards a certain directional speaker, a design decision that sets out to enable the spectator to create their own "maps" of the territory (bringing us back to Deleuze and Guattari, who tell us to "make a map not a tracing" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, p. 13) in order to set forth an exploration where alternate meanings can emerge). These early experiments open parts of the work up to the spectator while closing other parts off, exploring modes of spectatorship and questioning the rules of engagement for the visitor and the access the artists wanted to ascribe to the work. With the visitor encouraged to position themselves under different speakers, this floorplan ruptured the traditional cinematic mode of presentation and its sense of spectator immersion. Sound and image would have come together in different formations as spectators would have been empowered to rework the content of the film over and over into new orientations, with agency handed from the artists to the audience.

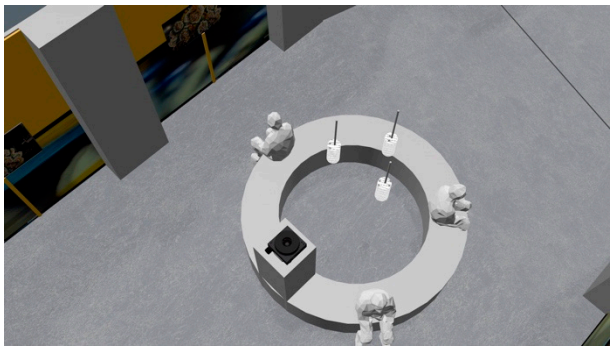
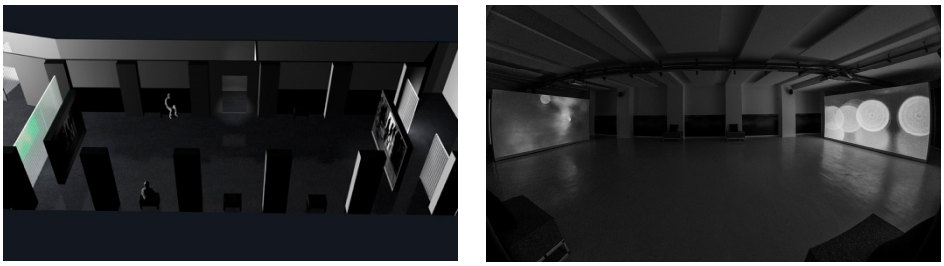


Figure 4. Speakers operating in the round. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James.

Reflecting back on these drawings, it is clear that the transfer of agency sat uneasily with the intimate conditions within which the work was made. As *For the Record*'s themes unfold through the artists' interpersonal relations, placing these in the background to empower the spectator would have changed not only the operation of the work but destroyed the very scaffolding upon which their diasporic archive is constructed. The subsequent design concept handed control back to the artists through the use of a call-and-response mechanism. An explicit gesture of control, the use of call-and-response disavowed a tradition of "documentary or ethnographic film (that) is typically organized to shore up the control of the spectator rather than to emphasize the hand of the director" (Gronland in Rivers 2016, p. 58). It also offered a mode of operation for the work that Antwi highlighted as "a method of exchange that Black folks have mobilised as an aesthetic form of work" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021).

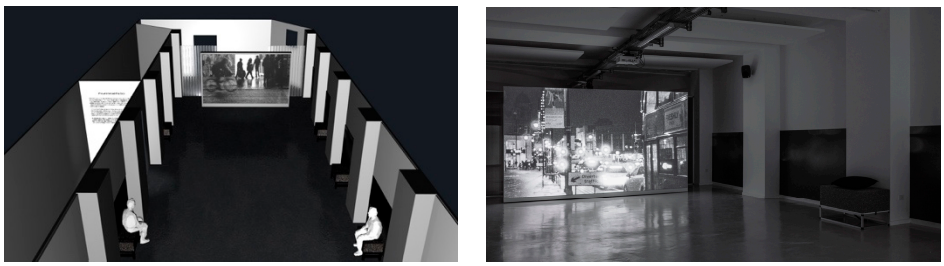
Within the design, the call-and-response mechanism is realised and spatialised through two screens and two speakers mounted at opposing ends of the gallery, facing one another (Figure 5a,b). The distance between the screens represents a marker of the remote geographies within which the work was produced, as Antwi's voice and image dwell at one end, and Storr's dwell at the other.

The political geographer Jay Appleton posits that landscape art traditionally frames the territory as a place of refuge and, in doing so, relates a discrete community's survival to a particular aesthetic form, the 16:9 image (Appleton 1996). The photographs that make up *For the Record* maintain a link to this form, projected onto a screen that maintains this landscape format. Like the solid frame around a watercolour painting, the edges of the projection screen in the gallery hold the territory within its bounds (Figure 6a,b). There were no curatorial gestures to expand the territory outside this frame and into the architecture of the exhibition space in the manner of objects or artefacts that relate to the territory, for example. For the spectator, the result is a feeling of distance from the territory, of being on its exterior looking in rather than being immersed within.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 5. (**a**) Call-and-response mechanism realised through opposing projections. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James. (**b**) Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr, *For the Record* (2021), *transmediale* Studio. Photo © Ben Evans James.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 6. (**a**) Landscape view of the territory. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James. (**b**) Photo © Luca Girardini.

4.5. (Re)Locating the Territory

To recap, *Framing the Territory* showed how Antwi and Storr gave form to the territory and foregrounded certain relationships through snapshots, while *(re)framing the Territory* examined how the edit—namely the selection of certain images and the order in which they appear—set up new relationships in which specific readings of the territory could take place subject to the spectator's labour. This third and final section looks at the role of the spectator in realising the work by analysing how the territory constructed by the artists relates to that of the location of the exhibition space, which is, in this case, the *transmediale* studio space in Berlin.

In *For the Record*, the territory was defined by Black histories in London and Vancouver, but its articulation at *transmediale* necessitated a consideration of "a triangulation of Black histories" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021) between not only these cities but also Berlin, where the exhibition took place. The intent of *For the Record* was not to project itself onto the Black German experience but rather to activate the site, "I would hope that in each space that it enters, that the work sits in, the traces of the Black histories in those neighbourhoods become more clear, and folks can actually hear those spaces more. So, yes, as much as I would want folks to know about the spaces we have archived, I'm more interested in triggering possibilities, or the awakening possibilities of our work" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021).

In this respect, the materialisation of the archive not in filmic form, as, let us say, a single cinematic screening, but crucially in exhibition form, provided an object around which people can gather. *For the Record* then activated the exhibition space as an infrastructure that could materialise the archive by making it real for a period of time in an actual place (Midal 2019)—an archive resituated to Berlin where it opened out to an Afro-German experience and interpretation. This orientated the map, its territory opening out to new directions and bearings, to influence and be influenced by other locations and their particular Black histories.

Reflecting on the postcolonial use of "haunting", Storr describes a work that "rather than being overcome by what's happened historically" operated as a "ghost for future

encounters" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021), an archival object that moulds to the situation it needs to be in at that time or a work that can be a "witness to the present, provides information on the past and can mediate with a future" (Wiens 2019, p. 126). This opens up the possibility that the orientation of the map may change based on who, when, how, and where the work is presented. Such site specificity exposes the work to conventions and discourse particular to the location, or in the words of scenographer Sigrid Merx, it defines the "space as host, content as ghost" (Merx 2020, p. 155) (Figure 7). In this role, the gallery exceeds the function as a container of art to provide a social function, an "arena of exchange" (Bourriaud 2009, p. 17). The artwork is viewed as a relational object in which each element must be considered in terms of the benefit or harm it may cause to all those entangled (Bourriaud 2009). In the case of *For the Record*, this is a "responsibility to the other that makes life possible for you" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). Rather than aligning the organisation and staging of aural, visual, and material elements towards a singular message through the display of an artefact that carries only the artist's intention, the gallery can activate a plurality of relationships. The exhibition space becomes not merely a backdrop but takes an active role in inviting spectators to situate themselves within the work and in relation to their lived experience (Wiens 2019). Treating the design and staging of the space as one that can kindle intersubjectivity rather than as a direct communication has the capacity to generate "understanding through the sensual, emotional and aesthetic responses of the viewer" (Wiens 2019, p. 11).

Figure 7. "Space as host, content as ghost" (Merx, p. 155). The *transmediale* Studio at Silent Green, Berlin. Photo © Luca Girardini.

The relationships that *For the Record* foregrounds exist both in time and in space. In space, *For the Record* establishes its territory through images that reveal not only a landscape but a set of relationships. It is these relationships that the spectator can translate into their own lived reality. Placing the spectator in the middle of the images orientates the spectator towards this active process of translation. If the exhibition were to take place in a different city (say, Storr's London or Antwi's Vancouver), the orientation of the spectator might need to be revisited to reflect a changed situational context.

In time, *For the Record* represents the mapping of a territory at a particular point, establishing the territory as a physical space that gives rise to a certain set of relationships. It follows that at some point in the future, the work will represent something that will exist in a different form. As the physical fabric of the territory changes, traces of old relations may remain while new ones stratify. At this point, *For the Record* becomes an archive of a place that may look to a different mode of presentation to generate a different mode of reception that speaks to future contemporary conditions. We can further elucidate this idea through Walter Benjamin's idea of the image's historical materialism (Benjamin 2010). Through Benjamin's construct, we can understand the emulsion or pixels of the image as holding traces of history. These traces can be understood only through the link between the photograph's moment of production in the past and its moment of consumption in

the present (Parpa 2018). Temporalities collapse as the past, present, and future cannot be isolated (Cadava as cited in Parpa 2018, p. 76). Through staging, the exhibition environment presents an opportunity to suggest alternate correlations between these temporalities.

4.6. (Re)Locating the Territory: For the Record Design Analysis Part 3

In *(re)Locating the Territory*, analysis has considered how the staging of space and exhibition design of *For the Record* was tied to specific spatial and temporal conditions. This recognises the artwork as a relational object, with its realisation at the *transmediale* studio space site specific not only to the gallery but to Berlin at a particular point in time. In highlighting the artwork's relational capabilities, this analysis has considered how the activation of a filmic archive in a physical form might provide an object around which people can gather, triggering the possibilities of the work influencing, or being influenced, by a location and its particular histories.

The desire to manifest the archive found form in the exhibition environment through scale. In place of two light floating screens, two wooden structures were employed that held significant presence, a physicality that embodies the artists in the space (Figure 8). As highlighted previously, no curatorial gestures between the screens attempted to place London or Vancouver in discourse with Berlin. The screens sat adjunct to their host city, projecting elsewheres that relied on the spectators to translate the images into their own lived realities in Berlin.

Figure 8. Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr, *For the Record* (2021), *transmediale* Studio. Photo © Luca Girardini.

5. Defining the Legend

For the Record is an archive activated by the spatial and temporal conditions within which it is realised, and in this regard, it opens itself out to the spectator to not only sit alongside the work but to "move together" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021) with the artists. This invitation transports the work away from existing in the gallery as an immutable depiction of the artists' vision towards a work that the spectator has an active role in realising. This collaboration is defined by the dynamic flow that relates the making of an image to its reception. In this flow, energy is transmitted from what is filmed, through the camera and through the person who holds it, to the potentially infinite number of spectators who will appropriate the image in their own ways (Galibert-Laîné 2022). The legend, which runs alongside a map, sets the rules of engagement for this interpretation. It is an anchor point that helps determine the labour required from the spectator to "read" the map and understand the organisational logic behind it.

5.1. Opacity

As a spectator, it is not always easy to find a way into *For the Record*; there are times when there is a feeling of eavesdropping on a personal conversation. When probed on this, Antwi points to moments of intersubjectivity between himself and Storr: "if intimacy is

anything it is the sparest gesture that is being communicated between some two people that know each other, and then you access that, it could feel like you're eavesdropping" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). The spectator is distanced from the work, which, following Jacques Rancière's thinking, helps generate the conditions for a subjective reading: "distance is not an evil to be abolished but the normal condition of any communication . . . . (The spectator's emancipation) begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, . . . when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions" (Rancière 2007). Antwi speaks of this through the lens of refusal, a resistance to explain certain ideas to the spectator: "The poet in me can sometimes be an ungenerous writer. And by that, I mean I want to keep doors open for folks to find an answer on their own, as opposed to constantly having the doors opened for them" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). In *For the Record*, to think through the work is to engage with the organisational logic behind its composition. "I put codes into the works and through relations, you get access, you get the keys to encode it. Once you have the relationship, you get the key, you get the password to decode something" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). In this sense, the "key" or legend is the mediator in the relationship between the filmmaker, the spectator, and the territory; it defines how transparent or opaque the themes of the work are to the viewer.

This refusal of transparency and realism and the embracing of opacity and artifice is identified by film theorists, including Erika Balsom (2017), Stella Bruzzi (2006), and Martin Lefebvre (2007) as a (not always to be celebrated) characteristic of modern artist documentary filmmaking. To contemplate the relationship between the territory mapped out in the images of *For the Record*, and the spoken narrative between Antwi and Storr, requires labour from the viewer. The viewer is asked to untangle the interpersonal relations that exist between the artists through a myriad of abovementioned references to Black scholarship, poetry, and music related to the role of opacity in the work. Thinking particularly of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (Glissant 1990), Storr reflects on her initial aspiration for transparency in the work and the problem this caused: "perhaps opacity is already present anyway, regardless of how transparent you think that you're being, and so to deny that you're denying other people access is kind of a disservice to them, because there will always be people who don't have access to what you're saying" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). Opacity, then, is a residue of the filmmaking process, a condition that radiates out from the filmmakers' subjectivity. To try to remove it from the work is to try to collapse the distance between subjectivity and objectivity, a Sisyphean task. Being opaque might then allow the work to operate in different ways depending on the spectator's knowledge. Opacity is an artistic manoeuvre or device that prevents the work from stalling on matters of representation. "I think with a lot of works, which think about Blackness, they stumble on this initial question of who is it for, and who is it representing. And I think it's good to not be kind of tied down by that question. Because sometimes it obscures what you really want to talk about" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021).

In Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay "The Task of the Translator", the theorist defines the translation of one language into another as an art form (Benjamin 2002). Benjamin proposes that to produce close renderings of an original, a translator must adapt the translating language to "match" the original. This adaptation means abandoning a word-for-word translation in favour of one that understands the frames of representation of the receiving language. Following Benjamin's theory, an accurate filmic translation should never strive for transparency, a condition of documentary objectivity, but rather, it should ask whether the film is a valid translation; "more than asking what's credible or authentic, we should think about what interests a documentary serves" (Lamas 2016, p. 153). Benjamin's theory of translation implies that the pursuit of transparency, a "word-for-word" translation of the real into a cinematic language, even if hypothetically achievable, would render it an inaccurate translation. By foregrounding the author's voice or subjectivity in the translation process, Benjamin's theory generates the potential for multiple realities and experiences to be acknowledged. Opacity then does not obfuscate truths but can rather provide a device

for the authors to "get at the things that we want to get at and not stating it as the fact . . . but leaving room open for those many different voices" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). The "many different voices" Storr refers to are those represented by spectators who are given the means to translate the work into their own realities. Progressing Benjamin's argument forward, we should not expect that the filmic object will remain unchanged as it is spatialised within the exhibition environment, as the flat plane of the video file adopts architectural form. This misrepresentation will occur not least due to one medium attempting to represent another, creating "asymmetries between two . . . the totality of the latter properties are not magically produced by the former" (Ponech 1999, p. 34).

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Ranciére draws attention to the unseen labour of the sedentary spectator by defining their potential as "active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it" (Rancière 2007). With projections placed at either end, the *transmediale* exhibition space, with its narrow form, presents the spectator with particular sightlines. Sitting on the benches placed against the wall, the spectator can comfortably view one screen while seeing the other only out of the corner of the eye. In this orientation, the spectator is forced to edit the images they see by the direction they look to produce meaning and labour as collaborators with the artists. Placing the spectator between two screens that cannot easily be read simultaneously challenges the photographic frame as a container for the artist's vision. Rather than viewing a singular image and working back to the artist's intention (Ingold 2000), the spectator is placed in an active role, producing meaning and labouring as a collaborator with the artists. Moving your eyes and the orientation of your ears heightens the feeling of eavesdropping on the conversation, a key operator of the work as explored in our earlier analysis around opacity. Furthermore, the requirement placed on the viewer to partially edit together the work means *For the Record* cannot be wholly experienced in one viewing, says Storr: "you can't see all of the images, some of the text is quite dense. I think it would be hard to really watch it one time through and get everything. So how long as a spectator would you have to spend with this work to really understand the kind of space and the mechanics and every little thing about it, I'm not sure that you could, and that's part of the work that it can't really be grasped or handled or re-contained in its totality" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). In my own experience, each time I have viewed the work, I piece together a different sequence of images in my mind, finding new associations and narratives between the over 150 individual photographs that make up the film. In this respect, the work continues to show a lineage back to the very first exhibition plan that proposed a single 35 mm projector and a set of directional speakers; these design interventions are aimed at engaging visitors in active forms of spectatorship.

In Sergei Eisenstein's 1945 essay, *Neravnodushnaja priroda* (Nonindifferent Nature) the filmmaker defines landscape as "the most flexible in conveying moods, emotional states and spiritual experiences" (Eisenstein 1987, p. 217). Drawing on Romanticism, Eisenstein compares the use of landscape in film to music in its ability to conduct the emotions of the spectator (Finicchiaro as cited in Lefebvre 2007). Eisenstein's thinking highlights territory as an element that does more than simply provide a film's setting. Starting from this point, Lefebvre shows us that affect in landscape cinema (images of the territory) is founded in the mode of spectatorship in which the viewer is placed (Lefebvre 2007). In *narrative mode*, the territory acts as a setting for events to unfold as the viewer is guided through the film in a linear fashion. In *spectacular mode*, the viewer drops out of narrative mode in order to reflect on the wider film spectacle and its themes. In *For the Record,* the interplay between sound and image plays between the tension of these modes. Images move between providing a setting for the conversation and existing as detached from the narrative, providing a broader context to the landscape or territory. It is in these moments when Lefebvre identifies the territory as a space that can exist beyond a narrative or aesthetic function and towards conveying identity and belonging (Lefebvre 2007).

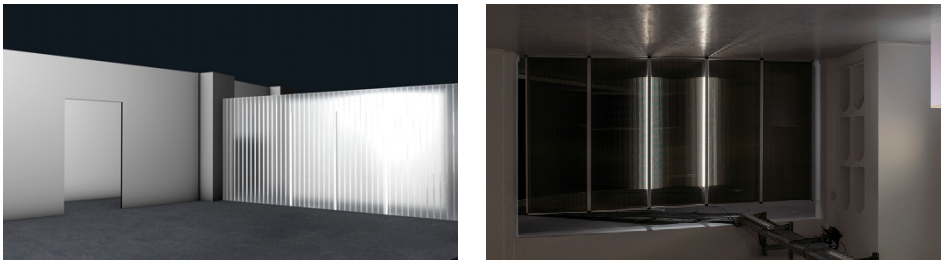
Gaps in the conversation between Antwi and Storr are marked by silence or rhythmical sound design that revert the viewer to a "spectacular" mode of viewing. Puncturing these

temps mort, new threads of conversation between Antwi and Storr commence through a short, sharp, sample, "*shhh*", pulling the spectator back into narrative mode. The staging of the visual and aural components in the space draws attention to these modes. Scenographic gestures, including image size and the spectator's orientation to screens and speakers, and even the choice of seating (leaning back or sitting forward), present strategies for highlighting the body schema and pointing the visitor to the interior or exterior of a filmic reality.

5.2. Design

The legend brings to the surface the mode of operation of the work. It offers us a translation device between the filmmaker, the territory, and the spectator. As part of this process, it asks us to consider the role of opacity within this translation process, specifically how transparent the themes of the work are and how opacity is being used productively to engage the spectator to interpret those themes. These interconnected themes of opacity and labour find form within the exhibition through design interventions considered in the following 3D drawings. Focusing on the labour of the spectator within the exhibition space, these drawings question how curatorial decisions can foreground the viewer's perception of the work through the relationship of the body to the visual and aural qualities of the work.

Through the use of polycarbonate screens, visitors are prevented from entering the exhibition space except through a narrow passageway that is a buffer between the work and the gallery reception area (Figure 9a,b). This passageway was designed as a threshold space, an architectural strategy that "leads the occupant to question their surroundings, thus leading to heightened awareness of the space as a transformative threshold between distinct spaces" (Zimmerman 2008). The aim is to distance the visitor from the outside world they just left and to sensitise them to the film world they are about to enter. By asking for a certain mode of attention from the visitor, the threshold space helps set up the idea of opacity within the work and of a labour of spectatorship.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 9. (**a**) Polycarbonate screen and passageway. CAD Drawing: Anonymous. (**b**) Photo © Luca Girardini.

At the opening end of the threshold space, a stacked image of Antwi and Storr was placed on a TV screen behind a smoked polycarbonate screen. As the visitor walked by, the still image slowly rippled like a lenticular poster, only coming into focus as they reached an angle perpendicular to it. This concealment of the image spoke to the intersubjectivity of the conversation, the position of the spectator between Antwi and Storr, and the labour required to decipher it (Figure 10a,b). The image treatment can also be understood as a response to refusal and a resistance against the performative gaze placed on the Black body within public spaces, a theme explored through the previous work of both artists. In this respect, the kinesis of the image formed by the lenticular qualities of the polycarbonate and the movement of the spectator's body plays with what Antwi terms "the echoes of life that rest in the still image" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021).

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 10. (**a**,**b**) Polycarbonate Screen. At its origin, the threshold space contains a vertically orientated flatscreen TV whose image is obfuscated by a polycarbonate screen. Photos © Luca Girardini.

At the end of the passageway, a vinyl wall text lit by a single spotlight faced the viewer. Presented as a vinyl on a gallery wall, the text took on the customary form of a curatorial text, instilling it with a kind of "factual" authority (the kind you might expect to see at an archival/collection-based show at a museum) (Figure 11). The text itself reflects the organisational logic (the legend) of the work, employing opacity as a device to open and close the themes of the work depending on the knowledge the viewer brings. Taking on a poetic form, the text signposted the work as a refusal against the Western hegemonic views that the archive represents; the text begins: "Our archive is not the silent storage room of Truth or History or Reality or Anything Real" (Antwi and Storr 2021).

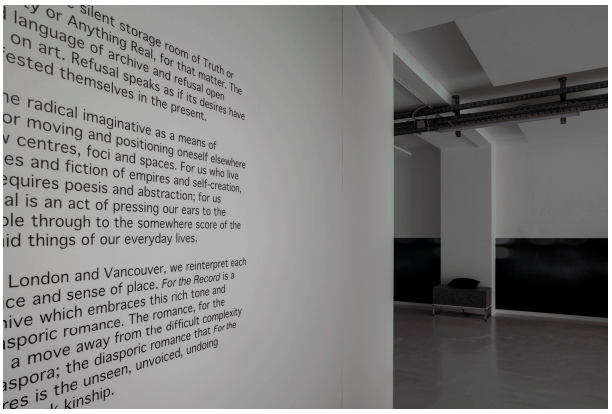


Figure 11. End of threshold space opening into exhibition space. Photo © Luca Girardini.

The threshold space opened out onto the centre of the gallery space (Figure 12). From a staging perspective, the designed circulation route prevented the visitor from entering the work from either end and privileging one voice over another. Rather, the spectator entered the space through a narrow opening, placing them between the artist's voices. Stepping into this liminal space played into the idea of the spectator eavesdropping, finding themselves interloping in a conversation in a manner akin to a crossed line on the phone or an unstable radio frequency. Further speaking to this idea, black and white vinyl was placed as a horizon line linking the two screens. This horizon line, originally thought of in geographic terms as a latitudinal line, became a space of disturbance, interference, and static—a space of Black noise.[6] The vinyl itself was made by blowing up a single black and white 35 mm image, with the grain and light leaks providing the requisite visual/sonic texture. This aesthetic was further carried into the seating that used blocks of mottled high-density foam

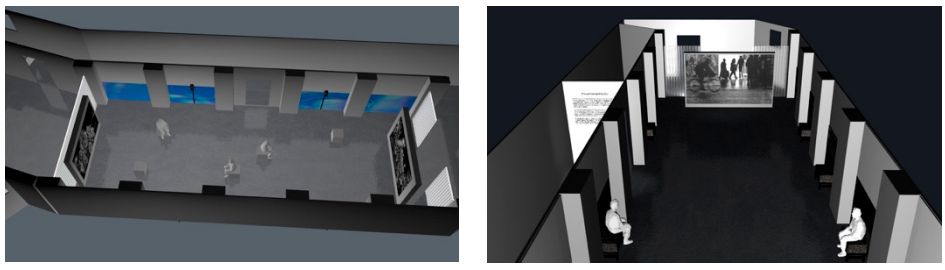
resembling the static of a signal-less CRT TV (Figure 13a,b). Acting as prompts to the spectator about how the work operates and the labour required, these design interventions locate the spectator as a receiver, picking up a signal that must be translated and brought down into their own reality.

Figure 12. Opening into exhibition space. Photo © Luca Girardini.

(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 13. (**a**) Black noise of exhibition vinyl. (**b**) Seating. Photos by Luca Girardini.

In initial floorplans, the seating was designed as a series of high-density foam blocks that the spectator could position themselves within the space, allowing them to prioritise a particular line of sight or alignment with audio (Figure 14a). In later drawings, fixed seating was positioned against the wall (Figure 14b). This placed the spectator in a position where all images were visible depending on the way they turned, editing images together with the artists and expanding on Antwi and Storr's dialogue in a multiplicity of ways.



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 14. (**a**) Original seating design with movable foam blocks. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James. (**b**) Fixed seating placed against wall. CAD Drawing: Ben Evans James.

5.3. Summary

In *For the Record*, Antwi and Storr adopt opacity as a strategy that refuses transparency. As part of this, an expectation of labour is placed on the viewer, with access to the farthest

reaches of the conversation only possible when employing the literary, musical, and theoretical references that underpin the work (even then, access to some parts remain inaccessible, bound as they are to the strong bonds and interpersonal relationships that exist between the artists). As this analysis has worked through the strategies of opacity adopted by Antwi and Storr, it has asked what happens as we spatialise these concerns and how this effects the expectations of labour placed on the spectator. *For the Record* offers a translation of a reality enabled through the organisational logic applied by the artists to an archive of images they have created. The exhibition creates a further translation, transforming the filmic object itself and offering different possibilities in the way the work conducts its themes and the role or signals it puts out for the spectator to engage with them. As we summarise this section, these interconnected themes of opacity and labour have found form within the exhibition space through a range of design interventions demonstrated in the accompanying CAD drawing evaluations.

In summary, to *Define the Legend* of a work is to think through the opacity of its themes and the labour required from the viewer to read and interpret those themes. As we spatialise a film work by bringing it into the exhibition space, attending to the legend can highlight how the opacity of a work can change (or be changed) and how this asks for different forms of labour from the spectator. This is not a static process, but one that shifts and evolves as a work shifts between different exhibition environments and locations.

This analysis and definition of *Define the Legend* marks the second of three processes that outline applications of the spatial language of mapmaking to filmmaking—a process that immerses the film process within the language of mapmaking to enable a bridge into the spatial practices of the gallery environment, into curatorial practice, and into exhibition design. It is a process this paper defines with the term film-mapping.

6. Set the Modality

To set the modality of a map is to determine how its data is visualised. Applied to filmmaking, *Set the Modality* considers how an array of film production technologies and processes mediate how the territory of a map is aestheticised, and the resulting effect on our understanding of its subject. The modality allows us to consider how these aesthetic qualities can be translated and manipulated within the physical space of the exhibition.

6.1. Defining the Modality

In his concept of *Lived Space,* phenomenologist and architect Franz Xaver Baier draws on the work of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre to argue that space comes into being through human experience and motivation (Baier 2020). For example, our understanding of the beach as a space might be defined by our motivation to swim (Baier 2020). Similarly, our initial understanding of the beach as an open expanse might be shattered if we were to step on a shell and cut our foot. At this juncture, the expanse of the beach collapses and "our world dissolves" (Baier 2020, p. 88). Space, then, is neither entirely objective nor subjective, allowing us to hypothesise that there is no universal spacetime but only a *Lived Space* that is forever changing based on our experiences.

Baier goes on to argue that while the concept of *Lived Space* allows us to see space as "a human existential" (Baier 2020, p. 86), we should not consider space as something exclusively brought into being by people but also by tangible and intangible materials; "today, we can begin with the assumption that everything participates in the reality of spaces" (Baier 2020, p. 86). The reality of space might, therefore, include material elements such as light, sound, colours, or smells. In reference to the theatre, scenographer Joslin McKinney references philosopher Gernot Böhme's theory of the "ecstasy of the thing" (McKinney in Wiens 2019, p. 59), where the characteristics of a "thing" creates an atmosphere that is not understood solely through the physical attributes of the object itself (e.g., the light, sound, colour, and smell in an exhibition). Within the artistic sphere, we could look to any number of practitioners who use everyday, inexpensive materials in excess to construct an atmosphere. A recent example includes Nina Canell's 2022 install at Berlinishce Galerie,

where visitors were asked to walk across seven tonnes of marine molluscs, emitting a distinct sound as shells were crushed underfoot; the ambition was to draw attention to the use of molluscs in creating construction materials (Cannell 2022). We can also think of artists working with less tangible materials such as light and extensively referenced examples such as Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* at Tate Modern in 2003 (Eliasson 2003), or even Andy Warhol, who famously wore perfume during performance works to create a presence in space beyond the physical borders of his body. In all these examples, there is a temporal as well as spatial condition to the atmospheres created; none are static over time. This fits Böhme's definition of atmospheres as "a mood hanging in the air" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 2) that may be best explained using common expressions that describe intangible feelings such as a "serious atmosphere" or perhaps a "tense atmosphere". These atmospheres can be produced "with the aid of entirely physical, technical means" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 183)—with materials and through the technologies used to deploy them. Böhme argues that by harnessing the external effect of materials, a space can be filled "with tensions and suggestions of movement" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 19). In *For the Record,* his theory can help draw focus towards the qualities of the image and how these are materialised in the exhibition space to create a particular atmosphere via a method for translating the 2D plane of the film strip back into 3D space to bring forth specific "feelings" and understandings of the territory, processes that re-territorialise a space.

6.2. Deploying the Modality

For the Record called for a range of production technologies, some of which are unremarkable in the making of a film and some that are perhaps less commonplace. Most conventionally, the film employs lens-based technologies through the cameras used by Antwi and Storr. As covered in some detail earlier in this essay around our conversation on the "territory", the decision to use photographic cameras and the form of the snapshot has conceptual and aesthetic consequences on the modality of the work. This section moves beyond the scope of these lens-based technologies to consider in greater detail the other technologies that shape the map's modality; this includes the use of the conferencing platform Zoom and the technology of the human body itself.

6.2.1. The Zoom Image

As the pandemic took hold, the video platform Zoom transitioned in use from noun to verb. "To Zoom" became a way of speaking with colleagues, friends, and family while being socially distanced. To exist in these spaces, we had to learn new ways of being and of performing. Mediated through technology, our bodies were dislocated, in each other's presence but not present (Antwi et al. 2021). Separated by over 7500 km, Antwi and Storr were not close to one another, but there was a closeness, an intimacy provided by their Zoom conversations that kindled the "bonds of Black kinship" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021) that underpin the work. Over a period of three months, the artists held weekly conversations on Zoom to create an archive from which they could draw; in Antwi's words, "recording a series of conversations that we are having among ourselves, you can call this research; . . . it is the archive of these meetings that we plan to draw from for *For the Record*" (Antwi 2020). In the making of *For the Record*, Antwi and Storr embraced the visual language that stemmed from a technology platform and mode of working we were almost all experiencing but that spoke intimately to their own encounters. "I think the condition of the now forced something out of us, it asked us to use technologies in ways that we are not used to doing," noted Antwi in the summer of 2021 (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). Taking screenshots and screen recordings as they spoke, Storr later rephotographed the images from her computer screen with the same 35 mm snapshot camera she had used to take images of London. Occasionally, the artist would let the Zoom recording play as she depressed the shutter, leaving faces blurred or suspended in movement, creating an almost double exposure effect. Cropping the images, switching them to black and white, and re-compositing them back together in Photoshop both removed elements of the digital,

such as the poor colour rendition, while emphasising the digital in others, such as the heavy pixelation that occurs when blowing up low-resolution images. These post-production processes revealed the technological mediation of the body in producing the work and of the technology of Zoom in creating its form. The images are both instantly familiar to anyone who has worked through the pandemic and also, through their editing, distance the spectator from the familiar. Cut into the final edit of *For the Record*, these fragments of photos never reveal the artists' full features but instead focus on a hand gesture or eye movement (Figure 15). Only on approaching the end of the film do we see the artists' full faces, laughing with each other in a final moment of levity as Antwi tells capitalism "to go fuck itself" (Antwi and Storr 2021), the giant pixels that make up the images strewn across the screen like the debris of the broken system itself.

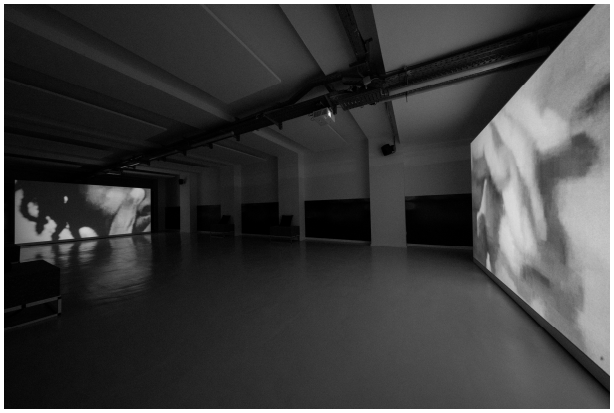


Figure 15. Manipulated Zoom screengrabs from For the Record shown in situ, *transmediale* 2021. Photo: Ben Evans James.

With the artists facing their laptops, the gaze of the camera turns onto Antwi and Storr as snatched screenshots show the pair conversing from their homes. These domestic images show the safety of a world captured "in here" in contrast to their 35 mm snapshots of Vancouver and London that map the instability of the world "out there". The decision to use still images of their bodies is a refusal by Antwi and Storr to perform in ways the artists see as habitually equated with Blackness, to adopt the kind of "explosive energy" that jazz, blues, or hip hop might act as a signpost for (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). This "over-determined or over characterised" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021) feature of what Blackness might be is countered by ideas of stillness in *For the Record.* The use of Zoom gave form to this stillness, capturing the artists' bodies suspended at the point of production, providing the opportunity for these images to be renewed when enfolded into the work within the gallery. "It was interesting that those gestures might transform into something else beyond what they could be on the screen in that moment" (Storr in Antwi et al. 2021). This job of transformation continued within the gallery, where the treatment of the images could amplify their themes.

As it is particularly relevant to *For the Record* and its use of photos, we can return to Böhme and his hypothesis of the properties of light in creating atmosphere. The philosopher defines space as a material "not created by the distances between things", an axonometric understanding of the world, but one that is defined only by light; "as things become visible in light, they also appear to us in space" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 200). Böhme offers us a way to think about the relationship between light and space, a dynamic that can influence the presentation of the image in the gallery environment. *For the Record* deploys a range of still images bound within a film format. These are not photographic prints but images rendered through light, whether from the beam of a projector or the pixels of a television. To consider the qualities of this light (size, brightness, colour, and orientation) is to interrogate lightness and, therefore, the definition of the gallery space and its atmosphere. Furthermore, it follows that by exploiting the use of light within the

images of *For the Record*, such as by focusing on the oversized weight of pixels and their movement, we can disturb the volumetric space of the screen and the spectator's spatial understanding of the exhibition environment.

Böhme's theory can attune us to the possibilities that arise as the image is staged, re-mediating it from the digital field (video file) into the material or physical field (beamed) such that it might create an atmosphere that further attunes the spectator to the work. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production*, Walter Benjamin suggests that the spectator "breathes" in the aura of an artwork (Benjamin 2008, p. 23). Breathing as a verb here allows us to consider the artwork as an experience that is absorbed through the body (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 15). It also places the idea of an atmosphere as something that sits between the artwork object and the spectator as something that is emitted by a work but only brought into being through the experiencing subject or spectator. It is precisely in this being in between that the value of understanding and manipulating atmosphere comes because it allows us to "link together what has traditionally been separated as the aesthetics of production and of reception" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 183).

6.2.2. The Zoom Sound

The default audio options in Zoom compress audio into a narrow range of frequencies, stripping the voice of range. Initially embraced by Antwi and Storr as an aesthetic that would communicate the physical distance between them, the poor quality of the audio later led them to abandon this approach for external recorders. Antwi used a variety of recording devices in a range of environments, creating tonal shifts in his voice across the work, transitions embraced by the artist as scratchy and messy, giving form to the audio shaped by ideas of interference and disturbance. Through the accompanying sound design in the work, Storr worked with layers of short samples and loops of radio interference, metallic tones and space sounds that further highlight the physical distance between the artists while also speaking to the audio aesthetics of Afrofuturism.

Sound, through its resonance and echo, is in constant dialogue with space. Sound requires space to materialise, and in turn, sound highlights the architectural qualities of space. This is reflected in the types of language we use to describe sounds, adjectives that describe a material experience of different tones, such as textural, grinding, sharp, or broken. These descriptors provide an understanding of sound that moves beyond the temporal towards the material or spatial—an understanding that Böhme argues allows us to also bring sound into the "aesthetics of atmosphere" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 185). Considering sound in this way locates space between the sound and the body, a translation device that affects the embodied experience: "music shapes the feeling of the listener in space, it intervenes directly in his or her bodily economy" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 186). In *For the Record*, the spatial structure of the sound design was invoked in the exhibition through the positioning of speakers, with Antwi's voice emanating from one end and Storr's from the other, conveying the remoteness crucial in making the work. Linking the two voices, sounds of interference and space sounds permeated through the atmosphere of the gallery. For the spectator, the sound design and its interpretation in space created the sensation of being caught between Antwi and Storr within the static of a shifting analogue radio dial. The set-up further draws attention to the call and response mechanism that defines the work, asking the spectator to edit the conversation between our protagonists. Around thirty minutes into *For the Record*, Antwi and Storr embark on an exchange with one another in which they talk about their bodies as living, breathing archives (Antwi and Storr 2021).

> Our bodies are constantly archiving. Our hearts, (Storr)
> *Our hearts*, (Antwi)
> Our guts, *Our guts*,
> Our feet, *Our feet*,
> Our skin, *Our skin*,
> Our tongues, *Our tongues*,

Our mouths, *Our mouths*,
Our anus, *Our anus*,
Our unitary tracts, *Our unitary tracts*,
Our bloodstream, *Our bloodstream*,
In our bodies everything is constantly archiving.
Let's find out what we can about each other based on this thing we carry with us all the time.

Speaking about the passage, Antwi reveals how their long Zoom sessions would often be interrupted by noises emanating from the body, including noises of bellies rumbling or dry coughs—noises he noted represent technologies that are also producing and giving form to the work, the kinaesthetic noises and rhythms of the body archive (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). In the exhibition space, the spectator is asked to consume the work in a way that, in part, mirrors the artists' production—a position of stillness from which the spectator has to engage in an internal, bodily labour to untangle the meanings within the work and apply them to their own reality.

6.3. Set the Modality

The Zoom image, frozen and further manipulated by Storr, revealed a material form that tied to the conceptual underpinning of the work—images enlarged to the point that faces were cropped to reveal only hairlines, eyes, or mouths; images that, for the artists, refuse dominant modes of broadcasting of Black bodies, from states of animation towards images of suspended animation, embracing "the echoes of life that rest in the still image" (Antwi in Antwi et al. 2021). In the following CAD drawings, artifice that arises through the use of Zoom as a production platform is employed to invoke these themes.

For the Record utilises black and white imagery throughout its 48-min run time. Edited as a diptych, there are points in the film where just one image was shown on a single screen, when both screens showed an image, and when neither screen had an image and was left black. The gallery was lit by the ambient light of the images, which helped choreograph the spectator's gaze (Figure 16). The impact of the space as screens switched from darkness to bright white amplified the qualities of the image, creating "a meeting between material and a sensation" (O'Sullivan 2006, p. 56). This meeting foregrounded the relationship of the body in the photos for the spectator, recalling the phenomenological potential of the film experience as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "[t]he movies are well suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty 2019, p. 111).

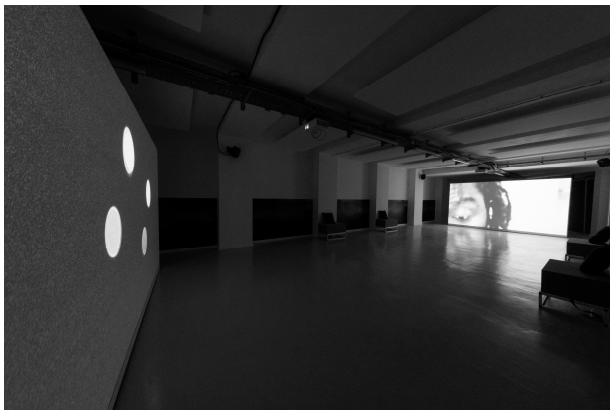


Figure 16. Projection as light source in the space, *transmediale* 2021. Photo © Ben Evans James.

The use of an artificial light source (projection) to present the work links the presentation of its images back to a "capitalist, technical civilization" in which nothing "is seen simply as it would appear of its own accord" (Böhme and Thibaud 2016, p. 203). In *For the Record*, the final rallying cry of Antwi for capitalism "to go fuck itself" (Antwi in

Antwi et al. 2021) might best be served by accentuating the commodification of the image itself, by embracing and amplifying its artificiality and its aestheticization in the gallery space (Figure 17). This reflects physicist Karen Barad's hypothesis that matter has discursive properties and the ability to convey meaning without the use of language (Barad 2007). Perhaps we can even argue that matter itself can go on to convey themes even beyond those originally intended by the filmmakers.

Figure 17. Grain. Photo © Luca Girardini.

Echo-reducing panels were suspended from the ceiling and calibrated to reduce resonance but not to completely nullify it to heighten the sense of distance between Antwi and Storr in the making of the work. Atmospheres are personal, subjective experiences for which we find a common language. In *For the Record*, the conversation between Antwi and Storr takes place in an atmosphere of kinship and intimacy. The exhibition space can either look to mirror this atmosphere or contrast it (though the decision is not necessarily a binary one as atmospheres are dynamic and can change over time). In Berlin, the spectator was physically placed at the exterior of the conversation, listening in.

6.4. Summary

To *Set the Modality* of a map is to determine how the map's data is visualised; it is to determine its form. Applied to filmmaking, to *Set the Modality* is to consider how diverse film production technologies and processes mediate how the territory of a map is aestheticised and the resulting effect on our understanding of the map's subject. Carrying this knowledge forward, the modality allows us to consider how these aesthetic qualities can be translated and manipulated within the physical space of the exhibition environment.

7. Conclusions

This investigation into how the spatial language of mapping can act as a bridge between the disciplines of filmmaking and curatorial practice puts forward the term *film-mapping* as a process with three stages:

1. Compose the Territory

This stage explores the relationship between a defined geographical area and its representation on a map. Applied to filmmaking, the process foregrounds relationships that exist between the filmmaker(s), their subject(s), and place(s).

2. Define the Legend

The legend represents the key to a map. When applied to filmmaking, this can be understood as a set of signals and codes that navigates a spectator through the work.

3. Set the Modality

The modality determines how the data of a map are visualised. Applied to filmmaking, it considers how diverse film production technologies and processes mediate how the territory is aestheticised and the resulting effect on our understanding of the map's subject.

For the Record by the artists Phanuel Antwi and Rhea Storr serves as a case study to develop a language around these three processes.

The first of these three stages, *Compose the Territory,* was itself broken down into three concurrent processes. The first of these, *Framing the Territory*, examined how particular filmmaking approaches engender certain relationships between the filmmaker and the territory. The second, *(re)Framing the Territory*, explored how the editing process scaffolds these relationships into particular narratives of the territory. The third, *(re)Locating the Territory*, looked to the conflicts and opportunities that surface when the rendering of a territory through a film is relocated to an alternate location such as an exhibition. The combined processes described in *Compose the Territory* reveal relationships at multiple scales: between the filmmakers themselves, between the filmmakers and the communities they have documented, and between the filmmakers and the spectator. By asking us to consider how the representation of a territory has been formed within a work, *Compose the Territory* provides a method to think through the specific relationships this representation attends to and how those relationships might change as we relocate the work into the gallery space.

The second stage of analysis, *Define the Legend*, was used to think through the opacity of a work's themes and the labour required from the viewer to read and interpret those themes. As we spatialise a film work by bringing it into the exhibition space, attending to the legend was shown to highlight how the opacity of a work can change (or be changed) and how this can be used to ask for or require different forms of labour from the spectator.

The final stage of analysis, *Set the Modality,* examined how a map's data is visualised; it examined its form. Applied to filmmaking, *Set the Modality* considered how diverse film production technologies and processes mediate how the territory of a map is aestheticised and the resulting effect on our understanding of the map's subject. Carrying this knowledge forward, the modality allowed us to consider how these aesthetic qualities could be translated and manipulated within the physical space of the exhibition environment.

Applying the lenses provided by the interconnected processes of *Compose the Territory, Define the Legend*, and *Set the Modality* created a spatial understanding of the work carried forward into the exhibition environment—a process demonstrated throughout this paper through accompanying CAD drawings and design analysis. Together, these processes can be understood as creating a translation device or bridge that sits between the production processes of filmmaking and the production processes of curatorial practice, mediating between the disciplines by providing a shared spatial language. While analysis within this paper is intertwined with the development of *For the Record*, the three-step model developed out of the research offers a replicable method for other artist documentary films that have a concern with place—more specifically, and turning back to the geographer Henri Lefebvre, with films that attend to a space formed at the intersection of the built environment, the discourses attached to it, and the lived experience of those who interact within the space (Lefebvre 1991).

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Notes

[1] Martin Lefebvre describes the relationship between landscape and artist documentary film as one in which landscape determines film form, "in the domain of art, landscape is not so much the result of a work; rather, it is the work itself which is the result of the landscape" (Lefebvre 2007).

[2] This speculative approach is adopted to kindle conversations that foreground Black and Asian voices in subjects where those voices have been historically crowded out in the West, in this case, circling subjects of intimacy, touch, and love.

[3] Referencing here Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of a "body-in-the-world" in which the presence of our physical body within a space alters our perception of it. As a body-in-the-world, we do not view the world from a detached objective position, but rather we live through our body, which in turn helps shape our experience of space (Jean Nouvel in Cairns 2013).

[4] The dérive can be understood as an embodied practice of 'drifting' across an urban environment in an unplanned or unstructured manner. Outlined by Guy Debord in 1956 and later taken up by the Situationist International (1957–72), it is a tool associated with psychogeography. Also defined by Debord, psychogeography explores interpersonal relations with place through affect and the resulting actions of the individual.

[5] Punctum draws the viewer into the image and its themes by sparking their subjectivity, the quality of a photograph that Barthes described as "pricking" or "bruising" him (Barthes 1981).

[6] A reference to the common expression for electrical signal interference as 'white noise'.

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